Youth Gangs in the BC Lower Mainland

Steeves, A., Kuechler, A., Jotovic, T., & Maher, M.

Abstract

This research was funded and supported by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD) and the University of British Columbia (UBC) School of Social Work. The gang landscape in British Columbia is unique in comparison to the broader Canadian and North American contexts. To understand these differences, three research questions were used to guide the research: (1) what preventative measures are useful in deterring youth from joining gangs? (2) what gaps do service providers identify in services directed towards youth at risk of joining gangs? (3) what do service providers identify as themes leading to youth joining gangs? A literature review completed on youth gang behaviour revealed two theoretical frameworks that would be beneficial to use when examining the research: social-ecological theory and dislocation theory. The youth gang development in this region poses a unique challenge to service providers, as gang violence in British Columbia's (BC) Lower Mainland has been steadily increasing. Statistics show that in 2016, BC's gun violence was responsible for 44.3% of homicides - a staggering increase of 29.5% since 2015 (The Mayor's Task Force on Gang Violence Prevention, 2017). Addressing gang violence in the Lower Mainland has now become a matter of public safety. Police and community support services are seeking to understand risk factors leading to youth gang involvement in the Lower Mainland to deter young people from this lifestyle. A social-ecological framework will be used to understand the complexity of risk factors impacting youth in this region through examining the social geography of the Lower Mainland, distinct family systems and community organization (Kuechler, 2019). Purposive non-probability sampling was utilized in this research as directed by the MCFD research sponsor, Preetpal Basanti. Youth were excluded from the research interview process due to the vulnerability of the population. There were two micro-focus groups with four participants in each group that took place through teleconference, which were audio-recorded for later analysis. The micro-focus groups aimed to obtain data specific to the participant's roles while working with youth involved in gang activity, as well as to gather professional insight to guide future service provision for youth gang prevention. Following the focus groups, the data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Four major themes emerged from the data: program collaboration; program provisions; community involvement; and youth and families. Some of the limitations identified in this research were: volunteer and selection bias; participant diffusion; restrictions on interviewing youth gang members; time limitations; small sample sizes; changes of questions and loss of non-verbal and contextual data. Two qualitative micro-focus groups took place with MCFD employees and affiliates. A thematic analysis of the transcripts indicated four major common themes that could benefit youth, their families, and service providers when aiming to answer the above research questions. Ultimately, the research identified the need for increased connection amongst the various systems that are working with youth who are at risk or are presently involved in gangs. Additionally, this research indicated that youth join gangs for a variety of reasons. Lack of connection and belonging was noted as a primary indicator of gang involvement. The research called for a collaborative community approach to better meet the youth and their family's needs.

Keywords: Youth Gangs, factors for involvement, prevention, service gaps

Correspondence: Dr. Barbara Lee, University of British Columbia, School of Social Work, 2080 West Mall, Vancouver, BC, Canada **Email:** b.lee@ubc.ca

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to gain further understanding of youth gang involvement in the BC Lower Mainland. In particular, what preventative measures are useful in deterring youth from joining gangs? What gaps do service providers identify in services directed towards youth at risk of joining gangs? What do service providers identify as themes leading to youth joining gangs?

Youth gang behaviour is an important scope of research to examine, as the number of youth becoming involved in gangs is increasing, and the age of onset is becoming younger (The Mayor's Task Force on Gang Violence Prevention, 2017). It is essential to explore how youth services and resources can be effectively utilized in gang prevention and what service gaps are present. The research questions were analyzed through the lens of theorist, Urie Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological theory and Bruce Alexander's dislocation theory. The literature review, in combination with the data collected through the micro-focus groups, provided significant information and insight into the proposed research questions.

Literature Review

British Colombia's Lower Mainland has an unusual youth gang landscape. Youth gang involvement in the BC Lower Mainland region poses a unique challenge to service providers as typical risk factors such as poverty, inadequate housing and involvement in foster care are not present in most cases. The youth participating in gang activity in the Lower Mainland are from diverse socio-economic and multi-ethnic backgrounds, and many individuals belong to affluent or middle-class families (Kane & Smart, 2019). Gangs that were identified as specific to the Lower Mainland by MCFD sponsor, Amarjit Sahota were: Hell's Angels, Wolf Pack, Brother's Keepers, Red Scorpions, Kang Group, United Nations and Independent Soldiers (see Appendix A). In the literature review, social-ecological theory and dislocation theory were used to understand the complexity of risk factors, attributes to social isolation, distinct family systems and community organizations impacting youth in this region. The Surrey Mayor's Task Force on Gang Violence

Prevention (Mayor's Task Force) noted that youth in BC gangs appear to come from a mix of affluent, middle class and low-income households (2017). According to Totten (2008), ethnic and racial minorities dominate gang membership in BC; however, the gangs are not exclusively made up of one ethnic background. The Mayor's Task Force (2017) reported that gangs in BC operate less like traditional gangs and more like businesses focussed on drug trafficking, firearm sales, and sex trade. In an article for the Globe and Mail (Kane & Smart, 2019), a spokeswoman for the Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit of BC (CFSEU), Brenda Winpenny, describes how youth begin working at a low level "dial-a-dope" lines where users can order drugs by phone for delivery. She describes this position as dangerous because of close communication with dealers and users and notes that it is rare for young people to be involved in sophisticated organizations such as Hell's Angels. Gang entrance in BC is quite different from others in that there is no formal entry.

Social Geography

In the last few decades, Canada's social landscape has drastically changed due to immigration policies. In 1967, Canada reformed the Immigration Act to include family reunification, non-discrimination, concern for refugees, and the promotion of Canada's economic, social, and cultural goals (Statistics Canada, 2017). Changes to the Immigration Act led to a surge of immigration primarily from Asia, East Africa, and other developing countries. According to Statistics Canada (2017), in 2016, immigration accounted for 40.8% of the Vancouver population. Ethnically diverse children of immigrants are a relatively new and developing demographic to Canada, leading to a gap in present research. Research has indicated that children of immigrant families experience various unique challenges while attempting to acculturate to the dominant culture. These children are vulnerable to alienation and depression and experience a lack of community and family connection. These all contribute to potential gang participation (Sumartojo, 2012). The under-development of relevant research is a strong indicator that support services and policies are not yet informed enough to serve this rapidly growing population.

The Role of Attachment

Attachment is defined as the "affections and emotions one holds for significant others and social institutions in one's life. Involvement refers to the amount of time one spends in conventional activities" (Huebner & Betts, 2002, p. 127). Huebner and Betts (2002) found that a secure attachment to their parents, schools and peers reduced the severity of their delinquent behaviours. There is a need to have ties or bonds to society or to other people. Without those bonds, individuals are more likely to be emotionally detached or feel little affection or love for others (Brownfield, 2010). Gangs are meeting the unmet needs, especially the need for attachment – a sense of belonging, unity, attention, protection, and love (De Vito, 2019).

Middle-Class Youth Involved in Gangs

For some immigrant youth in the BC area, their parent's lack of ability to speak English can result in families being isolated from the broader surrounding community (Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010). Other than economic opportunities, gangs provide the chance to form a sense of identity, protection from other gangs, perceived well-being and a way of solving social adjustment problems (Howell, 1998). Research conducted on youth gangs within Canada indicates status-related reasons for gang involvement (Sersli et al., 2010). Despite these youth coming from middle-class environments, they can also suffer from feeling marginalized by their communities, culture, and family.

The Role of Cultural Connections

Sersli et al. (2010) found an enormous strain was placed on families adjusting to cultural expectations while trying to maintain the values from their place of origin. There is a notion that parental control becomes lost when immigrants come to Canada, as the parent's and children's roles shift. Parents become dependent on their children to help navigate a new culture and language. Howell's (1998) observations of youth involvement in gangs recognized gangs as products of the breakdown of social institutions that is brought about by rapid social change. Research shows that "within youth culture, race appears to be a basis for clique formation, but the cultural patterns learned to appear to transcend their own ethnic cultures" (Bankston, 1998, p. 41). Gangs serve as carriers of community traditions and culture. During cultural exchanges, youth aim to re-establish their own culture (Howell, 1998). In Canada, the likelihood of immigrant youth becoming part of a gang increases over their time spent in the country (Sersli et al., 2010). Gangs form "social and cultural bonds which attracted individuals to organizations and that addressed their sense of ethnic and cultural marginality in a predominantly Euro Canadian environment" (Gordon, 1994, p. 6).

Social Organization

Interactional theory indicates social factors that lead to gang membership are "negative peer relationships, poor social structural environments, weak relationships, and an environment that is supportive of crime" (De Vito, 2019, p. 3). An additional risk factor is increased gang violence and public exposure to violence. In 2017, 983 gunshots were fired in densely populated areas in the BC Lower Mainland (The Mayor's Task Force on Gang Violence Prevention, 2017). Smith, Gomez Auyong, and Ferguson (2019) state that a "perceived lack of safety in the community, neighbourhood disorganization, concentrated disorganization (e.g., lack of resources, high crime, access to drugs, etc.) and low neighbourhood attachment/involvement" are all factors that contribute to further gang involvement (p. 724). Risks associated with community disorganization and peer relationships have been found to have a more significant correlation to gang involvement than individual factors (Smith et al., 2019). In the pursuit of deterring youth from gang violence, the focus must be placed on developing social organization that considers the multicultural development of the Lower Mainland.

Protective Factors

It is important "to promote the development of positive identities and to achieve a healthy sense of belonging [for youth] at home, at school and in the community" (Dunbar, 2017, p. 16). As "positive non-parental adult figures in schools and neighbourhoods are important potential sources of

social support for youth living in unsafe neighbourhoods" (as cited in Merrin et al., 2015, p. 525). For youth whose parents/caregivers are unable to provide guidance and support, having another positive adult figure can be crucial (Jotovic, 2019). "Having positive role models can help 'strengthen youths' bonds to their schools and communities, and these youth are [then] less likely to become involved in gangs and criminal activities" (as cited in Merrin et al., 2015, p. 525). Another protective factor is "that youth who reported being treated fairly from teachers and other adults in school were more likely to stay out of gangs. In addition, youth who reported a sense of belonging in school are also more likely to resist gang membership" (Merrin et al., 2015, p. 531).

Methodology

Ethics

Prior to commencing research, an ethics protocol was created and approved by the MCFD Research Ethics Board. A course-based Behavioural Research Ethics Board approval was also obtained by the University of British Columbia. With this approval, permission was granted to begin conducting research in the area of youth and gang involvement in the BC Lower Mainland.

Recruitment

Student researchers adhered to the Facilitated Contact protocol of MCFD when they contacted participants. The MCFD sponsor distributed an electronic invitation to participate to potential participants to determine interest in the research. Interested participants then contacted a student researcher via email. Prior to commencing the micro-focus groups, participants were provided with an electronic consent form via email to complete and return to the researchers. Optional dates were provided to allow for participants to schedule adequate time to partake in the 90-minute micro-focus groups. The micro-focus groups took place on March 5th, 2020 and March 12th, 2020. Each micro-focus groups included four participants, yielding a total of eight participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative research was utilized to gather and understand the experiences of service providers in working with youth gang members. Research in this field is largely uncharted and still developing. This research aimed to explore and identify variables that lead to youth becoming involved in gang and criminal activity in the Lower Mainland. Exploratory data was collected through micro-focus groups via teleconference calls in a private room at the UBC School of Social Work. The calls were audio-recorded using a digital recorder provided by UBC. Each micro-focus group was approximately 90-minutes in duration, consisting of eight questions (see Appendix C and D). The questions were slightly altered in the second micro-focus group based on feedback provided by those participants during the first micro-focus group. The audio recordings were then transcribed and analyzed using NVivo to identify common themes that arose from the data.

During the focus groups, two members of the research team were responsible for noting impressions and ideas that emerged from the interviews. After the focus groups were held, the student researchers proceeded with transcribing the recordings and familiarizing themselves with the data and taking notes of ideas and patterns that they observed from the interviews. One member of the research team then began the first cycle of coding and produced codes based on repeating patterns, reoccurring words, and ideas that helped the researches understand the operationalization of youth gang behaviour in the Lower Mainland; this researcher then organized and grouped data systematically into similar codes. The student researcher then began to search for themes and gathered data pertinent to the potential themes and placed the codes into relevant themes. The student researcher had another member of the research team assist with the second cycle of coding and data organization. The student researcher's member checked their themes and codes to increase the research validity and had another student researcher review the themes and codes that were produced to ensure the data organized was appropriately connected. The final step of the thematic analysis was the creation of a thematic map (see Figure 1) that was designed to reflect the researcher's analysis of the data gathered from the focus groups. The thematic

map contains central themes derived from the focus groups and the subthemes within the major themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic Analysis

Four themes emerged from the analysis of data: 1. Program Collaboration: information sharing, program partnership. 2. Program Provisions: lack of intervention, motivation to access services, engaging activities. 3. Community Involvement: location and access to services/lack of outreach, connection to services/high risk youth work, continuity of care, community involvement. a. Youth and Family: youth risk factors/social dislocation, family care, culture.

Demographic Survey

Prior to the micro-focus group, a demographic survey was emailed to those interested participants (Appendix B). We had a total of eight participants (Range of years of experience: 3-27). The agencies involved included: Youth Custody Centres, MCFD, a Non-profit Organization, Youth Probation, Corrections, Youth Custody, Youth and Family Support, and a Youth Initiative Program. The participants had varying educational backgrounds in psychology, criminology, and social work.

Results

Program Collaboration

Program Partnership. Program partnership was one of the most prominent themes that emerged during data analysis. Service providers noted multiple barriers in engaging and collaborating with other programs to address the growing youth gang population in the Lower Mainland region. One of the barriers identified was the lack of connection amongst service providers and the rapid turnover reported among frontline staff. Lack of trusting relationships and communication between service providers created challenges in building rapport among professionals and providing collaborative program provisions.

Participants reported that current systems lacked communication and coordination, making programs less efficient and unable to reach their full potential. Information sharing and communication was identified as being critical, particularly in keeping the youth and service providers safe. One participant recognized that "there is no one program that is going to be
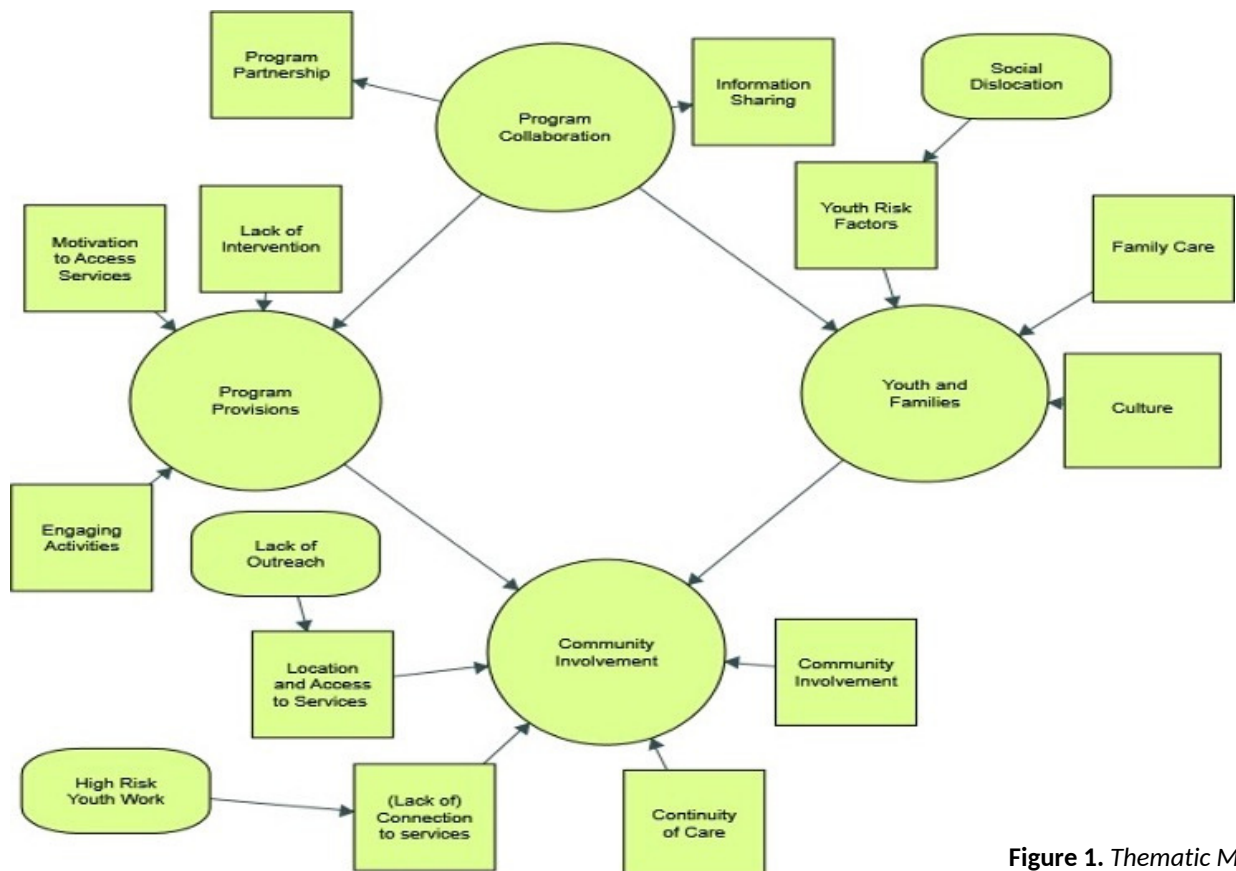

Figure 1. *Thematic Map*

successful; it has to be a collaborative effort if anything is going to be successful" (P03). Barriers to information sharing were found, particularly with the Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA). There were limits identified around information sharing and confidentiality, which inhibits valuable information from being shared among service providers working interdependently. Almost all participants discussed feeling little to no program coordination between other interdependent agencies, or within their current agencies. Despite this, it has been recognized that having collaborative services and program provisions will increase safety and minimize risk for both youth and service providers. The Children and Youth At-Risk Table (CHART) in Surrey, BC and Integrated Case Management Meetings (ICM) were identified by participants as being the most successful tools in building professional relationships and providing consistent and collaborative client care.

Information Sharing

The second most common sub theme recognized in the data analysis was information sharing. A common concern voiced by participants was that relevant and timely information was not being shared among federal, provincial and community levels, which impacted the development of potentially beneficial policies and programs. Participants found round table meetings to be most effective in information sharing. The round tables are effective as it allows for the development of trusting professional relationships between agencies while sharing up to date information "I always notice that where there are situational tables or integrated case management meetings… people are not feeling overwhelmed because they're only taking a piece of this situation" (P07). Effective information sharing allowed professionals to coordinate services, identify youth's needs, and allocate appropriate services and resources. Most importantly, it was responsible for increasing work safety and minimizing risk. Participants noted that communication among service providers is "getting better," particularly in determining risk factors of working with some of the youth and trying to ensure

the safety of youth and workers. It is not always timely, but "compared to what we were getting six years ago, which was nothing… it is getting better" (P04).

The gang populations in the Lower Mainland currently flow between districts, making coordination amongst service providers in the BC Lower Mainland critical. Greater service coordination between districts will reduce barriers with accessing services and safe access to services for youth (many youths must access services outside of their catchment for safety reasons). Some agencies such as CFSEU are volunteer-based, which has resulted in inconsistent engagement from youth.

Program Provisions

Lack of intervention. Participants mentioned that since the YCJA has come into place, there is minimal action taken by law enforcement, "police have unlimited power now, well, even then before" (P04). Participants reported that law enforcement had low engagement and intervention with youth involved with criminal or high-risk activities and frequently gave warnings or cautions to young people despite continuous law enforcement contact. Lack of service interventions was recognized within the research results, specifically for those youth who were deemed to be higher risk. This was mainly due to policy level restrictions that prevented service providers from working with youth if a safety concern was present. A participant noted: "the fact that they [youth] pose a safety risk and we [service providers] kind of distance ourselves from these youth, and we don't get to do much work with them other than just seeing them at our police department and then we are restricted as to how much contact we can have or even put in the place for them" (P08). Additionally, the youth were determined to be increasingly violent and of higher risk to work with due to the lack of early intervention from law enforcement, schools and other community service providers.

Participants shared that there should be more attention placed on early intervention with younger children, particularly in the elementary school age range. Increased focus on relationship building and education was suggested as a method of gang prevention. Participants described a lack of response

to youth at risk of gang participation within schools. Youth that were frequently demonstrating high-risk behaviours in the school environment would often be punished in the form of suspension, rather than being provided with a positive form of intervention. Participants believed that alternative intervention from schools could have positive results for at-risk youth, as a way of "supporting them in turning their pathways" (P08), especially if educators are able to recognize and act on early signs of vulnerability.

Motivation to Access & Engage in Service. The YCJA introduced changes to the way information was shared and the repercussions for youth involved in gang behaviour. Participants unanimously agreed that once the YCJA came into legislation, law enforcement took minimal action towards referring or sanctioning youth to programming or extrajudicial services. As a result, many participants reported that youth do not access these services voluntarily. It was found that: "one of the biggest challenges is that 99% of these services are voluntary, and none of these kids want to do it. The parents are not reinforcing it, and we don't have legislation to make them do it. You know, the YCJA changes a lot for us, a lot of the kids were mandated to do services. That gave them [youth] a small window of clarity, and maybe they would take some of these services, but now, it's all voluntary" (P02). This makes it challenging to assist youth who may need services for mental health, substance use, trauma, homelessness, or other factors that may keep them vulnerable to gang violence. Participants noted that services should be more youth informed and designed around areas of development that youth would benefit from.

Youth and Families

Culture. There is a strong disconnect between service providers and ethnically diverse families. This disconnect can be attributed to racial stigma and a misunderstanding by service providers of the youth and family's cultures. It was identified that service providers are not receiving adequate cultural training. This lack of cultural competency has resulted in a lack of awareness around the barriers that ethnically diverse families experience. Assumptions around culture are being made, causing a grouping of cultural experiences. Collaboration with families was identified as being important. Service providers should work with families to receive input around cultural and resource needs.

Additionally, the data highlighted that due to language barriers and racial stigmatization, immigrants and refugees experience a lack of trust towards government and community services. Participants discussed "shame-based culture" (P07) and the desire for family privacy in many communities in the Lower Mainland. As one participant stated, "there's ah, you know a shame factor that sort of stuff... you know people knowing their business that sort of stuff for their failings" (P02). Another participant also mentioned, some "cultures may not even want help because they want to keep it private" (P05). Participants stated that programs must address ways to positively build relationships with diverse families while reducing the stigma, fear and shame around accessing services. A common suggestion was to meet families within their homes so that families feel safer and less afraid. As one participant mentioned: "families are very different in their homes than they are in an office—just the way they present. I mean, a lot of cultures have skepticism of government and police and all that kind of stuff, to begin with, so again, just getting out to the families rather than having them come to you" (P05). The research indicated that ethnically diverse youth often experience dislocation from their parental culture and mainstream culture. As one participant mentioned, "they get stuck in that culture gap between the western culture and then their, you know, Indian culture" (P08). Religious and cultural workers were identified as vital resources to decrease social dislocation experienced by youth. First, second, and third-generation refugees and immigrants experience a significant cultural adjustment. As such, it was identified that programs need to be adapted to support this growing demographic in order to help individuals adjust and navigate the Canadian system.

Family care. Participants called for more one to one outreach work with families to help increasing

the service provider's understanding of the individual, family, and cultural needs. Low income and immigrant families were identified as high-risk and, in turn, required additional support in accessing services. When vulnerabilities in communities were discussed that made youth susceptible to youth gang violence, one participant stated that "I think, um, poverty, it is a big one" (P01). A lack of communication with family members resulted in their unawareness of the potential risk to their families and their children involved with gang activity. As one participant noted, "I think a lot of families, due to communication, do not even understand what's going on with their youth and what they can do to support them" (P09). Without an awareness of gang risks or the circumstances that families were in, parents were unable to intervene or provide appropriate support and supervision. Another participant noted, "if youth don't have a connection with their family or friends, then they are out looking for that connection, making them more prone to being part of gangs" (P08).

Participants noted a lack of family cooperation due to a mistrust of authorities or a fear of discovery of their children's criminal involvement. As two participants noted, "you could see families that are, um, not amenable or amenable to accessing services because they might inherently distrust them" (P01) and "I mean, a lot of cultures have skepticism of government and police and all that kind of stuff to begin with" (P05). Another participant noted, "the parents know these kids are committing crimes drug dealing and stuff, it's the cost of doing business. They need income, they know that these kids are pulling in" (P04).

Youth risk factors. The research demonstrated a lack of information being shared among service providers. environment. A disconnect with services was caused by service providers not being able to understand and connect with the youth's cultural experiences. The media was considered to influence youth with the "show off culture" (money, cars, drugs), and the competitive need to display their status. Service

providers noted that youth actions mimicked what they see in the media in music videos, music lyrics, and social media. Youth being exposed to more overt violence was noted as another risk factor; with the overexposure of violence, the behaviour becomes normalized, and youth imitate this. Participants often mentioned younger children as more vulnerable to gang recruitment, as that there is a lack of police involvement, community intervention, and enforced consequences.

Participants also discussed the significant role of poverty in youth gang involvement as youth may be financially responsible for their families. Changes in gang structures were identified as a risk factor impacting youth safety as gangs are no longer organized with a rule-based system. Family members are no longer off-limits for violence, and youth are frightened to leave gangs as this puts their family members in danger. Participants identified family involvement as being key. Without family support, it is difficult to supervise and successfully implement interventions for youth. Homelife (domestic family abuse, sexual abuse, etc.) and geographical location were listed as risk factors.

Community Involvement

Community Care. Community involvement was another primary theme among the participants. Under community involvement, there were four subgroups: community care, continuity of care, location and access to programs, and lack of connection to services. During the focus groups, participants expressed the need for an approach to gang prevention and intervention that utilized the community as a whole. A successful program noted by one participant was the Junior Youth ambassador program where "we collaborate with police, we collaborate with the city and a lot of service providers and the outcome of those programs is [the youth] really forge relationships with healthy adults" (P03). Community Care requires participation and collaboration that encompasses law enforcement, schools, MCFD, culture, community, family and religion. Participants suggested that law enforcement create a more relational role with youth, one that is focused around safety, connection, and support to improve youth's perspective of the police.

One participant stated, "having a community police

officer that's just there to hang out with them, play basketball, it really helps them feel connected to the community and have a different understanding of what police are there for" (P05). Fear of authority is a major deterrent that prevents youth from accessing services. Improving youth perceptions of law enforcement is vital. Many participants mentioned programs that focus on connection, such as the wilderness program at Centre Creek that reduce risk by improving communication, relationship building, positive mentorship, safety, and collaborative service approaches. The data also indicated that youth feel rejected by religious and cultural groups, especially after gang involvement. Participants noted that "community leaders... have washed their hands of a lot of the gang affiliated kids" (P02). Participants suggested the involvement of cultural leaders to improve youth's perception of their cultural environment. Immigrant children and youth are tasked with balancing between their family's values and beliefs and those of the mainstream culture. One participant noted that "indicators for [a] high degree of criminality at any community is income disparity" (P02).

Continuity of Care. Participants reported that youth lacked long-term care or consistent case management. To combat this, they suggested continuity of care and long-term case management, starting from a young age. One participant referred to a program in Denmark where "as soon as the kid was born, they were assigned a social worker" (P02). Participants also recognized the high turnover of staff that prevents consistent and long-term case management. In addition to increasing length of care, participants suggested more focus on youth transitioning out of programs or out of care. In the current system, participants noted that services did not meet the long-term needs of youth and cut access to service prior to their readiness. One participant stated, "So, it's not just "we get them from A to B." It's 'we get them from A to Z" (P05).

Location and Access. Location and access to programs was identified as a major barrier to service accessibility for youth and their families. In the focus groups, participants discussed that many programs end in the summer or are short term. When youth aren't in these programs, they are vulnerable to gang recruitment. Another barrier to services is the restriction of access to programs if youth are deemed to be high risk, particularly if they have a duty to warn. Additionally, youth often refrain from accessing services in their local catchment in order to avoid violence or retaliation from other gang members if they are seen interacting with gang prevention programs. Due to this, participants stressed the need for access to services outside of their catchment area and noted that they should be provided transportation to these services. Families are often unaware of how to access services and are fearful of the consequences of using them. As mentioned earlier, outreach was stressed as vital to effective intervention. Participants also recommended after school care for low-income families who can't afford it in order to increase levels of supervision and provide an additional point of intervention. One participant discussed the lack of access to positive services, while at the same time having easy access to gang involvement. "The ease of connection to this world [gang involvement] is there and... but it's not something that necessarily searches you out, but it's around you" (P07). When youth face barriers in accessing positive resources, but easily access connections through gang involvement, they are more likely to choose the latter.

Lack of Connection with Service Providers. Participants discussed that workers do not understand youth culture, which is affecting their ability to connect with the youth on a personal level. One participant noted, "if you are a worker and you are not able to engage young people and speak their culture, their language, it doesn't matter who you are, you're not going to be successful in supporting them" (P03). Additionally, large caseloads make it difficult to meet regularly enough for building connections with youth. One participant discussed a youth's thoughts about short term programs: "why would I connect with you because you're gonna leave in six months and then I'm gonna have someone new, and I'm gunna have to tell my story all over again" (P05). Intervention that is directed by youth is essential. Participants also discussed how programs

are selected for the youth without their input and engagement. One participant discussed a case where the service provider selected an intervention that was not meaningful to the youth. "[The service provider] just look at a youth and they're like: "Oh, he's 12, he's 5"9', he would be a great football player'. Yeah, except he's not into sports so that's not really a meaningful intervention. So it has to be meaningful to the youth and individual focused and it needs to be relevant... it can't be something that they would consider to be lame" (P05).

Without youth buy-in, the services were viewed as essentially useless. Language was repeatedly listed as a barrier in connecting with the youth, but more specifically, in connecting with the youth's caregivers. Participants discussed the lack of languages provided by support workers despite the diverse population in Surrey, BC. As identified in the findings, family involvement in intervention is essential, and this cannot be done if service providers are not connecting with families in their own languages. "So, I think obviously language and culture would be the most obvious barriers [to accessing services]" (P01). In addition to the dialectical differences, the law enforcement jargon presents as another barrier in connecting with youth and their families. "A lot of officers that I talked to say that... families don't cooperate with them to help the family or the youth; however, I think the families and youth themselves are struggling with understanding. They don't understand the language, they don't understand the legal terms" (P08).

Discussion

This research aimed to explore why youth in the BC Lower Mainland are joining gangs, what preventative measures are useful in deterring youth from joining gangs, and what is working for services providers. The themes found in the research were: (1) program collaboration, (2) program provisions, (3) community involvement, and (4) youth and family involvement.

Youth joined gangs for a variety of reasons; however, a lack of connection and belonging was noted as a primary indicator of gang involvement. One particular reason for this lack of connection was described as the result of competing cultural views.

Social media creates a platform where income disparity is extremely apparent and show off culture was mentioned in both interviews by participants as a draw to gang lifestyle. Gang members utilize social media as a way to display their wealth, status and prestige. This portrayal of lavish spending and social status draws in vulnerable youth. Beyond the material appeal, data from the micro-focus groups revealed that youth often feel obligated to provide for their families. Gang involvement offers quick and easy access to financial gain and allows youth to support their families. On top of these enticements, youth are recruited from a young age and are not yet equipped with information about the dangers of gang involvement, signs they are being recruited, and how to respond when being recruited.

The data from the focus groups provided a variety of suggestions in response to how youth can be deterred from joining gangs. As mentioned above, a lack of connection was identified as the main reason for gang involvement. Conversely, youth can be deterred by increasing connections available to the youth. The focus groups determined that essential connections include family, community, culture, school and social services. Family connection was identified as being essential to prevent gang involvement. To increase family connection, services should be family focussed in an accessible and culturally sensitive manner. Community connection can be improved by helping youth identify interests and hobbies that are meaningful to them (e.g., recreational programs, sports, art, etc.). Cultural connection was discussed in the findings as being a primary method of intervention. By improving cultural relations, youth are more likely to seek out these connections rather than resorting to gang involvement. Early intervention programs in schools, particularly in elementary grades, were suggested to address young recruitment. Finally, service providers that are trained in anti-oppressive practice were also deemed essential for gang deterrence. The collaboration of these systems would ultimately eradicate many of the risk factors for youth gang involvement.

Participants reported that when agencies work collaboratively, effective care can be provided for

the youth. To do this, CHART and ICM meetings were suggested in order to share information, build professional relationships, track youth and break problems into manageable pieces. The participants noted that in many cases, this is not happening. As a result, care for youth is fragmented and restricted.

The themes were supported by frameworks of the social-ecological and dislocation theory: The social-ecological model, founded by American Psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner, suggests that human development should be examined as a joint function of the individual and the broader environment (Mizokawa & Komyia, 2014). Youth are demonstrating a sense of wanting to belong somewhere. A social-ecological framework assisted researchers in understanding the risk factors impacting youth through examining the social geography of the BC Lower Mainland. In particular, it is crucial to understand the impact that this may have on second-generation immigrants and their families. According to census Canada, in 2016, immigration accounted for 40.8% of the Vancouver population (Statistics Canada, 2017). Various ethnic groups have been over-represented in gang violence in BC's Lower Mainland (The Mayor's Task Force on Gang Violence Prevention, 2017). Immigrant children are also in the unique predicament of creating new cultural narratives while being pulled between dominant western culture and traditional cultural values (Sumartojo, 2012).

Psychologist, Bruce Alexander's (2012), dislocation theory states that when an individual feels isolated or is exposed to repeated traumatic events, they can experience society as void of connections. As a result, sustained dislocation is so unbearable that they search for ways to cope with the isolation by gaining acceptance or approval. The research data indicated that youth search for acceptance and belonging by working their way up the chain in gangs. The literature on dislocation theory states that service providers should shift focus away from behaviours, cognitions and individual factors to give more consideration to social conditions such as colonization, childhood trauma and the free-market society that place economic and psychological strain

on families (Alexander, 2012). Youth experience alienation and lack of belonging, coupled with a poor connection to the dominant culture and deterioration of parental relationships, which creates a loss of self-esteem (Sumartojo, 2012). Social dislocation is also being experienced between parental culture and mainstream culture. As a result, they often experience exclusion from both cultures. Therefore, it is important "to promote the development of positive identities and to achieve a healthy sense of belonging [for youth] at home, at school and in the community" (Dunbar, 2017, p. 16). Communities partnering together will largely contribute to a reduction of community disorganization, which will, in turn, reduce violence and crime. Smith et al. (2019) notes that "concentrated disorganization and low neighbourhood attachment/involvement," are all factors that contribute to further gang involvement (p. 724).

The research on youth gang behaviour sheds light on social isolation and how it breeds vulnerability. It provides several methods for increasing belonging with a focus on improved connection through services, family, community, school and culture. In addition to the suggestions on improving social connection, the data revealed a need for improved collaboration and communication between service providers in order to effectively engage with youth. If agencies introduce open and effective communication streams through integrative case management teams, they will be better able to prevent gang involvement and provide interventions to youth already engaged in gang behaviour.

Limitations

There were eight limitations that was identified by the student research team: (1) Volunteer and Selection Bias: The reasons for voluntary participation or why they were selected to complete the research may have influenced how they responded to the questions; (2) Population Validity: Student researchers only had access to second-hand information due to ethical restrictions on interviewing youth gang members; (3) Participant Bias: Participants may have shielded their answers

Sample Size: Due to the small sample size, research team cannot generalize the findings to the actual population; (5) Phone Interviews: There could be potential for loss of nonverbal and contextual data in phone focus groups; (6) Change of Questions From the First Interview to the Second Interview: As a result, the opportunity for common themes between first and second interview to be identified was lost. (7) Time Limitation: Due to a delay in ethics approval and the approaching class end date, individual interviews were eliminated from the data collection methods; (8) COVID-19 Restrictions: The research group was unable to meet during the coding process due to COVID-19. This could present threats to internal validity. With only one person coding the interviews, there is opportunity for biased coding.

Recommendations

The research team identified six recommendations for improved service delivery. The recommendations are as follows:

ICM Meetings. As mentioned in findings, program partnership was identified as a main theme in the data, particularly relating to information sharing. In order to share information effectively between professionals, approach cases collaboratively and to break big problems into manageable pieces, ICM meetings were recommended

Increased Outreach & Transportation Programs. Participants noted a variety of reasons why youth are unable to attend services in offices (risk of being seen speaking with professionals by other gang members, lack of transportation, etc.). To provide accessible services, outreach and transportation, when necessary, is essential.

Transition Programs for Youth. Participants noted that services were disrupted, and information was lost when youth were ageing out of a program. Many programs were short term, and if youth knew that they were going to be short term, they wouldn't engage in a relationship.

Culturally Appropriate Services Directed to Reach Immigrant and Ethnically Diverse Youth. Surrey's population is exceptionally diverse, and many participants reported that a large number of youth gang members come from immigrant families, yet services are not yet accessible in terms of language and cultural knowledge by service providers.

Early Intervention for Youth as Young as 10. Gangs are recruiting youth as young as 10 years old, yet intervention and education in schools are focused on teens. These teens are already gang involved. In order to provide proactive intervention, services need to be put in place for younger children.

The Inclusion of Families in Intervention. Some participants identified family intervention as being essential for effective intervention.

Future Directions

Student researchers recommend future research in the following four areas: (1) Research directly from youth gang members or youth gang members that have successfully exited from gangs; (2) Exploring services in other regions that are effective. (3) Inclusion of the perspectives of family members. (4) Research specifically to immigrant and ethnically diverse youth.

Conclusion

Utilizing a qualitative research methodology, two micro-focus groups were completed with MCFD employees and affiliates. A thematic analysis brought forward four major themes: program collaboration, program provisions, community involvement, and youth & family. The findings provided valuable data regarding the three research questions that guided this study. The research showed that there needs to be increased communication, strategic program partnership and collaboration and effective information sharing amongst those service providers that work with youth. Services, policy, and training need to be culturally competent to those service recipients. Service providers also need to work at increasing support and services that meet the youth's individual needs and values, as well as their families. More focus is required around the continuity of care and relationship-building, with increased involvement from schools and law enforcement agencies. Taking steps such as these can help reduce some of the identified risks found in this and other research.

Future research around this area should include

the perspectives of current youth gang members, exited youth gang members and family perspectives. Future research should also be explicitly tailored to ethnically diverse youth. In addition, exploring services in other regions that have been proven effective would allow for greater knowledge building.

With these findings, the research team hopes that MCFD employees and affiliates will have a better understanding of youth gangs in BC's Lower Mainland, what is luring youth to gangs, and what effective measures could deter youth from becoming entrenched in gang involvement. Service providers, family members, youth, and communities need to work cohesively in order to see effective prevention and change.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A

Key Terms

- **Brother's Keepers:** A gang with most members previously connected to Red Scorpions. Organization most active in Metro Vancouver (Bolan, 2019).

- **Duty to warn:** Deemed unsafe for community partners to be with the youth in public, as they are 'targets' for rival gang members.

- **Gangs:** Groups who are street-oriented with a shared identity and territory who come together regularly to engage in illegal criminal activity (De Vito, 2019, p. 2).

- **Hell's Angels:** The Hell's Angels are considered by police a "top-echelon criminal organization" (Combined Forces Special Enforcement Unit of BC, 2015).

- **Independent Soldiers:** Organization located in the Lower Mainland, Fraser Valley and lower Vancouver Island. Members are Fijian, Malaysian, Singaporean, and Indo-Canadian. Involvement in the drug trade, sex trade, gun smuggling, kidnapping, home invasions and cross border human trafficking (Totten, 2008).

- **Kang Group**: Closely aligned with the Red Scorpions and was formerly part of the Brothers Keepers. This organisation is mainly based in Burnaby (Totten, 2008).

- **Lower Mainland:** Located in the southwestern corner of British Columbia, the Lower Mainland

- encompasses Vancouver and its surrounding area and the Sunshine Coast (B.C.'s Lower Mainland, 2018)

- **Red Scorpions:** A multi-ethnic violent drug-trafficking criminal organization formed in the early 2000s, operating in Burnaby, Coquitlam, New Westminster and Port Moody. A common identifying mark is the letters 'RS' tattooed on the wrist, neck or shoulder (Totten, 2008).

- **United Nations:** A multi-ethnic gang that operates out of the Fraser Valley (CFSEU, 2018). It is made up of youth and adults involved in drug trafficking from various backgrounds: Iranian, Indo-Canadian, Caucasian and Asian (Totten 2008).

- **Wolf Pack:** A coalition of members of the Hells Angels, Independent Soldiers and Red Scorpions originating in the Lower Mainland (Petruk, 2016).

- **Youth:** individuals aged between 12-17-years-old.

Appendix B

Data Collection Instrument (1 of 3): Participant Demographic Questions

Questions:

1. How many years have you been working in youth gang prevention in the Lower Mainland?

2. How many years have you been working with your affiliated organization?

3. Have you completed specialized education and/or training related to youth justice and/or gang activity?

4. How would you summarize your professional experience working with youth gangs?

Data Collection Instrument (2 of 3) Micro-Focus Group #1 Questions

Questions:

1. Can you summarize your professional experience as a community partner to MCFD?

2. What ways could BC's Lower Mainland criminal justice and community support programs be adapted to respond to an increasingly multicultural and ethnically diverse population?

3. What are the barriers key informants observe ethnically diverse youth face in accessing community support services?

4. What are the youths that are currently in gangs or have engaged with criminal gang activity indicated as service needs in their community, or vulnerabilities in their community that made them susceptible to gang violence?

5. What program do you feel has been most successful?

6. Are you aware of any promising practices being implemented in BC?

7. Are you aware of any promising practicing being implemented elsewhere?

8. Upon the completion of research would you like to be provided a final report through email?

Appendix D

Data Collection Instrument (3 of 3) Micro-Focus Group #2 Questions

Questions:

1. How would you describe youth gang behaviour in the Lower Mainland?

2. In what ways could service providers respond to youth involvement in gangs? How can they support families of these youth?

3. What barriers do ethnically diverse youth face in accessing community support services?

4. What are the vulnerabilities in communities that make youth susceptible to gang violence?

5. What programs do you feel have been most successful in engaging youth who are involved in gangs in the Lower Mainland?

6. What programs and interventions are you aware of that are successful in deterring youth gang involvement in other areas?

7. What barriers are present in communicating with other professionals involved with youth gang members?

8. What are the deterrents that prevent service providers from engaging with youth?