

GANG-INVOLVED GIRLS IN THE LOWER MAINLAND: AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE YOUTH ROLES IN GANGS AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION BY GANGS.

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PURPOSE AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of qualitative inquiries in 2020 regarding female gang involved youth in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia for the Surrey Anti-Gang Family Empowerment Program (SAFE) in partnership with Pacific Community Resources Society (PCRS). These inquiries explore the role of female youth in gangs and how gangs use sexual exploitation or human trafficking to entrench female youth.

Key findings of this report include:

- Significant gaps in research exist for female gang-involved youth in Canada, and B.C.,
- Local organizations working with gang-involved female youth exhibit diversity in observations,
- Females are most often affiliated with gangs through a boyfriend who is a member,
- Female affiliation with gangs may involve participation in core gang activities despite being subordinate to male members,
- Roles of Indigenous female gang-involved youth may differ from non-Indigenous female gang-involved youth,
- Risks of sexual exploitation among female gang involved youth are substantial, but the connection between human trafficking and gangs is limited,
- Sexually exploited female gang-involved youth rarely recognize themselves as being sexually exploited,
- Female gang-involved youth are subject to numerous vulnerability factors targeted by gangs or their gang-involved boyfriend

SCOPE AND DEFINITIONS

Limitations on the scope of the research were initially established by SAFE and PCRS in conjunction with the researcher. These limitations included a range of suitable ages as well as the cultural backgrounds of the population under study. The researcher defined further scope upon completion of the literature review, establishing a relevant geographic area, and creating an operational definition of both sexual exploitation by gangs and of gangs themselves to be used in the remainder of the study. These are explored in greater detail below:

Age: For those elements of the study concerning roles of female youth in gangs and sexual exploitation of these youth by gangs, the study defines youth as between the ages of 11-19. This range is based upon the ages of youth the *FGI* program is designed to target (12-19), with a slightly lower boundary year to account for PCRS' observation that girls are becoming involved with gangs at younger ages.

Cultural Backgrounds: Reflecting the cultural backgrounds of many of their *FGI* clients, PCRS expressed interest in Indigenous female youth involvement in gangs. This study includes Indigenous but also Non-Indigenous Canadian and newcomer female youth as well, as the literature review revealed that these reflect unique factors relevant to the study.

Geographic Area: To establish context for female gang-involved youth, the initial literature review includes Canada-wide information, with special attention paid to British Columbia.

The media scan and interviews narrow this geographic scope considerably to the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. The rest of Canada and B.C. is excluded from the remainder of the study unless it regards movement of a gang-involved youth from elsewhere to the Lower Mainland (e.g. through human trafficking). The Lower Mainland was selected as a focus area over the city of Surrey itself to account for cross-jurisdictional activities by gang-involved youth in the Metro Vancouver area and Fraser Valley.

Gangs: There is no legislated definition of a gang in Canada and no consensus over the definition of a gang member (Kelly, 2015). This report employs a wide interpretation found in the literature to account for the variety of ways in which female youth may be involved in organized criminal groups. Accordingly, the definition is as follows: any group of three (3) or more people, formally or informally organized, which may have a common name or identifying sign or symbol, whose members individually or collectively engage in or have engaged primarily in street level criminal behavior, creating an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community (Kelly, 2015).

Sexual Exploitation: While the Criminal Code of Canada contains several sections pertaining to sexual exploitation, these refer to youth aged 18 and under (212 [2] and [4]; 163; 172; 153), the B.C. Ministry for Children and Family Development provides services for sexually exploited youth aged 19 and under. This report adopts the wide interpretation of sexual exploitation used in the literature. This defines sexual exploitation as the sexual abuse of a youth aged 19 and under through exchange of sex for money, drugs, food, a place to live or sleep, or acceptance into a peer group, and may include an element of threat against the victim, trafficking, or someone known to the victim (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010). The Criminal Code of Canada defines trafficking of a person under the age of 18 as: Every person who recruits, transports, transfers, receives, holds, conceals or harbours a person under the age of eighteen years, or exercises

control, direction or influence over the movements of a person under the age of eighteen years, for the purpose of exploiting them or facilitating their exploitation is guilty of an indictable offence and liable.¹

METHODOLOGY

The research topics were particularly informed through PCRS and SAFE. Their close association on female gang-involved youth enabled three initial topic areas of inquiry, upon which the researcher developed five core research questions. These areas are highlighted in the table below:

Topic Area	Research Question
Role of females in B.C. gangs	What are the roles performed by female youth aged 11-19 in gangs in the Lower Mainland of B.C.?
How gangs use sexual exploitation and/or human trafficking to entrench girls	<p>What are the factors that put female youth 11-19 at risk for sexual exploitation by gangs in the Lower Mainland of B.C.?</p> <p>What are the experiences of sexual exploitation by at-risk female youth 11-19 by gangs in the Lower Mainland of B.C.?</p>

Initial research was conducted via a literature review, under the keywords “girls OR young women OR females AND gang roles AND Canada OR BC”; and “girls OR young women OR females AND gangs AND sexual exploitation OR prostitution OR human trafficking” and “girls OR young women OR females AND gangs AND programs OR work experience OR job skills”. All literature was assessed for credibility (including peer or doctoral review, government-source or government-commissioned research) prior to inclusion in the review. Final sources comprise academic theses, journal articles and books conducting research and analysis, as well as government and non-governmental organization research reports.

To develop a more up-to-date picture of gang-involved female youth roles and sexual exploitation, a media scan was also conducted through Canadian Newsstream, which provides full text access to approximately 300 Canadian news publications. Criteria for inclusion comprised any date from 2009 and up and included B.C. Lower Mainland-focused news media including magazines, newspapers, trade journals, blogs, podcasts, and websites.

Local program models were found through online searches using keywords “girls OR young women OR females AND gang exiting AND employment AND programs AND BC OR Lower Mainland” or were specifically requested for inclusion by PCRS.

PCRS and SAFE helped identify eight expert interview participants with working knowledge in the Lower Mainland on female youth in gangs, the sexual exploitation of female youth by gangs, employment program support or any combination of these topics. These interview participants were selected based

¹ <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/page-63.html>

on the relevance of their organization’s remit and an appropriate level of responsibility within the organization. Participants included police officers, a social worker, a clinical counsellor, parole officers, program managers and directors as follows:

Name(s)	Position	Organization
Marlies Dick	RCMP “E” Division, Provincial Counter Exploitation Unit	RCMP E Division
Jon Ross	District Social Worker, Supervisor	Surrey Wraparound Program
Suman Hothi	Clinical Counsellor	Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit
Camila Jimenez	Program Managers	PLEA Community
Lauren Mathias		Services/Onyxworks
Larissa Maxwell	Director, Human Trafficking Programs	The Salvation Army/Deborah’s Gate
Kevin Baumung	Team Leader, Surrey/White Rock Youth Probation	Ministry of Children and Family Development
Deanna Moscato	Youth Justice Team Leader – Surrey Indigenous, Langley, Delta	

Interviews were designed to be semi-structured to balance receiving specific information on the research questions above with opening new avenues of inquiry into the research. The master interview schedule is attached in Appendix A.

Among other findings discussed in more detail below, the media scan revealed that the Lower Mainland gang context is unique in Canada, while the literature review noted the importance of ensuring programming efforts were tailored to the specific circumstances gang-involved girls found themselves in. Accordingly, the researcher felt the best approach to capture the nuances of the data would be to opt for an inductive approach rather than attempt to fit the data into an existing theory. To accomplish this goal, all interviews were first transcribed and coded. Preliminary codes were then grouped according to common patterns in the data, which were in turn identified and defined as themes. This report presents and resolves some of the inconsistencies among these final themes in the interview findings.

FINDINGS

Literature Review

Significant gaps in research

Female gang involvement is an under-studied area of research. Publications have generally focused on gang involvement being a primarily male activity (including offending, violence and membership as male behaviour) alongside limited police attention to female membership (Dunbar, 2017). Moreover, much of the most prominent research regarding female gang-involved youth is over a decade old (see Nimmo, 2001; Chatterjee, 2006; Totten, 2008; Aulakh, 2008; Dorais and Corriveau, 2009). Some of the more recent public data regarding female gang involvement relative to male involvement dates from 2002, where estimates range from 3% in Ontario to 12% in British Columbia (Chettleburgh, 2003, Totten, 2008). Even at the time, these estimates may not have been accurate: Chettleburgh (2003) suggests that as females are less likely to be arrested by police (and thus counted in official statistics), the real proportion of female gang-involved youth may be as high as 33%. Female youth may also not be counted as belonging in gangs due to their level of affiliation with the gang. Nimmo (2001) states that service providers have explained the records of female youth referred to them as the girlfriends of gang members despite quite possibly being members themselves.

Sexual exploitation of young women by gangs is a further under-studied area, though this may be due to difficulties in accessing the population for primary research rather than biases on the part of researchers. The Abbotsford Youth Commission (2010) notes that gaining research access to girls who have experienced sexual exploitation by gangs is a significant challenge as most are heavily controlled by gang members and are largely underground. Female youth who have survived sexually exploitative scenarios may have also left the province as a means of escape from the gang that victimized them and are no longer contactable (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010).

Gang types involving female youth

Totten (2012) states that the majority of gangs in Canada are male dominated but may contain a minority of female members. Gangs comprised entirely of females do exist but are comparatively rare and are usually attached to male-dominated gangs. This “auxiliary gang” (Dunbar, 2017) acts as a support system for the male gang, mirroring a feminine version of the male leadership structure. Independent female gangs (that is, gangs unconnected to male-dominated gangs) are the rarest, though there is some evidence that female auxiliary gangs may eventually evolve into independent gangs (Dunbar, 2017).

Gang membership of female youth in Canada is largely confined to the street level (Totten, 2012). In B.C., street level gangs (relative to mid-level or high-level criminal organizations) are characterized by a more fluid membership where their membership comes together on an ad-hoc basis for criminal activities, which are generally less serious than those of higher-level gangs (Totten, 2008). The gangs themselves may be based out of schools, neighbourhoods, or reserves and typically claim a territory, identifying one another through shared symbols, graffiti or clothing.

Hierarchical relationships in gangs involving female youth

Inherent status differences exist between males and females, not only between female-dominated gangs auxiliary to male-dominated gangs but within the structures of male gangs as well. Female youth are generally subordinate to male members and are generally excluded from decision-making processes.

Nimmo (2001) suggests that highly patriarchal gang life continues to marginalize females even as it provides a temporary relief to marginalization for males. Female youth are exposed to many of the same risky activities male members take part in, but they are rarely provided with the same level of support from members. Female youth may be tasked with tertiary tasks associated with gang activity, such as renting and driving cars on behalf of others, holding drugs or weapons, etc., as they are considered by the gang to be a less obvious target to police (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010). Nevertheless, there is often an expectation within the gang that female youth will face the legal consequences of these actions alone, out of loyalty to the gang or member boyfriend (Totten, 2012; Kelly, 2015).

Risks borne by female gang-involved youth are not only associated with contact with authorities. References to and narratives of sexual violence, beatings, intimidation or other forms of psychological abuse of female gang-involved youth from male members are common throughout the literature in Canada and B.C. (Nimmo, 2001; Aulakh, 2008; Totten, 2008; Totten 2012; Kelly, 2015).

Female gang-involved youth are likewise unsupported by their female colleagues, suggesting that a further hierarchy appears to exist between the various girls involved in male-dominated gangs. Females regard one another as competition, often for male attention. Girls support their member boyfriends rather than other girls and may attempt to denigrate the reputations or be complicit in the abuse of other girls by the gang to gain favour (Kelly, 2015).

This gender-based hierarchy occurs as female gang-involved youth are often used as a means to an end. In this sense, the gang's continued survival and money-generating activities rely on maintaining the subordinate role of female youth. Accordingly, the transferring of risks associated with getting caught onto female gang-involved youth is done to protect the male members the gang considers inherently more valuable (Kelly, 2015). At the same time, threats or acts of violence or sexual assault are frequently imposed upon female youth internally by the male gang members in order ensure they generate income for the gang from their activities. Ultimately, male dominance and continued control over other gang-involved youth is normalized, while females are constructed as powerless and extraneous, despite their core role.

Levels of affiliation and gang roles

The literature suggests that female youth occupy different levels of affiliation when involved in male-dominated gangs. Sexuality is a core component of each level, as male-dominated youth gangs construct hyper masculinities for themselves and sexualized identities for females in an effort to preserve the gendered hierarchy (Petersen and Howell, 2013; Dunbar, 2017). Three broad categories exist for female gang-involvement: romantic partners, sexual exploitation victims, or "regular" gang members (Totten, 2012). These different affiliation levels confer different relative status levels within the gang, all of which are subordinate to male members. It should be noted that none of these levels of affiliation is free from the risk of sexual or other physical or mental abuse.

Affiliation through a romantic partner is most common, with many female youth drawn into gang life through a boyfriend (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010; Totten, 2012). Primary research with gang-involved female youth suggests that boyfriends often provide the promise of protective, emotional and financial supports. Even if this promise is not one that is necessarily delivered upon, the potential to follow through with these supports (and the status they confer) continue to influence females' choices to remain associated with a gang (Kelly, 2015). In addition, the degree to which protection is ever actually provided by the boyfriend may only be from potential abuses by other male members. In this

regard, leaving the boyfriend while maintaining links to the gang is a particularly dangerous prospect. Totten (2012) finds that female youth, having broken up with a gang-involved boyfriend are suddenly subject to a much higher risk of sexual assault from other gang members, or being coerced into prostitution by the gang. This is not to suggest that coercion into prostitution only occurs when a boyfriend is out of the picture—the Abbotsford Youth Commission (2010) finds that boyfriends are often involved in coercing their girlfriends into sexual exploitation.

Gang-involved females in prostitution may also be forced into human trafficking for sexual exploitation. In this circumstance, the gang has opted for prostitution as an income-generating activity and will actively transport females to willing buyers across the country (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010). This has been acknowledged as a relatively rare occurrence within the Lower Mainland of B.C., as this form of exploitation is often unrelated to gang activities (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010). This finding carries a caveat in that trafficked youth are extremely difficult to locate. An inherent component of human trafficking is that the victim's movements are restricted, limiting their contact with the outside world. Gangs may thus be involved in trafficking, confining girls in homes or other environments (Totten, 2012), but as the activity remains deeply concealed, or is pursued by law enforcement as prostitution-related, it is under-reported.

Sometimes, sexual exploitation of female gang-involved youth through sex work need not occur through coercion or force. Gangs may target female youth already involved in the sex trade, offering affiliation with the gang in exchange for a share of the income the prostitution was generating (Totten, 2012). In this respect, the element of exploitation itself occurs due to the age of the youth (and thus, their inability to consent), despite the youth's belief that they are a willing participant in the arrangement.

Female youth involved in sexual exploitation of all types have low status within the gang and are generally regarded as disposable, their role being valued only in the income it produces for the criminal enterprise (Totten, 2012).

Female youth may be affiliated with male dominated gangs but remain unconnected to the sex trade or human trafficking, which confers a higher status (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010; Nimmo, 2001). These youth may be more actively involved in core gang activities such as drug holding and dealing, enforcing, feigning romantic interest in male rivals to spy or set them up for assault, and recruiting girls (Abbotsford Youth Commission, 2010; Totten, 2012). Through these activities, female youth can leverage their sexualized identities to be seen by the gang as somewhat more valued assets (Nimmo, 2001).

Despite their greater perceived value relative to prostitutes and human trafficking victims, female youth gang members are still at risk due to their subordinate sexualized identity within the gang. In this sense, females associated with male-dominated street gangs may still face sexually exploitative scenarios from male members, being required to pay back various debts through sexual favours (Totten, 2012, Kelly, 2015).

Value of work experience in support programs

Aulakh (2008) finds that upon leaving the gang, female youth place a strong focus on acquiring job skills or completing education that furthers a career. For many of these youth, limited prospects in these areas have driven their entry into gangs in the first place. Unfortunately, the time spent in gangs has done little to enhance their resumes. Nevertheless, these youth emphasize that having a stable career is

a core element of becoming financially independent, and to be financially independent is to remain independent of the gang and control by male members within it.

Echoing these findings, Spergel and Curry (in Chatterjee, 2006) identify opportunities provision, including providing adolescents with employment, employment training and education as one of the most effective elements for reducing gang involvement in their Comprehensive Model (alongside community organization, social intervention and suppression). Alongside financial independence, provision of these opportunities confers additional benefits for youth, including positive and realistic role models to encourage them to access new opportunities, develop a stronger sense of responsibility and become involved in the community (Nimmo, 2001).

Despite their promise, female gang intervention programs emphasizing work skills or job experience have been historically overlooked in practice and research (Nimmo, 2001). However, Totten identifies several key considerations that should be incorporated in program design. First, female gang-involved youth have specific protective factors relative to males. Many females have a history of being sexually abused both prior to and during their time in gangs, thus programming must be sensitive to this difference in lived experience (Totten, 2008). Second, cultural competence should be demonstrated by programs, as racial minorities (and gendered minorities) face barriers to full participation in society, including schooling and work opportunities (Totten, 2008).

Media Scan

The media scan revealed only five articles written after 2009 that specifically concerned female gang-involved youth in British Columbia. Of these, only two refer to youth aged 19 and under. Nevertheless, some important themes can be drawn out of the media regarding the local landscape of female gang-involvement.

With its prevalence of middle-class and multi-ethnic gangs, the Lower Mainland of B.C. has long been acknowledged as having a gang context unique among jurisdictions throughout North America. This uniqueness appears to apply to female youth affiliated with gangs in this region as well. Motivations for female youth to join gangs in other areas are often driven by poverty, as they perceive a future of helplessness and hopelessness (Dunbar, 2017). By contrast, in the Lower Mainland, females associated with gang members as romantic partners may come from particularly affluent backgrounds, and (at least among older women) may hold high-income legitimate jobs—from lawyers and nurses to exotic dancers (Kane and Smart, 2019). For their part, younger girls are often attracted to gang lifestyles through material desires they could not otherwise afford—not simply to satisfy basic needs like food and shelter. In fact, in an interview with VPD detectives running a female gang-involved youth program, Kane and Smart (2019) note that the regular interaction of slightly lower-income gang-affiliated females with non-gang affiliated wealthy peers in Metro Vancouver leads to a perception that luxury goods are as “needed” as basic goods. In this respect (discussed in more detail below) the need for belonging appears to hold an exceptional degree of influence over female youths’ decisions to join and continue association with local gangs.

The scan also revealed that females may be more active in their participation than in other jurisdictions. In the Lower Mainland, females have begun to escalate their activities to dealing drugs or carrying out robberies and armed assaults in the gang’s interest (Mercer, 2009; Isai, 2019).

More responsibility for core gang activities carries a greater degree of risk. Several articles reference how Lower Mainland females are now considered “fair game” for violent actions from other gangs (Macdonald, 2009; Mercer, 2009) which often differs from other jurisdictions. As a result, 17 females have been killed in gang-related violence in B.C. between 2007 and 2017 (Kane and Smart, 2019). Through this escalation of activities, females have come to the greater attention of law enforcement as well, both in terms of arrests and programming (Isai, 2019; Kane and Smart, 2019).

Interviews

Diversity in responses

Significant differences in observation exist across participant responses, despite their organizations operating in broadly similar thematic areas. Among three axes fundamental to the research questions (that is, observation of female youth involvement in gangs, sexual exploitation of female youth by gangs and human trafficking by gangs) there was no uniformity in what the participants encounter.

Participant	Sees female youth involvement in gang	Sees sexual exploitation of female youth by gang	Sees human trafficking by gang
Camila Jimenez Lauren Mathis (PLEA/Onyxworks)	Maybe*	Yes	Maybe**
Larissa Maxwell (The Salvation Army)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kevin Baumung Deanna Moscato (MCFD)	Maybe*	Maybe**	No
Marlies Dick (RCMP “E” Division)	--	Yes	No
Suman Hothi (CFSEU)	Yes	Maybe**	--
Jon Ross (Safe Schools WRAParound)	Yes	Yes	Yes

*Participant’s observation may change depending on operational definition of a gang

** Participant cannot definitively observe extent of issue

As an explanation for some of these inconsistencies, interviewed participants may not reflect the entirety of their organizations. While all participants hold high levels of responsibility over their teams, they may represent divisions or units within those organizations. These units may have a focus on certain areas, such as Indigenous youth, or on human trafficking victims, or an age range that differs from others in their organization. In this sense, these participants can only speak to what they see within their own unit.

Additional explanatory factors for the diversity in observation may also include the degree to which the female gang-involved youth present themselves as having been sexually exploited (discussed in more detail below). The inconsistent definition of what a gang actually is may also play an important role. For example, Kevin Baumung notes the presence in Surrey of an exclusively female youth criminal group that he considers a gang because its activities involve assaulting other female youth, but as it does not

engage in drug dealing, would not normally be considered a gang by mainstream media (Interview 2020).

Ultimately, the following themes are drawn primarily from those participants that observe these phenomena within their work.

Roles of female youth in gangs in the Lower Mainland

As previous noted in the literature review, female youth involved in gangs in the Lower Mainland are often associated through their boyfriends. This is not to suggest that their involvement may always be peripheral to core gang activity. Sometimes, involvement in core gang activities happens suddenly and unexpectedly: “‘You're my girlfriend...now we're driving...here hold this.’ And then they get pulled over, and then the girls are generally caught with the drugs and the guys are not.” (Interview Suman Hothi, 2020). In other circumstances, partaking in gang activities may be more active. This includes renting homes and cars in their names, handing over family vehicles or driving male gang members around themselves (Interview Jon Ross, 2020). More active involvement of females can also involve drug dealing to girls, calling in debts to other girls, and violent robberies of vulnerable people (Interview Suman Hothi, 2020; Interview Jon Ross, 2020).

Of note is that the boyfriends more closely connected to gangs than their girlfriends are often new members, and relatively low in the hierarchy of the gang. Jon Ross notes that they may have been introduced to drug trafficking only a month prior (Interview 2020), providing a further incentive to make money (and generate status) quickly. In this sense, the use of a girlfriend to assist in these activities is to further a means to this end.

Sexual exploitation may also be a component of female involvement in gangs. Emphasizing that her organization’s research in this field is preliminary and the connection not firmly established, Suman Hothi states “we do know that a lot of our females tend to be sexually exploited at the same time [as they are associated with gangs].” (Interview, 2020). Marlies Dick further suggests that as the nature of income-generating activity is not specialized in gangs, sexual exploitation of female youth may occur “off the side of the desk” with gangs dabbling in prostitution as well as drug dealing (Interview, 2020).

Roles subject to sexual exploitation in gangs occur in several different ways: girls are recruited by male gang members for sex with those members or sold to johns either in person or online (Interview Jon Ross, 2020; Interview Marlies Dick, 2020; Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020). In circumstances where a boyfriend is not involved in exploiting the youth, females may also take on the role of recruiting for sexual exploitation. Females may be better placed to develop trust and rapport with other girls, particularly as they are perceived as less of an obvious threat than male gang-involved youth. This is not to suggest that this role is unchallenging, rather, females involved in recruitment of other females for sexual exploitation know that their skills are in high demand in the Lower Mainland: “[Gangs will be interested in girls who...] ‘know how to run game. Do [they] know how to turn out another girl?’” (Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020). If the recruiter is being sexually exploited herself, there is an added motivation for female gang-involved youth to recruit other girls for sexual exploitation: “Part of the allure is that you have to do less sex work in that you’re getting someone else to do it for you” (Interview Jon Ross, 2020).

A significant component of the exploitation occurs online. Female youth are offered money to share nude photos or communicate online via webcam in various states of undress with older men. Money

can then be wired to an account held by the youth or another individual (Interview Jon Ross, 2020; Interview Marlies Dick, 2020).

If females involved with gangs become human trafficking victims, it appears to be relatively rare compared to other forms of sexual exploitation. While Jon Ross notes a particular case involving the trafficking of a B.C. female youth caught by police on the way to Alberta (Interview, 2020), Marlies Dick emphasizes gang activities in this region typically do not involve trafficking. Rather, trafficking occurs through independent criminals, individually or in small groups of two to three (Interview, 2020). However, Larissa Maxwell notes that activities change with the various levels of gang sophistication (Interview, 2020) This suggests that human trafficking may be an activity beyond the purview of street-level gangs, or that they may only be exposed to a small part of it.

The roles of female youth in gangs are related to their ages. Older, more entrenched females are more likely to be involved in activities such as robberies, drug dealing and calling in debts while younger females are more likely to be involved in sexual exploitation (Interview Kevin Baumung and Deanna Moscato, 2020; Interview Jon Ross, 2020). This likely occurs for two reasons: older girls are more experienced, and thus cautious about the risk of being sexually exploited (“...they’re more empowered not to be dragged into the exploitation piece” [Interview Kevin Baumung, 2020]) and younger girls are more actively targeted by gang members because they bring a greater profit (“they find younger girls to contribute to the bounty” [Interview Jon Ross, 2020]).

Roles may also vary on the ethnic makeup of the gang. Deanna Moscato notes that while Indigenous female youth are at significant risk of being sexually exploited by pimps, that exploitation is not at the hands of gangs (Interview, 2020). Indigenous gangs may not typically involve female members in sexually exploitative scenarios either. Indigenous females in gangs often have very active roles in that they are expected to run income generating activities like drug dealing and collecting alongside males—though they generally make far less money (Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020). By contrast, newcomer female youth may be at relatively greater risk of sexual exploitation, including human trafficking. The physical or emotional isolation associated with being a recent immigrant to a new society can be a magnet for predatory groups who offer the promise of belonging (Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020).

Vulnerabilities of girls to gangs, putting them at risk of sexual exploitation

Participants discussed particular vulnerabilities of female youth to entrenchment in gangs where they may be sexually exploited. These vulnerabilities can both put them at risk of joining gangs, and of remaining in these gangs. By logical extension, the degree to which these vulnerabilities are unaddressed by services impacts the potential for gang exiting.

Numerous vulnerability factors appear to exert an influence of one’s decision to associate with a gang. According to the participants, these risk factors for initial involvement into a potentially sexually exploitative gang may include:

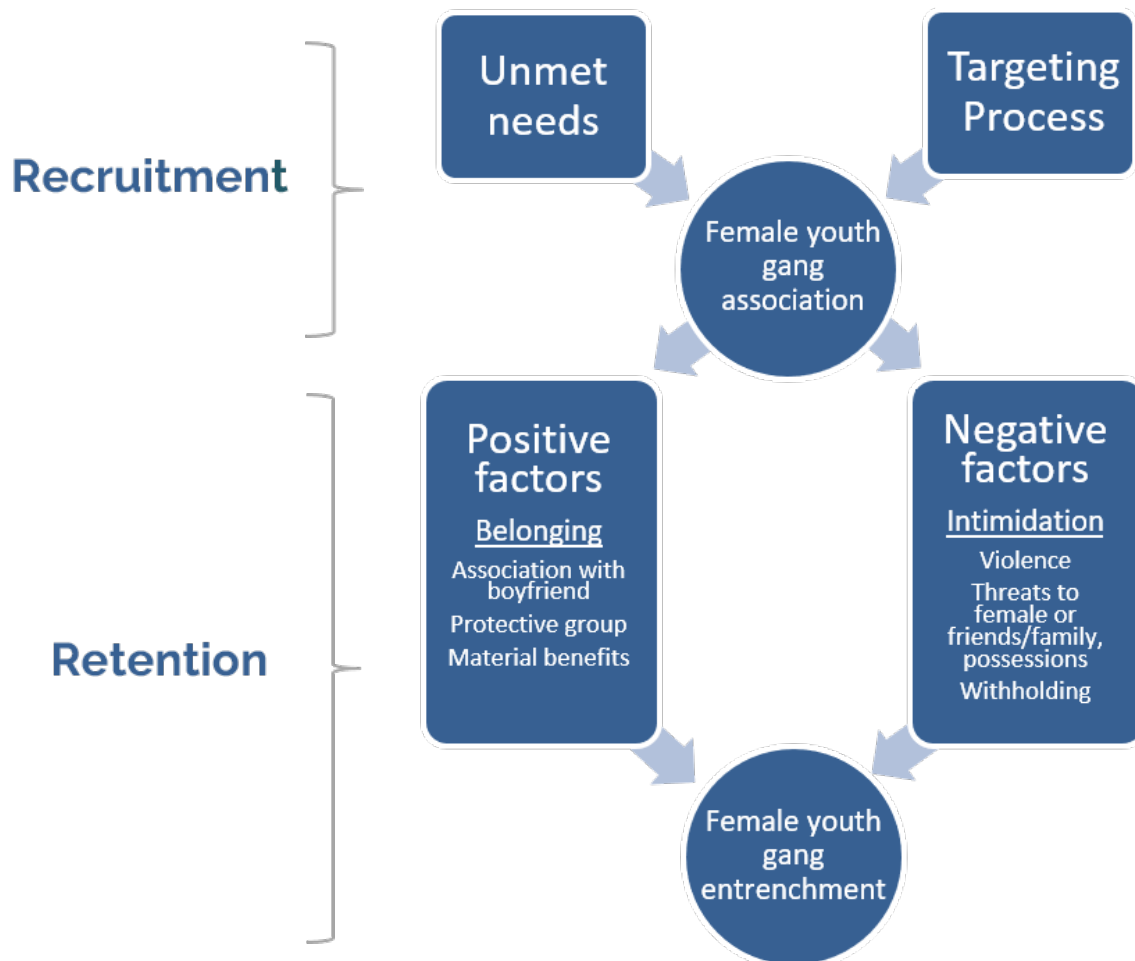
- Material wants
- Need for Excitement
- Disconnection from school
- Peer or boyfriend-related influences
- Prior sex trade involvement
- Need for protection

- A history of prior abuse (by family members, partners or peers)
- An unresolved history of trauma (e.g. arrival in Canada as a persecuted refugee having experienced conflict abroad)
- The impact of colonialism and systemic racism
- Youth itself (younger ages being targeted more frequently)

(Interviews Camila Jimenez and Lauren Mathias, 2020; Jon Ross, 2020; Kevin Baumung and Deanna Moscato, 2020; Marlies Dick, Larissa Maxwell, 2020)

While these vulnerability factors highlight how female youth may be at risk of gangs, they do not in themselves explain how these youth are recruited and retained within exploitative gangs. The below model describes this process and discusses how vulnerabilities can be capitalized upon by gangs and lead to entrenchment.

Female youth gang recruitment and retention model (Lower Mainland)



Recruitment occurs through the intersection of two processes aligned with these factors. In the first, the factors listed above can be conceptualized as *unmet needs* on the part of the female youth, and thus the decision to associate with a gang reflects a way to fulfil those needs. For its part, the gang engages in a

targeting process to recruit female youth with these vulnerability factors, dangling the promise of fulfilling these unmet needs as an overall strategy to attract them.

This model of recruitment raises the question of how entrenchment occurs. Why do female youth remain within the gang, especially once it is apparent the gang is unable to fulfill many of their needs—and indeed, imposes greater risks and traumas upon them? To remain (or indeed escalate her activities within the gang), a female youth must accept a narrative that the gang role is ultimately worthwhile, despite evidence to the contrary. Here, the youth is affected by both positive and negative types of retention factors that exert an influence on her gang entrenchment.

Unlike in other jurisdictions in Canada, in the Lower Mainland basic needs such as food, water and shelter are accessible by youth through services (interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020). Thus, positive factors largely appear to be associated with the gang's ability to meet a higher order of needs than basic needs. These can be grouped under the need for belonging. At a fundamental level, female youth seek out the gang as a substitute for the “gap of love or attention [as a] peer group that they wouldn't necessarily otherwise find” (Interview Camila Jimenez and Lauren Mathias, 2020). In this respect, female gang-involved youth may come from families that are affluent, non-affluent, highly dysfunctional or simply experiencing limited parental involvement in their lives (Interview Larissa Maxwell 2020, Interview Kevin Baumung and Deanna Moscato, 2020, Interview Camila Jimenez and Lauren Mathias, 2020). In this respect, the concept of belonging takes the form of the gang acting as a sort of family surrogate.

Belonging can also come from remaining in a romantic relationship with a male partner who is able to convince his partner he loves her, despite his faults. “He's gonna sell his drugs and make his money and she's gonna do this [sell herself for sexual exploitation] and make her money... [speaking from the perspective of a gang-involved female youth]: he isn't much of a boyfriend but he's my boyfriend.” (Interview Marlies Dick, 2020). Male romantic partners may often represent the only longer-term male figures in the female youth's lives, and so the attention they provide is a powerful counter to their misogynistic, violent, exploitative tendencies (Interview Jon Ross, 2020). The occasional positive treatment, such as a gifted item or cash, some personal time, etc., from a male figure ensures significant loyalty among females involved in sexual exploitation (Interview Marlies Dick, 2020).

Lastly, belonging can also encompass the gang's ability to meet the female youth's material wants—both interview participants and the literature suggests that the value of having high end luxury items (and the cash to afford them) is actually to demonstrate belonging with an elite peer group (Interview Camila Jimenez and Lauren Mathias, 2020; Kane and Smart, 2019). In circumstances where a female youth has a prior history of sexual exploitation, the offer of a gang to help ensure she makes money simply by doing what she was doing before is a powerful draw (Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020).

Negative retention factors of gang association are largely driven by intimidation. At their core, intimidation is often backed by the implicit or explicit threat of violence, ensuring female youth comply. These may include threats from rival gangs, or from one's own gang. Ensuring that debts remain outstanding is a common technique by a female youth's own gang members to intimidate her. Debts can accrue on a constant basis, whether associated with the consumption of drugs or alcohol at parties attended by the female youth, or from situations such as being in a car at a traffic stop with a gang member (Interview Jon Ross, 2020). Gang threats to the female youth can concern herself, or quite often her family. These may include slashing the tires of the family vehicle, physically threatening a family member (Interview Jon Ross, 2020), or potentially sexually exploiting a younger sister (Interview

Marlies Dick, 2020). Some physical threats are less immediate, such as the withholding of drugs the female youth has become dependent on (Interview Camila Jimenez and Lauren Mathias, 2020; Interview Marlies Dick, 2020).

In addition to intimidation through physical threats to the female youth or her family, threats associated with shaming are employed by exploitative gangs. Simply revealing to family or non-gang-involved peers the sexual exploitation the youth has been subjected to is a common tactic by exploiters (Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020; Interview Jon Ross, 2020). The threats to reputation, alongside threats to health and wellbeing combine to have a powerful retentive effect. As Jon Ross notes, female youth are not entrenched in exploitative scenarios by being continually duped, rather “they know what’s happening, but as far as they’ve suffered that kind of indignation or trauma, they’re prepared to do it longer if they need to, perhaps to remedy whatever fear they have in leaving” (Interview 2020).

Experiences of sexually exploited female youth by gangs

Among gang-involved female youth in the Lower Mainland of B.C., feelings of shame associated with exploitation paradoxically coincide with a belief that they do not see themselves as victims. Larissa Maxwell highlights how female gang-involved youth are often highly engaged in what she terms “transactional living”—engaging in various activities (including support programs) only in exchange for an immediate, tangible benefit (Interview 2020). Accordingly, numerous participants noted that these youth may believe themselves to have been fully aware and accepting of the consequences to becoming involved in sexual exploitation, even if they were under the age of consent at the time (Interview Camila Jimenez and Lauren Mathias, 2020; Interview Jon Ross, 2020; Interview Marlies Dick, 2020). Kevin Baumung suggests “significant mental gymnastics” are at play when a female youth is exploited by a boyfriend in particular: “I’m doing this for my boyfriend, he still loves me, he just needs me to make a couple bucks” (Interview Kevin Baumung and Deanna Moscato, 2020).

For some female gang involved youth, a feeling of accomplishment is at play when discussing their roles (though this typically involves the exploitation of other girls). While Jon Ross notes that female gang involved youth must typically devote a significant proportion of their day to gang activities (Interview 2020), Larissa Maxwell highlights that maintaining and negotiating roles in the gang are exceptionally hard work for female youth, and some recognize a certain sense of accomplishment in being particularly adept and skilled at what they do (Interview 2020).

Female youth are often only able to recognize the reality of what has happened to them through extensive counselling and creative conversations with support workers (Interview Camila Jimenez and Lauren Mathias, 2020; Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020). For many of these youth, the concept of victimhood is inherently one of weakness, and recognizing that they have been victimized is to portray that sense of weakness for the world to see. For some youth, acknowledging their own exploitation is a process that takes years (Interview Larissa Maxwell, 2020). Ultimately, through the assistance of support systems, female youth may be able to reframe this discourse and instead portray themselves as survivors, having exerted personal agency to change and reform themselves out of exploitation.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

From the literature review, media scan and interviews, some implications of the research into roles and sexual exploitation of gang-involved female youth are immediately apparent. First and foremost is that there is a pressing need to harmonize definitions of gangs and gang membership. A lack of consistency in operational definitions across responding organizations suggests that the extent of female youth association with gangs cannot be measured accurately. An incomplete picture of the extent of female gang involvement may affect the allocation of appropriate resources to the problem.

Building on this theme of harmonization, organizations should take advantage of opportunities to break down silos between different agencies that address various facets of female gang involvement. In this regard, participation in SAFE's CHART referral program represents an excellent initiative to develop stronger community responses. Expansion of SAFE's network of partnerships could also further this aim.

The research further implies an important need for education campaigns for female youth at risk of gang association. Starting these campaigns at young ages (such as early teens) may be appropriate, considering that gangs actively target younger females for recruitment into sexual exploitation. Considering the central roles of positive and negative retention factors highlighted in the model above, the content of these campaigns should not only highlight the various risks and harms associated with gang association. Rather, campaigns must facilitate a sense of belonging for youth to intervene in areas where they may exhibit particular vulnerabilities. A focus on family connections and developing positive experiences with pro-social peers would be a suitable starting point.

Campaigns focusing on sex education and rights education should emphasize the core role of personal agency and include practical applications of what resources are available and how to access them. It should also be stressed for youth that claiming rights and getting help can happen at any time—an especially important message for those who feel their options are limited by entrenchment into gang or sexually exploitative lifestyles.

Particularly for entrenched female youth, programs providing work experience have particular value as a means of gang-exiting as well.

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APPENDIX A: MASTER INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

What are the roles performed by females aged 11-19 in gangs in the Lower Mainland of B.C.?

****Questions to be used as a guide to facilitate discussion; may not be applicable to all participants****

How common is female gang involvement in the Lower Mainland?

Are females members of small/neighborhood gangs, mid-level gangs, or more major gangs?

What are the motivations for females to join gangs here? Why would they want to stay in? What causes them to exit?

What are the roles [your organization] has observed female gang involved youth taking part in? Have these changed over time?

How do the roles of female gang involved youth change depending on the category of gang the female belongs to?

How do the roles of females in gangs vary with the money-generating activities of the gang?

How do the perceived benefits of membership in a gang change with the role being performed?

How do the roles of females in gangs vary with the demographic makeup (age/sex/dominant ethnicity/class) of the gang?

To what degree are females able to change their roles within gangs?

How much time does the gang role take up for female gang members? Do they have time for other activities? What activities are these?

What are the factors that put females 11-19 at risk for sexual exploitation by gangs in the Lower Mainland?

****Questions to be used as a guide to facilitate discussion; may not be applicable to all participants****

How are females recruited for gangs in which sexual exploitation is a money-generating activity for the gang? Does this differ from female recruitment into gangs where sexual exploitation is not a money-generating activity?

Canadian researchers developed four profiles of sexually exploited females in gangs. How do these categories apply in the Lower Mainland among females aged 11-19?

- a.) Submissive: Female's low self esteem leads to a belief in a romantic association with male gang member; manipulated into prostitution
- b.) Adventurous: Female voluntarily joins gang to be involved in prostitution to generate money quickly
- c.) Independent: Female chooses to associate with gang members but tries to maintain independence; involved in prostitution only occasionally
- d.) Sex slaves: seen by the gang as sexual object to generate money. Restrained through force (as opposed to manipulation)

What are the socio-economic backgrounds of sexually exploited females in gangs?

Are females who are sexually exploited involved in the sex trade prior to gang involvement?

How are female gang members involved in the sexual exploitation of others?

What are the experiences of sexual exploitation of females 11-19 by gangs in the Lower Mainland?

****Questions to be used as a guide to facilitate discussion; may not be applicable to all participants****

How common is sexual exploitation among the female youth you work with?

How do victims portray their own experiences?

Where does sexual exploitation occur (e.g. gang houses, massage parlours, trick pads, street, etc.)?

For what purpose were females exploited by gangs (e.g. gang initiation/retention/exiting, prostitution, etc.)? Does the nature of the exploitation change depending on the purpose?

Are there hidden populations of sexually exploited females unreachable by services?

What barriers do young women who are sexually exploited face to exiting their situations?

How can programs offer support to gang-involved females 11-19 at risk of sexual exploitation to connect them with work or volunteer experience?

****Questions may not be applicable to all interview participants****

What are the unique challenges associated with delivering programs that target gang-involved young women at risk of sexual exploitation? Can programs targeting gang involved young women and young women at risk of sexual exploitation separately be effective?

What are the unique challenges associated with gang involvement and employment for young women?

****Specific program questions****

Description of program (if not publicly available): goals, clientele, activities

Is there an evidence base for the type of support your program offers? Is it based on a theoretical model of change?

What is the participant capacity within the program?

What was the initial cost of setting up the program? Ongoing costs: what are the costs of operating the program per participant? How is it funded?

How do the program elements reflect cultural/gender supports for participants?

Does the program facilitate connection between the participant and a key worker to support them through the process?

How does the program respond to unforeseen complications in the lives of its participants (e.g. missing days of work)?

How is remuneration handled for program participants?

With what organizations have you partnered in order to deliver the employment/volunteer experience?
How were these organizations approached? How have agreements been secured?

Was training or assistance provided to partner organizations to participate in the program?

What additional steps were needed by organizations in order to meet the programs needs?

What are some of the challenges/successes you have found in operating the program? Would you change anything about the program if you had the scope to do so?

How do you measure success/benefit to participants in the program?

Has it been evaluated—can any evaluative materials be shared? Has a cost-benefit analysis performed, and can this be shared? Has an SROI been performed and can this be shared?

Do you have any other specific reference material you would be willing to share (e.g. logic models, activity reports, etc.)?

Are you familiar with any additional programs in other jurisdictions that may be helpful for this study?