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The Unravelling of Identities and Belonging: Criminal Gang Involvement of Youth from Immigrant Families

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Abstract Grounded in the experiences of 30 gang-involved respondents in Calgary, this Canadian study examined criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families. Our analysis showed that gang-involved youth had experienced multiple, severe and prolonged personal and interpersonal challenges in all facets of their lives and that gradual disintegration of their relationships with family, school and community had resulted in the unravelling of self-concept, ethnic identity, sense of belonging and sense of citizenship and progressively propelled them towards membership in high-risk social cliques and criminal gangs. Our findings brought attention to the need for coordinated, comprehensive support for youth from immigrant families through family-based, school-based and community-based programs.

Keywords Youth · Gang · Crime · Immigrant · Racial minority

Introduction

Foreign-born youth and Canadian-born youth from immigrant families represent about 20 % of all young Canadians under the age of 18, and this is expected to reach 25 % by 2016 (Canadian Council on Social Development 2006). In recent years, there has been growing public concern about criminal gang involvement of this sub-population in major Canadian cities, but public discourse has focused solely on the reporting of criminal and violent incidents (Giroday and McIntyre 2012; Howlett 2015; Humphreys 2011; Rassel 2009; Spencer and Austin 2011). Many communities have initiated

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projects to support high-risk and gang-involved youth from diverse backgrounds (National Crime Prevention 2012). These efforts, however, have been hindered by inadequate theoretical and empirical attention to issues facing immigrant and ethnoracial youth in Canada, especially in the sociojustice arena. In response to this reality, we mobilized and involved stakeholders from the community, social service, education, government, justice and health sectors in a sustained action research to gain an understanding of criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families and to promote collaborative action to support high-risk and gang-involved youth. This article sets out to review the literature related to youth crime, immigration and ethnicity in Canada, to elaborate on the research process, to examine criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families and to discuss theoretical and practical implications.

Background

The academic literature in the USA and Europe has long examined the link between immigration, race and gang membership (Decker et al. 2009; Freng and Esbensen 2007). Thrasher (1927) theorized that most gangs in Chicago would be found within the transition zone, which was populated by immigrants sharing common beliefs, behaviours and experiences. A number of scholars have supported the view that minority membership in gangs is a symptom of larger societal issues, such as poverty, discrimination, segregation and urbanization (Curry and Decker 1998; Curry and Spergel 1992; Hagedorn 1998; Shaw and McKay 1942; Short 1968). Vigil (1998, 2002) put forward the notion of multiple marginality and contended that disadvantages and marginalization facing racial minorities are key launch factors to gang formation in Los Angeles. Similarly, theoretical development and research from Europe has also highlighted economic disadvantages and structural factors (i.e. government policies, access to housing and opportunities and segregation) in gang membership among immigrants and racial minorities (Adamson 2000; Covey 2003; Decker et al. 2009).

In Canada, there is a lack of official public crime statistics related to immigration status, race and ethnicity (Owusu-Bempah and Millar 2010; Wortley 1999). This limitation has impeded research efforts to understand the prevalence and patterns of criminal involvement of youth from immigrant families and to inform policy and practice. Nevertheless, a limited number of studies from various Canadian cities have begun to document the role that immigration status, race and ethnicity play in criminal involvement. Using data from nine waves of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, Bersani (2014) showed a significantly low rate of offending among the foreign born and an increase in criminal involvement among Canadian-born children of immigrants. The author, however, noted that there was no evidence that the rate of involvement or patterns of offending among Canadian-born children of immigrants were significantly different from that of the native-born population. Similarly, three surveys of junior high and high school students in Toronto revealed that foreign-born youth were less likely than their Canadian-born counterparts to report criminal gang membership or involvement in delinquent activity (Hagan et al. 2008; McMullen 2009; Wortley and Tanner 2006). However, the results from the Wortley and Tanner study demonstrated that the likelihood of foreign-born youth reporting criminal gang membership increased with their length of time in Canada. McMullen (2009)) raised the

concern that Canadian-born youth with at least one parent born outside of Canada reported the highest rate of violent delinquency, compared to those born outside of Canada or those with both parents born in Canada. In addition, Wortley and Tanner (2008) showed that gang membership in Ontario is more prevalent among African, Hispanic and Aboriginal youth than among Canadian-born youth of European, Asian or South Asian descent.

A few qualitative studies have shed light on the experiences of gang-involved youth from immigrant families in Canada. Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) interviewed representatives from social service agencies, community groups and the criminal justice and forensic mental health systems who frequently come into contact with immigrant and refugee youth involved in criminal and/or gang activity in Edmonton. The stakeholders identified a wide range of risk and protective factors related to family functioning, individual experiences, peer relations, school challenges and community life. Drawing on the experience of known gang members of diverse racial backgrounds in Ontario, Wortley and Tanner (2008) asserted that racial minority gang members were more likely to highlight racial injustice and social inequality as reasons for gang membership than their White counterparts. Gordon (2000) interviewed inmates in correctional centres in British Columbia and learned that young racial minorities with socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds sought to escape from exceedingly difficult family lives and became involved in street gang activity to achieve a sense of belonging in a supportive, intra-ethnic social network. Drawing upon their consultations with diverse ethnocultural group members, law enforcement personnel and service providers in Alberta, Ngo et al. (2013) further identified criminological risk factors related to home country experience, acculturation, strains in community interactions, socioeconomic disparity, negative media influence and interaction with the criminal justice system, as well as the protective factors related to family support, the strengths of ethnocultural communities, community engagement and civic participation, and access to services.

Parallel to the limited research on criminal gang involvement among youth from immigrant families is a lack of contemporary theoretical explanations of the social phenomenon from the Canadian perspective. Among the few theoretical efforts to understand the immigration and crime connection is Wortley's synthesis of four explanatory frameworks: the importation model, the cultural conflict model, the strain model and the bias model (Wortley 2003, 2009). With an explicit focus on the relationship between immigration and crime, the importation model contends that those youth who come from crime-prone nations are likely to commit crimes in Canada. The strain model, on the other hand, attributes criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families to tensions in their relationships with Canadian society at large that result in frustration with their marginalized status. The cultural conflict model focuses on the intersection of immigration and culture. Proponents of this theoretical standpoint would argue that some youth come from cultures that condone certain practices that are not legally accepted in Canada such as violence, prostitution and the use or sale of drugs. Finally, the bias model suggests that over-representation of certain ethnoracial groups in crime statistics is due to systemic discrimination and bias in the criminal justice system. These models speak to different aspects of the experience of youth from immigrant families in their interactions with Canadian society. More research is needed to further elaborate on and confirm these models.

In summary, the limited number of Canadian studies has consistently shown that criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families is rooted in their Canadian experience. They have cursorily identified the risk and protective factors and have begun to offer theoretical insights into the underlying motivation leading to gang involvement. Our study sets out to contribute to this body of knowledge with explicit description of pathways leading to gang involvement of youth from immigrant families and theoretical insights into this contemporary Canadian social phenomenon.

Methodology

Research Processes

This study involved two interlinked processes: the multi-stakeholder group process and the inquiry into lived experience of gang members. The multi-stakeholder group process was informed by the participatory action research (PAR) methodology, which promotes involvement of community members in all aspects of research, and integration of theory and practice in the pursuit of solutions to community issues (Reason and Bradbury 2006). We engaged 32 representatives from the community, social service, education, government, justice and health sectors in a 2-year collaborative process, through which they provided strategic direction for the interviews with the gang-involved respondents, reflected on the learning from those interviews and developed and implemented strategies to deal with the issues emerging from the analysis of the interviews. The second process of the research was the inquiry into the lived experience of gang-involved respondents. We used grounded theory, an inductive research methodology for theoretical development through continuous interplay between data collection and analysis (Glaser and Strauss 1967), to seek answers as to why and how some youth from immigrant families became involved in gang activity. The inquiry involved labour-intensive outreach activities carried out by the primary investigator, five research assistants and several community partners. We used semi-structured individual interviews to collect data. Eighteen interviews took place at various locations in the community such as probation offices, a school office, a service agency and a university campus, and 12 interviews took place in the local youth detention centre. With the exception of one telephone interview, all the interviews were conducted face to face. Each interview lasted about 2 h. With the exception of one interview conducted in Vietnamese, all the interviews were in English. The emerging insights from the interviews were regularly presented to the multi-stakeholder group and informed their dialogues and action.

Gang-Involved Respondents

A total of 30 respondents with a history of criminal gang involvement voluntarily participated in the study. All came from immigrant families (with at least one parent born outside of Canada). Sixteen respondents identified themselves as former gang members, and 14 were still affiliated with a criminal gang at the time of their interviews. The respondents were all male with the exception of one female former gang member. With respect to birth place, 19 respondents were born outside of Canada

and 11 were born in Canada. The respondents represented diverse ethnicities: five Southeast Asians, eight South Asians, three Middle Easterners, nine Africans, one European, one Latino and three with mixed ethnicities (Lebanese Canadian, Somali Canadian). At the time of their interviews, the respondents ranged between 14 and 38 years of age, with an average age of 23 years. Among those who were born outside of Canada, the length of time in Canada ranged from 4 to 25 years, with the average being 15 years. The respondents represented a wide range of educational backgrounds (eight with post-secondary education, six with high school diploma and 16 without high school completion). In terms of employment status, only 14 respondents were legally employed, and two respondents were looking for employment. One participant was attending university full time. One participant was on social assistance for a long-term disability. Twelve respondents were in the youth detention centre.

Results

The analysis of the interviews with the currently and formerly gang-involved respondents (hereafter referred to as "gang-involved respondents") unearthed their complex life experiences. The youth either directly experienced pre-migration trauma or were indirectly impacted by their parents' pre-migration histories. Their life experience in Canada involved gradual disintegration of their interactions with their families, schools and communities. Subsequently, the youth experienced crises of identity and belonging, which propelled them towards membership in high-risk social cliques and criminal gangs.

Pre-Migration Trauma

Of the 19 foreign-born respondents, 11 individuals directly experienced extreme violence in their home countries or in refugee camps during childhood. They recounted the chaos, severe brutality and long-lasting struggles with post-traumatic stress. At age eight, a respondent was caught in a bloody civil war in Burundi:

> I saw lots people dead in front of me. Too much to count. Everybody was running in the same direction, and the soldiers were shooting at us. Once, my sister was close to being shot, but the lady beside her got shot. It wasn't a good thing to see, because the lady was carrying a baby on her back. The bullet went through the baby and out of the woman's chest. After the war, hundreds of soldiers, hundreds of mothers, hundreds of kids lying around dead. It would take days to clean up. Every time I went to school, I'd see pictures of ladies on the run, I would be thinking what if they were my mom, my dad, or sister laying on the ground like that. Those memories would piss me off.

Even though some respondents were born in another transitional, safe country or in Canada, they had experienced the impact of civil wars through their parents' post-traumatic behaviour. They indicated that their parents internalized traumatic experiences and expressed anger through domestic violence against their spouse and/or children.

Disintegration of Family Relationships

Gang-involved respondents had experienced difficult interactions with family members in Canada. Their struggles should be seen in the context of disadvantaged family socioeconomic conditions. Respondents primarily came from working class or low-income families. Their parents worked long hours, often with multiple low-paying jobs, to make ends meet. One third of respondents ($N=10$) indicated that they had lived in poverty over an extended period.

Respondents were raised in families in which the prominent approaches to childrearing were absent, permissive or hostile parenting. In fact, 18 individuals reported inadequate parental guidance in navigating developmental and social challenges during their childhood and teenage years. They came from large families (with at least four children), single-parent families, non-traditional home arrangements (i.e. foster care and group homes) and families with over-worked parents or parents with out of town employment. The absence of guidance from fathers, in particular, was identified as a detriment to development for some young men. A respondent claimed, "A man needs his father in his life to show him how to become a man." In addition, 15 respondents indicated that at least one of their parents was permissive in parent-child interaction. These parents, in most cases their mothers, adopted a "laissez faire" approach to childrearing. They were overly nurturing, rarely communicated their expectations for acceptable behaviour and did not support them to face the consequences of their actions. At the opposite end, 11 respondents reported that their fathers were very strict. They recalled rigid rules, controlled social boundaries and consistent expectation of perfection in their households. Their interactions with their fathers were typically devoid of affection and, instead, burdened with demands for obedience. A respondent assessed the different styles of parenting:

> It's like you pick up sand in your hand. One person could hold sand in an open hand and wind would blow them away. One person could squeeze it really hard and it would leak out of his hand. Another person could just close his fist gently. Who's going to have more sand left in their hand?

Respondents attributed strained interactions with their parents to the varying levels of adaptation of Canadian norms and values. They differed from their parents on the roles expected of parents and children and on cultural practices and life priorities. They experienced deep frustration as a result of the acculturative gaps between them and their parents.

Respondents perceived differential treatment in their families on the basis of their gender. The male respondents frequently reported that, compared to their female siblings, they enjoyed relatively greater freedom. At the same time, they felt burdened at a very young age with an expectation of hyper-masculinity from their fathers. These individuals had internalized the expected "macho man" standard of behaviour and found it difficult to seek family support to deal with their personal struggles. A number of respondents came from a non-traditional family structure, such as a cross-cultural marriage or blended family. Two mixed-race participants experienced familial racism; they reported verbal abuse, mistreatment and rejection by other family members. Furthermore, a few respondents reported turbulent relationships with stepfathers. As

young children, they felt that they had been made vulnerable by the choices that their mothers made in relationships with men. These respondents uniformly reported mistreatment by stepfathers, including physical and verbal abuse and neglect.

Gang-involved individuals frequently reported negative influences from their parents and siblings. Thirteen respondents grew up in families characterized by serious domestic violence. They were subjected to severe physical and verbal abuse. They also witnessed verbal spats between their parents and physical aggression of their fathers against their mothers and other siblings. These individuals experienced deep anxiety, anger and trauma that they connected to family strife and violence. For eight respondents, persistent family violence reportedly led to parental divorce, which caused further disruptions in the young people's lives. The following traumatic experience had followed a respondent all his life:

> My older sister told my mom about my dad's plan to marry another lady. My mom confronted my dad about it. That night, in this room right here, we were all sleeping. My dad came out. He plugged in like that, and electrocuted her right in the eye. We were all very terrified. I was only five at the time, but I still remember it like it was yesterday. Then he beat up my mom very badly, he broke her nose and cheek bone. I remember after that happened, the next day I killed a kitten. Out of anger I picked up a big rock and started smashing it. I was lashing out as a kid. That was definitely the starting point for what happened after that in my life.

Many respondents revealed that their parents had struggled with mental health challenges. In fact, nine respondents indicated that at least one of their parents suffered from depression associated with post-trauma-related stress, acculturation, financial hardship and marital troubles. Their parents' poor mental health affected their caregiving ability and parent-child relationships. Eight male respondents took on financial and caregiving responsibilities for their parents and siblings in their teenage years. In addition, four respondents reported that they witnessed their parents' drug use and heavy drinking at a very young age. Two respondents were taken away from their parents and moved through various foster care and group home arrangements over the years. There was further evidence that gang-involved individuals were exposed to negative sibling influences. Thirteen respondents acknowledged that they looked up to their older siblings and aspired to emulate their lifestyles and behaviour as early as age 5. They indicated that their older siblings had progressively introduced them to fighting, alcohol and drug use and criminal activity. Their description of sibling influence suggested a chain reaction; while the respondents acquired their older siblings' negative behaviours, their young brothers and sisters also looked up to them and aspired to follow in their footsteps.

Disintegration in School Interactions

Gang-involved respondents had uneven and challenging educational paths. Almost all respondents ($N=26$) experienced persistent academic struggles starting in the late elementary years. For them, going to school, as one respondent noted, was like "stepping up the stairs, from this level to another level, without knowing how to get there." Respondents most frequently reported a lack of English proficiency, sporadic

education in their home country, learning disabilities and a lack of motivation as their personal learning barriers. Many felt vulnerable to peer derision and social exclusion due to their limited English and learning disabilities. A participant recounted, "I was labeled retarded. They put me into this LD [learning disability] class, and it was right across from where the normal kids went to class. We got made fun of all the time."

Respondents experienced difficulties at the various school transition points: from home country education to Canadian education, from one school level to the next school level, from one school to the next school and from a faith-based school to a public school. In addition to language barriers, foreign-born respondents struggled to adapt to new cultural norms with respect to learning, teaching style, relationships with school personnel and peer relationships. Those who came from a strict education system admitted to taking their newfound freedom in a Canadian school for granted to the point that they did not show respect to their teachers and peers. On the other hand, those who came from a chaotic environment in their home country indicated that they struggled to adapt to the new cultural expectations and practices, particularly in dealing with conflict. A respondent admitted, "Once I got here, the rules are different. You cannot fight. I had a problem, because I was so used to fighting. If I get mad or if somebody doesn't agree with me, I usually end up punching them and get into troubles."

The transition from one school level to the next school level posed tremendous challenges for 17 respondents. These individuals elaborated on marked developmental changes at each school-level transition and on increased peer pressure to be "cool" or "popular" in their schools. Many respondents found the transition from the elementary level to the junior high level the most frustrating experience. They had yet to develop the skills to cope with the increased peer pressure in junior high school, particularly the emphasis on acquiring expensive, brand name fashion. Seventeen respondents also experienced transitional difficulties when they moved from one school to the next school. It was noted that the individuals changed schools when their transient families moved into new neighbourhoods or when they were expelled from their current schools. In several cases, the respondents regularly changed school, at times from month to month. They struggled to adjust to the new school environment and experienced social exclusion and bullying. The respondents, in varying ways, stated that while school personnel in a new school were often well aware of their previous behavioural records, their personal and academic needs were less readily communicated to and/or recognized by their new schools, and consequently, they did not receive adequate support.

Three respondents from a Muslim background found the transition from a faith-based private school to a public school in their high school years tremendously challenging. These individuals had led a sheltered life in their faith-based school, with a strict focus on religious values and conduct. When their families made a conscious choice to register them in a public school, they experienced "a huge cultural shock" and felt overwhelmed by the "very loose" school environment. The respondents felt that they were ill prepared to deal with the social complexities, particularly negative peer influences that they encountered in public school.

Respondents provided overwhelming evidence that their school experience was marred by pervasive incidents of bullying and racism. Many faced racial segregation and hostility as early as kindergarten. Indeed, 21 respondents stated that they were

frequently taunted with racial slurs at school and, in some cases, in the presence of their teachers. One third of the respondents (N=10) indicated that they were subjected to racially motivated violence over a long period of time. These incidents involved beating, kicking, punching, spitting and verbal humiliation. Their fear of retaliation prevented them from sharing their suffering with family members and school personnel. As youngsters, they lived in fear every day and felt desperate for protection. A respondent recalled his experience:

> Getting called a Paki by itself made me upset, but it wasn't the main thing. It would come hand in hand with punching me or spitting on me or kicking me. Up until 10, I was bullied once a week. Most of the time they were Whites, sometimes Natives, sometimes Blacks, but that was rare. They didn't know any better.

Eight respondents pointed out that racial tensions were not confined to interactions among the students. They perceived differential treatment on the basis of race from their principals and teachers. A respondent protested the following:

> If I do something and a White kid does something, they [teachers and principal] judge you differently. They give you different consequences. It's always the same. Some kid's thing goes missing and they point finger at me. And what else, you Black, you're not really smart, and they start looking down on you. Sometimes it got me mad enough to care, and I usually ended up lashing out with violence.

A number of respondents had long-standing histories of behavioural problems in school. They reported minor mischief in elementary and early junior high school years, including the following: causing classroom disturbances, petty theft and vandalism. Several respondents, however, noted that their behavioural problems escalated as they grew into their late junior and senior high school years. They became increasingly aggressive, and 18 respondents were, in fact, suspended and/or expelled for intimidation, fighting, use of alcohol and drugs and theft.

Respondents pointed out that peer pressure is an integral, prominent reality in the school culture, especially at the junior and senior high school levels. What set their experience apart from that of other peers was their vulnerability to negative peer influence and the delinquent nature of the activities in which they were pressed to take part. Gang-involved respondents were particularly vulnerable to negative peer influence due to difficult interactions with family members, struggles with academic performance, challenging school transitions and recurrent experiences with social exclusion, bullying and racism. Many respondents felt a heightened need "to fit in" and "to prove" themselves. They were particularly susceptible to the influence of peers with a similar experience of academic and social struggles. Several felt reluctant to assert themselves under peer pressure due to a fear of social exclusion. Respondents admitted that under negative peer influence, they became involved in a myriad of delinquent activities, including mischief, school truancy, drug use, consumption of alcohol and fighting.

In spite of their persistent academic, social and behavioural struggles, respondents reported inadequate support from schools. Those with a non-English mother tongue reported a lack of English language instruction in their schools. Several individuals found that the traditional teaching methods, which involve "hours of sitting and listening to teachers talk", made them grow "restless," "frustrated" and disengaged. Twenty-three respondents thought their teachers lacked the skills and life experience to understand and support students with complex life challenges. They were critical of school policy related to suspension and expulsion in dealing with behaviourally challenging youth. Quite often, the respondents did not receive any follow-up support in the community, and they simply continued their behavioural patterns in new schools. In addition, 21 respondents were critical of how their schools dealt with cultural diversity. They reported very few role models from diverse backgrounds among the teaching staff. They perceived discriminatory treatment by school personnel and felt that racial segregation and exclusion became the accepted norm in their schools. A participant was critical of his high school experience:

> I didn't belong to the school. They would have school rally. Me and the guys would be forced to go there, and we would sit there and look like donkeys on a fence. We wouldn't know what we were supposed to do, and we didn't care about it. We would see all the White guys on the rugby team all excited. I didn't see my culture in the school.

Disintegration in Community Interactions

Most respondents were raised in low-income neighbourhoods with a disproportionate presence of immigrants, aboriginal people, single-parent families and transient populations. They generally had negative perceptions of their communities, using negative terms such as "ghetto" and "crack head town" to describe their neighbourhoods. They asserted a view that the municipal government had overlooked their communities in terms of socioeconomic development. Twenty-eight respondents witnessed rampant drug dealing and prostitution in their neighbourhoods and were aware of gang warfare and gang-related deaths at an early age.

In sharp contrast to their reporting of negative influences in their neighbourhoods, respondents struggled to identify positive adult figures in their lives. Several respondents stated that that they looked up to troubled adults who eventually involved them in criminal activity. A respondent revealed, "Half of my neighbours that I was around with are doing jail time. Two of them that I know are sex offenders. I was chilling with drug dealers." Respondents further socialized with other young people who also came from socioeconomically disadvantaged families or "broken homes" in their neighbourhoods. In their interactions, they mutually influenced and reinforced negative behaviours. They engaged in minor delinquent activities in their early years, such as causing neighbourhood disturbances. Their mischievous behaviours quickly escalated and became more serious. Several respondents reported that they had committed vandalism, fighting and breaking and entering offences by the later years of elementary school and started to experiment with cigarettes, alcohol and marijuana in early junior high.

More than half of the respondents (*N*=17) brought attention to their experience with racism in their communities. They provided explicit accounts of racial tensions between White and non-White, as well as among ethnic groups. Those individuals from South Asian and African backgrounds were subjected to racial slurs on a regular basis. Some reported personal experience of hate crimes in their communities, which triggered post-war trauma for those with traumatic refugee experiences. A number of individuals expressed feelings of anger and resignation in their relationships with the community. A respondent shared his experience:

> I was walking home at night. A car was waiting but I didn't see nobody, because it had tinted windows. Then I heard the door open and someone said, "Hey Nigger." He started chasing me. I saw a knife in his hand, so I started running away…After that, I met the guys that I hang out with. They explained to me what a Nazi is, because I didn't know that in Africa. After that, the memory of the war from Africa came back. My friend said, it brings out the evil in us.

Furthermore, several respondents reported differential treatment from the justice system on the basis of race. They perceived hostility and racial profiling in their interactions with the police. They reported racially motivated stop and search practices and the use of racial slurs by police officers. When they got into conflict with the law, they perceived unfair treatment and outcomes because of their racial background. These individuals expressed a loss of faith in the justice system and discontent and anger towards the police.

The majority of the respondents were either unaware of or did not readily access services in their communities. Many respondents particularly lamented a lack of opportunities for them to participate in team sports. A few respondents said that they only accessed social services as a result of court orders or intervention from child protection services. These individuals were frustrated by a lack of culturally responsive services. They noted that even though some professional helpers had good intentions, they were not equipped with life experience, knowledge and skills to work in cross-cultural situations and to support young people with complex needs.

Not surprisingly, almost all participants (*N*=28) expressed their struggles to connect with the broad community. In addition to the aforementioned factors, many respondents indicated a lack of English proficiency made them reluctant to participate in community activities. Their parents also discouraged them from cross-cultural interactions due to their mistrust of the broad community. It was noted that respondents' disengagement from the broad community did not always propel them towards having strong connections with their ethnic communities. Twenty-three respondents indicated that they did not have firm roots in or had drifted away from their ethnic communities. They had not fully developed or had lost their ability to speak and/or write their heritage languages. Subsequently, respondents did not have the cultural tools to communicate with other members in their ethnic communities. Some respondents further cited parents' demanding work schedules and being deterred by community conflicts as the reasons for their lack of involvement in their ethnic communities. Two respondents of mixed race did not feel accepted by other members in the ethnic community. A respondent shared his view of his ethnic community:

I didn't consider people at my mosque a support system but I considered them a burden. I felt like an outcast when I went there. Was it a support system? It could have been. Was it a support system to me? No, not at all. I felt that these people didn't like me.

This pattern of acculturation reinforced the experience of marginalization in which bicultural individuals have identified with neither ethnic identity nor dominant group identity (see Berry 2008; Berry et al. 2006).

Unravelling Identities and Sense of Belonging

As established in the preceding sections, gang-involved respondents experienced gradual disintegration of their interactions with their families, schools and communities. Our critical review of interview data provided further insights into respondents' crises of identity and belonging, which were manifested in a negative self-concept, as well as in disempowering views of ethnic and Canadian identities. As individuals, respondents internalized the identities of the victim/oppressed, the deprived/underprivileged, the unwanted, the incapable, the follower, the frustrated/disillusioned and the delinquent. Many respondents saw themselves as victims of civil wars and mass brutality in their countries of ancestry. A number of youth associated themselves with the underprivileged class and viewed "being poor" or "coming from a ghetto" as an integral part of their history. Respondents reinforced the self-description of the unwanted. They experienced social exclusion and internalized social labels such as "loner" and "outcast." Those individuals who struggled with academic performance and English proficiency used negative terms, such as "retarded" and "stupid," to describe how others saw their ability and how they assessed their own learning capacity. Even though respondents adopted cool behaviour, such as dressing in expensive clothes or acting tough, they felt vulnerable and were, in fact, following the narrow definition of popularity set by their peers. Furthermore, the majority of the respondents saw themselves as angry people. In total, respondents mentioned the words "anger" or "angry" 102 times. This frustrated/disillusioned identity seemed to have deep roots in their experiences with or perception of injustice throughout their lives. They were resentful of perceived unfair treatment due to their disadvantaged position in social hierarchies and power structures (i.e. parent versus child, student versus teacher, police versus civilian, Black versus White). Finally, many respondents had internalized their identity as a delinquent. They referred to themselves as "trouble makers" but acknowledged that such a label was often first assigned by their parents, school personnel and community members.

Respondents further experienced a diminished sense of citizenship as Canadians. Regardless of whether they were foreign or Canadian born, respondents referred to themselves primarily as immigrants or singular ethnic minorities (Vietnamese, Chinese, Muslim, etc.). Various individual, familial and intercultural dynamics seemed to contribute to underdevelopment of Canadian identity among the respondents. Many individuals reported language barriers and a lack of understanding of Canadian norms and practices. They were raised in families in which parents were struggling with their own resettlement and cultural barriers and had limited exchanges with people outside of their confined ethnic networks. Hostile intergroup relations at school and in the

community further reinforced their sense of otherness. Respondents associated their membership in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities with status as second-class citizens.

Gang-involved respondents' accounts also indicated lack of an empowering ethnic identity. Respondents did not have adequate knowledge about or attachment to their heritage cultures. There was ample evidence that many gang-involved respondents readily subscribed to contemporary subcultures within their own ethnic groups. The messages conveyed by these subcultures, such as hip hop or rap, often expressed frustration and negative responses to marginalization and glamourized violence and promoted violence- and money-based power. In addition, respondents had rather negative views about their ethnic communities and indicated a lack of opportunities to interact with positive role models of similar cultural backgrounds. They felt vulnerable to negative public perceptions and criticisms of their cultural practices and reported pressure to tone down or abandon their cultural practices in order to "fit in" with their peers and in the community. The personal accounts of several respondents showed that they lived with the devastating effects of internalized racism. As a consequence of pervasive, persistent hostile treatment by others, these individuals no longer embraced their ethnic identities. They disliked and distanced themselves from cultural practices and avoided interpersonal relationships with people from their own ethnic background, especially in romantic relationships. Worse, they experienced self-hatred as demonstrated in the following account by a Sudanese Canadian youth:

> I was looking at the mirror…I just wanted to, feel like, spitting at myself, you know, spit on my skin or something. I just hated it, you know, disliked it…I just felt like, people look at me and call me the N word, you know. That's why I hated myself, even if I was a little bit lighter than this. You see, *(gesturing vertical hierarchy)* there's Black, and then there is light, and then there is a little bit Black, and then there is mulatto, and then all the way down here is where tar is, you know. And I'm like there *(pointing to the bottom)*, that's what I feel like, you know. These kinds of light skin guys, they get away with everything. Me, I'm Black.

Again, their disconnect with both Canadian and ethnic identities was consistent with the acculturation mode of marginalization (see Berry 2008; Berry et al. 2006).

Substituted Integration

The unravelling of identities experienced by the respondents during their adolescence created a void in social identity and connections, which propelled them to seek membership in alternative social networks. Respondents developed friendships with other socially disconnected individuals, who introduced them to alternative groups, such as an established social clique. Many respondents banded together with other youths to form their own social cliques. Through their involvement in high-risk groups, respondents received social validation and support and participated in delinquent behaviours. Over time, some social cliques, such as Fresh Off the Boat (FOB), evolved into criminal gangs. Many respondents also became connected to established criminal gangs through the members of their social cliques. In a few cases, the respondents were

introduced to established gangs by family members. As gang members, respondents participated in a range of criminal activity, including drug trafficking, debt collection, extortion, illegal gambling, theft, robbery and sale of weapons. Through group inter-actions and activities, respondents enjoyed social bonding, group identity, protection, social status, thrills and financial rewards. A respondent elaborated on his experience as a gang member:

> First, I wanted a name. I wanted people to stop bugging me. Second of all, I wanted the power that they had. Third of all, I wanted revenge…I got exactly what I wanted. That's all I wanted at the time…All you wanted at the time was to feel tough, feel big, to have the attention, and to be untouchable where nobody can do anything to you…I became untouchable, and everybody knew that.

Discussion

Grounded in the experiences of gang-involved respondents, this study proposed the interpretive theory of unravelling identities and sense of belonging to describe and explain criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families. The proposed theory posits that some youth became involved in criminal gang activity as a result of an unravelling of their self-concept, sense of citizenship and ethnic identity and their sense of belonging. This unravelling occurred as the youth experienced gradual, cumulative disintegration in their relationships with family, school and community. It prevailed when the young people were confronted with both a wide range and severity of negative life experiences over a prolonged period of time and was exacerbated by pre-migration trauma and socioeconomic conditions at home and in the community.

Our findings confirmed the various criminological theories and related research and pointed out the tension in theoretical interpretation of youth gangs. They supported the differential association theory, which asserts that criminal behaviour is learned in the process of communication and interactions within intimate personal groups (Sutherland 1939). Our results are consistent with those from a number of studies that show the negative influence of peers, family members and adults on youth in their involvement in crime and drug use (Church et al. 2009; Erickson et al. 2004; Selfhout et al. 2008). The evidence from this study further lent support to the social control perspective that attributes a lack of personal control, social bonding and social control as the causes for young people to drift into situations where they commit delinquency or crime (Hirschi 1969; Matza 1964; Reiss 1951). The disintegration in the gang-involved respondents' relationships with others at home, at school and in the community confirmed the presence of weakening social bonds and social control in life circumstances that led the youth to gang life. A compromised self-concept, on the other hand, reinforced the notion of a lack of personal control among the gang-involved respondents.

At first glance, the findings seemed to illuminate those aspects of the ecological perspective which attribute the rise of criminal involvement to social disequilibrium and social disorganization in neighbourhoods and related deterioration in social values and the effectiveness of institutions and informal social control forces (Park 1936; Shaw and McKay 1942). The majority of the respondents in this study came from low-

income, transient neighbourhoods and reported an absence of strong social infrastructure (i.e. inadequate social services) and cohesion in their neighbourhoods. A deeper examination of the frustration of many respondents with respect to the differential treatment and experience of immigrant or visible minority groups in their interactions with local institutions and other community members, however, did not reinforce the underlying functionalist paradigm of the ecological perspective. Rather, the experiences of many respondents were more congruent with a structural analysis of the strain perspective which examines social, economic and political structures in constructing the social reality of crime (see Wortley 2003). As demonstrated in this study, many respondents experienced social exclusion through numerous incidents of bullying and racism. They resented their lack of access to opportunities and responsive services at school and in the community. Several were critical of the municipal government for failing to initiate socioeconomic development in their communities. The consciousness of structural inequalities among many respondents and their differential experiences as immigrants and/or visible minorities reinforced structural discourses on racialization of visible minorities (Miles 1989), "othering" of groups in a society (Dominelli 2002) and the negative experiences of immigrants and minorities in their interactions with the various systems (Henry and Tator 2009; James 1997; Jiwani 2001; Kunz 2003). Our findings supported the multiple marginality framework, which considers macrohistorical and macrostructural forces that produce a cumulative effect of marginalization (i.e. economic insecurity, lack of opportunity, poverty) and ultimately results in gang membership of ethnic/racial minority members (Vigil 1998; 2002).

The interactions between gang-involved respondents and authorities solidified the labelling perspective that is concerned with the effects of societal reactions on the self-image and behaviour of individuals (Becker 1963; Lemert 1951), as well as the procedural justice school of thought that examines legitimacy and fairness of legal institutions (Sherman 1993; Tyler 1990, 2009). For example, some respondents were frustrated by their life struggles and acted out at school. They reported that their actions were labelled as delinquent behaviour and noted in school records, which then influenced how new school personnel perceived and related to them. In their experience with law enforcers, some respondents felt frustrated by the recurring assumption of their criminal or gang membership, simply on the basis of their visible minority status, long before their actual involvement in criminal gangs. Such statements as "if you already think I am in a gang, that I am a bad ass, then I might as well play the role" indicated their experience with self-fulfilling prophecies. These examples reinforced the literature that shows the prevalence of internalized racism among crime-involved racial minority youth (Bryant 2009; Manzo and Bailey 2005). They also showed the youths' perception of unfairness and bias in the criminal justice system, which led them to question the legitimacy of the authorities and encouraged their defiance of the sanctioning agents (Sherman 1993; Tyler 1990; 2009).

Our proposed theory brought attention to the social construction of identities, particularly self-concept, citizenship and ethnic identity. Since self-concept involves "identity" (the question, "*Who* am I?") and "esteem" (the question, "Am I *worthy*?") (Taylor 2002), the experiences of the gang-involved respondents with multiple marginalization in the various facets of their lives negatively impacted both their identity formation and evaluation of self. A number of studies have supported the link between low self-esteem and the likelihood of criminal involvement and gang membership

(Florian-Lacy et al. 2002; Wang 1994). Rosenberg et al. (1989) observed the reciprocal effect between low self-esteem and delinquency among adolescents: While young people become involved in delinquency due to their low self-esteem, some actually gain self-esteem because of their delinquent involvement. This observation was consistent with the experiences of several gang-involved respondents, who were treated by others with respect and fear and subsequently felt an elevated sense of power and self-confidence.

The second aspect of the proposed theory focused on the underdeveloped sense of citizenship among children of immigrants. Our findings were consistent with the existing research which asserts that regardless of their generational status, children of immigrants struggle to achieve a strong sense of Canadian identity (Reitz and Banerjee 2007; Thomas 2005). They illuminated the incongruence between legal status as a Canadian citizen and substantive experience of being Canadian. From the constitutional standpoint, immigrants (depending on length of time in Canada and naturalized citizenship status) and second-generation children of immigrants are guaranteed rights and duties as citizens. Yet, in their subjective experience, many children of immigrants do not readily *feel* Canadian. The findings from this study identified the various individual, interpersonal and institutional strains that impede the development of Canadian identity among youth from immigrant families.

Our study also shed light on the unravelling of ethnic identity among the gang-involved youth. The findings, in congruence with the related literature, offered three key insights about the relationship between ethnic identity and the well-being and development of ethnic minority youth. First, ethnic identity is important to youth from immigrant families. Almost all of the gang-involved respondents, whether they struggled with their ethnic experience or felt disconnected from their heritage cultures, during interviews readily explored and discussed their perceptions of their ethnic identities and their relationship to their ethnic traditions and communities. Our learning is consistent with the results of several studies that found ethnicity and ethnic identity to be more salient issues for ethnic minority adolescents than for members of the dominant culture (Branch et al. 2000; Hamm and Coleman 2001; Phinney and Alipuria 1990). Second, an empowered sense of ethnic identity is crucial to the development of youth from immigrant families. Several researchers found that a strong attachment to ethnic identity is a significant predictor of self-esteem of adolescents (Phinney and Chavira 1992; Smith et al. 1999; Umaña-Taylor 2004). The findings of this study demonstrated the negative consequences facing youth when they failed to achieve an empowered sense of ethnic identity. Third, our study findings confirmed that the development of ethnic identity of children of immigrants is vulnerable to the quality of their interactions with others. Kroger (2007), for example, pointed out that experiences of discrimination complicate efforts by adolescents to develop a strong sense of cultural pride and belonging. Spencer and Dornbusch (1990) noted that young people's awareness of negative appraisals of their cultural groups can negatively influence their life choices and plans for their future.

At the practical level, our research identified a need for a wide range of policy and service strategies to provide family-based, school-based and community based support to high-risk and gang-involved youth from immigrant families. Family-based strategies could support youth and their families to address resettlement and socioeconomic needs (i.e. housing, employment), to access specialized counselling to deal with the impact of

past trauma, to improve literary and English skills and to access resources and family coaching services to promote the well-being of all family members and their healthy interaction. School-based strategies should address responsive academic programming, opportunities for empowering social interactions, positive identity development, mentorship, school transitions, outreach to and psychosocial support for socially alienated students, purposeful and supportive school discipline and culturally competent school practices. In addition, community-based strategies could promote access of youth from immigrant families to general youth services as well as culturally specific programs, mentorship from culturally diverse individuals, community development to address neighbourhood inequities and the development of organizational capacity in service organizations to work with psychosocially/ behaviourally challenging youth from diverse backgrounds. The federal government could champion a national strategy that focuses on the resettlement and integration of children of immigrant families. This strategy should involve all federal departments (i.e. immigration, health, justice, employment and social development) to develop and implement department-specific policy strategies and inter-departmental initiatives to support the identified home-based, school-based and community-based services that address the needs of youth from immigrant families in the realms of justice, education, health and social services. A similar approach can also be used at the provincial level, particularly among the departments responsible for human services, education, housing, employment, health, justice and community development. At the local level, the municipal government could initiate policies that address inequities among communities and neighbourhoods; access of low-income families to quality public housing in healthy, mixed neighbourhoods; racism and discrimination; access of children of low-income families to recreational programs and activities; youth-focused facilities; and service priorities for vulnerable youth and families. The local school boards could strengthen educational policies that promote quality learning for students with ESL needs, learning disabilities and sporadic education; cultural diversity and competence; equitable resource allocation to schools; equitable outcomes among students; positive, inclusive school cultures; and educational upgrading. They should review the policies related to school suspension and expulsion to determine their effectiveness and to ensure concurrent and follow-up support for students. In the community, institutions and service stakeholders could ensure organizational policies related to cultural diversity and competence, as well as responsiveness to youth with psychosocial and behavioural challenges. In all jurisdictions, institutions and organizations, policy development ought to go hand in hand with corresponding funding priorities, adequate resource allocation and accountability and reporting measures.

Finally, our study had some limitations. Due to increased media attention, the publicized crackdowns on criminal gangs and the increasing levels of gang rivalry, gang members were reluctant to come forward. The study thus relied solely on the methods of convenient and snow ball sampling. In addition, people who occupied central roles in the hierarchy of their gangs were reluctant to take part in this study. With respect to gender representation, this study primarily relied on the perspectives of male participants for theoretical development. There are thus opportunities for theoretical contributions with a focus on female perspectives on criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families. Additionally, future research can explore the unique experiences and nuances of criminal gang involvement of youth from specific

ethnocultural communities (i.e. Sudanese, Somali, Vietnamese, Muslim, etc.). Comparative studies on criminal gang involvement of youth from first and second generations or between gang-involved and non-gang-involved youth from immigrant families would also enhance theoretical clarity.

Conclusion

This study offered a thorough description of and theoretical insights into the lived experiences of gang-involved youth from immigrant families in the Canadian context. Our research findings showed that gang-involved youth from immigrant families had experienced multiple, severe and prolonged personal and interpersonal challenges in all facets of their lives. They also demonstrated the intricate interactions between the gang-involved youth and others at home, at school and in the community that resulted in the unravelling of self-concept, citizenship and ethnic identity and sense of belonging. Our study highlighted the need to develop policies and services that support healthy development of youth from immigrant families through family-based, school-based and community-based programs.

Appendix

Evolving Interview Guide (Gang-Involved Youth and Former Gang Member)

Note: Interviewing Process: Interviews in grounded theory are guided by the principles of constant comparison and ongoing formulation and verification of hypotheses about relationships among categories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It is important that the researcher continually compares and identifies theoretical concepts and relationships and collects additional data as directed by accumulating data to verify hypotheses. The interview guide, therefore, ought to evolve to advance theoretical building.

Note: Considerations for Interviewing Locations: In consideration of safety protection for the research participants and the researcher, all interviews will take place in locations that have security measures in place, such as service organizations and the university.

A. Initial Interviewing Guide

Demographics

- Age

- Gender
- Country of birth
- Length of time in Canada
- Highest level of education
- Occupation
- Employment status
- Contact information (phone number, e-mail address)

Grand Tour Question

I am interested in learning about criminal gang involvement of youth from immigrant families. Reflecting upon your own experience, please tell me how you had or have become involved in criminal gang activity.

Potential Probes/Guiding Questions

- What influenced you to become involved in criminal gang activity?
- What specific (personal, family, school, community) issues had you struggled with prior to your involvement in criminal gang activity? Were there specific aspects of your experience as a first-generation immigrant that influenced your decision to become involved in criminal gang activity?
- Describe how you became involved in criminal gang activity.
- What does/did your involvement in criminal gang activity mean to you? How would gang involvement of immigrant youth (i.e. motivation, pattern) be different from that of other non-immigrant youth?
- In what ways have you benefited from your involvement in criminal gang activity?
- What support/strategies should be in place to prevent criminal gang involvement of immigrant youth?
- What support/strategies should be in place to help those immigrant youth who are currently involved in criminal gang activity?

B. Further Questions from Critical Reflection on the Emerging Learning

- Is there any connection between criminal gang involvement and drug abuse? If yes, when did the young people start to use drugs or alcohol?
- What are the roles of racism and discrimination in criminal gang involvement of immigrant youth?
- How do you understand your self-identity?
- Are there differences in how males and females become involved in gang activity?
- Would you clarify the role of adrenalin rush in gang involvement?
- What are the roles of self-esteem, sense of belonging, sense of competence and sense of accomplishment in criminal gang involvement?
- What is the role of culture (or shared culture) in your gang involvement?
- How were you connected to the community?
- Who were your role models? Did you have a mentor?

- How important was money in your decision to become involved in criminal gang activity?
- How do you view success?
- How loyal are you to the group?
- What is the continuum of involvement?
- What would it take to leave the gang lifestyle?
- What are the effective exit strategies to support those who are currently involved?
- At what points would have things been different for you?
- At what points would you have been able to walk away from gang life?
- What are the barriers to exit gang life?
- Have you been lured back?
- Do you trust authority?
- What do proactive support for gang-involved and high-risk youth look like?
- If you are no longer involved in gang activity, how did you leave? Were there threats to your family? Why did you decide to leave?
- What support did you have when you decided to leave?

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