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## Preventing Aboriginal Youth Gang Involvement in Canada: A Gendered Approach

Mark Totten

### ***These Eyes***

*I've seen death, looked him in the eye,  
I've done things that would make you ask why?  
I've looked down the barrel of a gun,  
I've danced with the devil ... and won.  
I've been beaten and broken ...  
For words I have spoken.  
I've been raped and abused,  
I've been tortured and used.  
Yet no amount of pain can break me.  
No amount of time will shake me.  
They can lock me in a cage,  
I'll still put my soul on this page.*

Written by an incarcerated twenty-two-year-old Aboriginal female gang member, who is a client of a gang project in Western Canada.

## **Introduction**

### ***Overview of Aboriginal Youth Gangs in Canada***

In Canada, 22% of all gang members are Aboriginal. It is estimated that there are between 800 and 1000 active Aboriginal gang members in the Prairie provinces. The largest concentration of gang members in Canada (of all gangs) is in Saskatchewan with 1.34 members per 1,000 population, or approximately 1,315 members (CSC 2001, 2003; Totten 2008c; CISS 2005; Astwood Strategy Corporation 2004).

The focus of this paper is on youth gang members aged 12 to 30 years. Aboriginal youth gangs are defined as follows: visible, hardcore groups that come together

for profit-driven criminal activity and severe violence. They identify themselves through the adoption of a name, common brands/colours of clothing, and tattoos to demonstrate gang membership to rival gangs. Gang-related communication rituals and public display of gang-like attributes are common (Totten 2000, 2008c; Gordon 2000). Membership is fluid, there is a lack of organization and structure, and many of these gangs operate independently in small cells. Status is defined by the ability to make large amounts of cash and engage in serious violence. Aboriginal gangs tend to be intergenerational and rely on violent entry and exit rituals to protect the gang from outsiders. Aboriginal youth can be categorized on a continuum of gang involvement into one of the following groups: anti-social group; spontaneous criminal activity group; purposive criminal group; crew; and street gang. The degree of organization is defined by the structure and hierarchical nature of the gang; the gang's connection to larger, more serious organized crime groups; the sophistication and permanence of the gang; the existence of a specific code of conduct or set of formal rules; initiation practices; and the level of integration, cohesion, and solidarity between the gang's members (Totten 2009c, 2008c; Mellor et al. 2005).

Membership commitment can be measured in a hierarchical ranking system within the gang. Often, there is not one person who directs other members, although older members have more influence compared to young members (CISC 2004; Mellor et al. 2005). Leaders (also called King Pins, Bosses, Presidents, or Captains) actively promote and participate in serious criminal activity. These males are generally in their late twenties to early thirties. Veterans (also called Heavies or Higher-Ups) decide which criminal activities the gang will participate in and are considered to be faithful in their loyalty to the gang. Along with leaders, they are responsible for settling internal conflicts within the gang. Core members (also called Regular Members, Associates, or Affiliates) usually have been with the gang since it started, and are experienced, proven members. Most gang leaders require prospective recruits to meet certain criteria and perform serious crimes of violence before they are allowed membership into the gang. These youth want to prove themselves and rise through the ranks; they often earn serious money for gangs. To gain entry, a recruit generally requires sponsorship. It is common for recruits to “do minutes”: survive a beating at the hands of some gang members. Strikers (also called Soldiers) are also highly likely to engage in serious acts of violence.

## **The Gendered Nature of Aboriginal Suffering in Canada**

### ***Why Me?***

*He's in my room again tonight,  
Maybe if I pull the covers up tight,*

*He might think I'm sleeping,  
 I heard the giggles in the other room.  
 Please God not tonight.  
 I feel a cold hand on my thigh,  
 My mind goes blank  
 Why me? ...  
 Suddenly it's over.  
 I curl to the corner of my bed ...  
 And silently cry ...  
 It will never be over.*

Written by a twenty-two-year-old gang-involved Aboriginal young woman, participant in a gang project in Western Canada.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples comprise 4% of the population of Canada, or approximately 1,325,000 people (Statistics Canada 2008a). The majority live in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and in the Northern Territories, and almost one-half of the Aboriginal population now live in urban areas. The proportion of Aboriginal peoples is increasing rapidly compared to every other group in Canadian society, and their average age is much younger than the rest of the population

Most Aboriginal young people who grow up in high-risk environments do not become gang-involved—they have positive school and community supports, and particular individual attributes (for example, perseverance and determination). Yet, Aboriginals experience a disproportionate burden of suffering, and this helps explain their participation in gangs. Factors related to this include racism, colonization, marginalization, and dispossession; the loss of land, traditional culture, spirituality and values; and the breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal law. Girls and women are particularly vulnerable to gang recruitment in part due to sexist and misogynist values and practices in many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities. Psycho-social problems are linked to all of the above factors, including:

- Entrenched and severe poverty as well as overcrowded and substandard housing (Bittle et al. 2002; Dooley et al 2005).
- Ill-health and suicide: the suicide rate for young Aboriginals in many communities is approximately six times higher than the rate for non-Aboriginals (Shah 1990; York 1990; Statistics Canada 2001; Chandler et al. 2003).
- Alcohol and drug abuse: one quarter to two thirds of Aboriginal young people in remote communities inhale gasoline. The incidence of fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD) is very high (Canada, House of Commons Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs 1990; RCAP

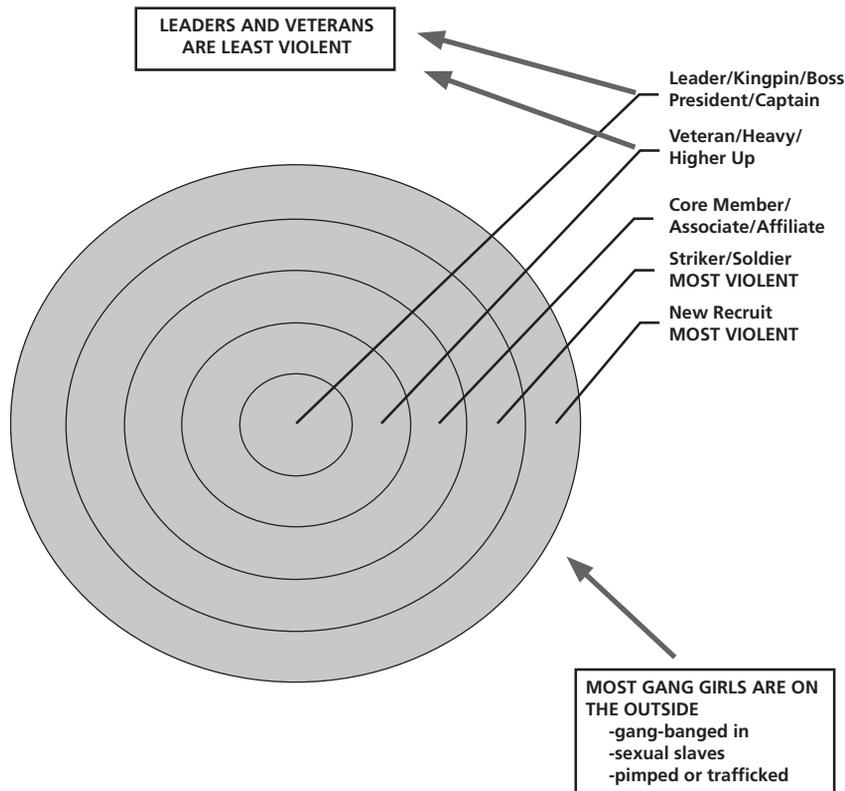
1996).

- High rates of criminalization: Aboriginals are significantly over-represented at all stages of the justice system (Statistics Canada 2006a, 2006b, 2007a, 2007b, 2008b);
- High rates of violence, especially male violence against girls and women: woman abuse, sexual assault, family violence, child witnessing of mother abuse, and homicide involving Aboriginals as both perpetrators and victims are serious concerns. On-reserve violent crime rates are elevated for both youth and adults. Youth are accused of committing homicides on reserve at about eleven times the rate of youth elsewhere in Canada (Statistics Canada *ibid*).
- Sexual trafficking and exploitation: NWAC has documented 510 cases of murdered and missing girls and women in Canada (NWAC 2008) over the past thirty years. Twenty-five percent have been identified as missing and 67% have been identified as murdered. There are forty-three cases where the nature of the case remains unconfirmed, or where a situation of “wrongful death” has been identified (for example, a woman’s death may have been caused by negligence on the part of another person, rather than through a direct act). In addition, it is estimated that the majority of all sex workers in western Canada are Aboriginal. For example, 60% of all sex workers in Vancouver are Aboriginal (Farley and Lynne 2005; Lynne 2005; Farley, Lynne and Cotton 2005).
- Low educational attainment, and high rates of school drop-out and unemployment blocks conventional means of achieving success and bonding to broader Canadian society (RCAP 1996; Statistics Canada 2001).
- High numbers of Aboriginal young people are placed into child welfare, mental health, and other institutions (Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson 2006; Trevethan et al. 2002; Blackstock et al. 2004).

### ***Aboriginal Gangs and Sexual Slavery***

Figure 12.1 illustrates the gendered roles in Aboriginal youth gangs and corresponding levels of violence. Females who participate in Aboriginal gangs are for the most part treated as sexual slaves and are forced to play tertiary roles (look-out for the police, dealing drugs, sex trade work, carrying drugs and weapons). Often, they are traded amongst gang members for coercive sex. Gang crimes related to exploitation include gang rape and other forms of sexual assault, witness intimidation, extortion, forcible confinement, controlling or living off the avails of prostitution, organized crime offences and trafficking.

Most females who are gang-involved have personal relationships with male gang members: they are sisters, nieces, daughters, granddaughters, or girlfriends. Those females who do not have these personal relationships become involved

**Figure 12.1: Gendered Roles in Aboriginal Gangs and Levels of Violence**

through sexual exploitation, forced prostitution, and sexual trafficking. Gang members use many forms of violence to initiate girls into, and maintain their involvement in, sex trafficking. Most girls are gang-banged as part of initiation into gangs. In many communities, family members socialize girls into the sex trade. This is a common way for families to make money and the practice is perceived as legitimate employment.

There is a dearth of research in Canada on the relationship between gangs and the sexual exploitation and trafficking of Aboriginal girls and women. In particular, very little is known about the men who are doing the trafficking.

There are many different causes of gang-related sexual exploitation and trafficking, including severe poverty, racism, addictions, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, a lack of services, and the early sexualization of girls in many communities. Emerging data from the Prince Albert and Regina Anti-Gang Service (RAGS) projects support current estimates on the widespread nature of these forms of violence in Western Canada (NWAC 2008; Amnesty International 2004). Anecdotal evidence from many northern communities in Western Canada

suggests that there is significant under-reporting on this issue. For example, it is common for family members in such communities to identify female relatives who have gone missing. Such reports are “unofficial” due to a variety of reasons, including shame, humiliation, lack of education, fear of outside involvement, and family ties to gangs. Trafficked girls are hard to find, as they are usually confined within homes or other hidden locations. Severe poverty and a lack of opportunities in remote communities result in the migration of young Aboriginals to cities where girls are vulnerable due to a lack of job skills and a lack of knowledge on how to navigate city life.

Trafficking is not prostitution or sex work—it is a form of slavery. It is common to confuse other forms of sexual exploitation with trafficking. For example, an adult who consents to engage in prostitution is not being trafficked. In general, sexual exploitation occurs when a child under nineteen years of age is sexually abused by adults; engages in sexual activity to support a friend, partner, or family member; trades sexual activities with adults in exchange for money, drugs, food, shelter, gifts, transportation, or other items; engages in commercial sex work in brothels, escort services, for pimps, and pornography; and internet sex.

Sexual slavery of females in gangs is often preceded by long histories of sexual exploitation at the hands of adult men, most often family members. Many youth who have suffered childhood sexual abuse engage in survival sex (providing sex for a place to sleep, a meal, or for a ride) after they have run away from home or child welfare facilities. Sexual exploitation is not employment or a chosen occupation. Some gang-involved girls under age nineteen feel they are not being exploited and that they have chosen to willingly exchange sex for resources.

Sexual trafficking of Canadian Aboriginal girls and women is most common within the borders of Canada, particularly in the Prairie provinces. Trafficking networks are found in both major cities (such as Vancouver, Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton) and in small towns in BC and the Prairies. There are patterns of city triangles across provinces (for example, Saskatoon—Edmonton—Calgary—Saskatoon, and Calgary—Edmonton—Vancouver—Calgary). The oil rigs and mining businesses in Alberta have contributed to trafficking activity.

### ***Gendered Pathways into Gangs for Aboriginal Youth***

Julie (all names are fictitious in order to protect the identity of participants), Aboriginal, and twenty-one-years-old, was the only female in an all-male Aboriginal street gang with members ranging from the age of fifteen to nineteen years. She had to show the male gang members that she was deserving of their respect and was tough. She also needed a strategy to avoid being forced to work in the sex trade to bring money into the gang. She resorted to pimping out a stable of anywhere from six to ten fifteen- to seventeen-year-old girls over a three year period. She was widely feared on the streets due to her propensity to engage in severe violence. She continued this lucrative operation until she was charged and

incarcerated for four years in both youth and adult facilities. She explained her gang involvement in this way:

My Dad is old now and probably isn't going to be around for much longer. He's probably sick. He's done needles for as long as I can remember. Coke and mo (morphine). That's what I remember when I was young. Always lots of people coming and going, lots of girls and needles and alcohol. They all were slammin' (shooting up). My Dad was a dealer and a pimp—that's why there were always lots of girls and drugs around. That's how they took me (child protection). I brought a friend home when I was like five or six and my Dad and all those people were doing needles and then my friend went home and told her Mom and child welfare came to get me later that day. The cops picked my Dad up. My Dad's my Mom's boyfriend—not my real Dad. And it's my Grama who I call Mom. My real Mom I don't like. She could never take care of me or my brother or sister. She's an addict. That day they picked up my Dad I got put in foster care. I've been everywhere—I've stayed in different places—until I went to jail—pretty much all my life .... They took me from the ghetto and put me into a rich neighbourhood. I was the only Indian in an all-white school .... Then I started to act out and went to (secure custody facility) lots.

A pathways approach is useful in identifying the primary mechanisms through which Aboriginal youth find themselves involved in gang activity. Some gang members are located on one primary pathway; others become gang-involved through a number of different pathways. Most of these routes into gang violence are unique to Aboriginal youth gangs. Evidence supporting the existence of these pathways comes from initial data analyses from the Prince Albert Warrior Spirit Walking Gang Project and the Regina Anti-Gang Services Project (Totten 2009a, 2009b) involving a combined sample of approximately 150 youth, along with the few Canadian studies on this issue (for example, Weatherburn et al. 2003; Dickson-Gilmore and Laprairie 2005; Totten 2008c; Kelly and Totten 2002). There are five main pathways: 1) The process of “violentization” (Athens 2003), rooted in experiences of serious and prolonged child maltreatment; 2) The prolonged institutionalization of children into child welfare and youth justice facilities; 3) Brain and mental health disorders, resulting from childhood trauma and fetal alcohol spectrum disorder—the end result being “psychological homelessness” (Hardy and Laszloffy 2005); 4) Social exclusion and devaluation; 5) The development of hyper-masculine and sexualized feminine gender identities. Each pathway is briefly described below.

Violentization is the first pathway into gangs—the process through which survivors of extreme physical maltreatment and neglect during childhood become predators and prey in adolescence. When Aboriginal children suffer these forms of harm, they are at high risk for poor intellectual and academic outcomes, including reduced academic ability and attainment, neurological impairment, and language development. They are more likely to have personality disorders, impaired psychosocial development, and internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Suffering chronic and repeated sexual trauma throughout childhood is also a key driver into gang life for both girls and boys. Typical victims experience multiple types of

exploitation within a single year, including sexual abuse, commercial sex work, and trafficking. These children are most often abused by male family members or men who know them. More girls are victims, although many male youth who participate in violent gang activities report having been sexually abused (Totten 2009c, 2009a, b). For example, a majority of the twenty-six male gang leaders participating in the RAGS intensive gang exit program reported prolonged and severe sexual abuse by men during their childhood. Four of the five females who are participants in this same program reported that the long-term childhood sexual abuse they suffered continued throughout their adolescence and early adulthood. These four women were trafficked by Aboriginal gangs for lengthy periods of time. The average age of these gang members was 20.7 years.

This betrayal of trust and abuse of power is aggravated in many communities by widespread misogynistic and sexist beliefs, which result in attitudes promoting the early sexualization of girls. Things were not always this way. Sex was traditionally considered sacred amongst Aboriginal peoples; it was understood to be a gift from the Creator and a profound way to communicate. However, with colonization, sexual abuse was introduced to many communities and has now reached epidemic levels.

The second key pathway into gang life is experiencing multiple out-of-home placements in child welfare and correctional facilities (Totten 2000, 2008c; Kelly and Totten 2002). Many of these facilities are prime recruiting grounds for gang members, and a significant number of gang members report that they only became gang-involved following placement in such facilities (Totten 2009a, b). For example, of the forty-one youth in the Prince Albert gang project who responded to questions regarding their experiences growing up in care, thirty-one reported having spent most of their childhood and adolescence in child welfare and youth justice facilities. On average, each of these young people had between three to six placements and twelve had seven or more different placements.

Arguably, Canada's child welfare and youth justice systems have replaced residential schools. Currently, one in ten Aboriginal children is in foster care and group homes compared to one in two hundred non-Aboriginals. Today, there is three times the total number of children in care compared to that number at the height of the operation of residential schools (28,000 Aboriginal children are in child welfare facilities today) (Trocmé et al 2004; Blackstock et al. 2004). The Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect reported that the main reason why Aboriginal kids are brought into care is neglect—severe poverty, substance abuse by parents, and poor housing (Trocmé 2005). In Canada, most Aboriginal children are placed in White settings, where it is very difficult to learn about Aboriginal teachings and develop a cultural identity. Thus, many Aboriginal children in care experience culture loss and are at high risk of gang recruitment and sexual exploitation as a way to get love and survive. Growing up in care often results in attachment disorders, which magnify the impact of childhood maltreatment.

The following account is from an interview with Sylvie, who talked about the connection between growing up in care and gang involvement. She was a twenty-three-year-old Aboriginal female gang member who was incarcerated for a crime of extreme violence. She was a mother of three and had been trying to exit her gang for two years. Her narrative typifies the sexual trauma young gang-involved women suffer in their own gangs as well as during their childhood at home:

I was raised in what you would call an abusive, dysfunctional home. In and out of foster homes and since the age of twelve in and out of jail. Eleven years of my life incarcerated—I'm sick of it. Since the age I can remember of my childhood days, my mother was in a common law relationship with my stepfather—he was really good to me. They were together for eighteen years. But when I was a child his brother used to molest me every chance he got. My step-family was white-skinned. I was about five or six years old when he first started doing things to me 'til I was about eleven. My family traveled a lot and my Mom and step-dad partied a lot as well as used I.V. drugs all the time. Instead of trying to kill myself I was introduced to a new clique called (name of gang). In this gang it was different from just stealing cars all the time. It was based on love, loyalty, support, and respect—what I been yearning for all my life. I got jumped in. I remember I couldn't even walk the next day how beaten up I was ... that was called love the respect. I was about to start learning to be a part of them! It was the beginning of the end for me .... The decision that made me want to change and not be a part of the gang anymore was an incident that happened in (date). I was out on parole violation and some shit happened to me. I was partying with three guys and one thing lead to another. They beat me and raped me, knocked me out. I woke up and realized what happened. I couldn't do nothing either. They told me I was free to leave. I was black and blue, bloody, couldn't even hardly close my legs.

The third pathway relates to the lifelong impact of brain and mental health disorders, resultant from prolonged experiences of childhood trauma and FASD. Developmental impairments and emotional vulnerability are the end result. These forms of severe trauma leave Aboriginal children with little time and energy to grieve their losses. In the Prince Albert Gang Project Evaluation Study, 82 percent of 91 youth reported having a close family member who had a severe drug or alcohol problem. Many of these youth have the visible facial features indicative of FASD. Forty-six of these young people reported having suffered serious and persistent verbal abuse by a caregiver during the previous six months.

Suffering severe abuse is directly related to experiencing mental health problems and extreme violence. Common mental health problems found in abuse survivors include post-traumatic stress disorder, borderline personality disorder, depression, and bipolar disorder. The youth participating in the Prince Albert Gang project evaluation are illustrative of this connection between mental health and engagement in severe violence. Of the forty-one participants who completed the Rochester Youth Development Study Depression Scale (adapted by Rochester Youth Development Study from Radloff 1977 and slightly revised by Totten 2008a), seventeen were scored as moderately depressed and thirteen were rated as highly depressed over the previous six months. The remaining eleven youth were slightly depressed. Twenty-one of this same group reported having had

suicidal ideation sometimes or often and nine had attempted suicide during this same period of time.

The impact of experiencing major childhood losses and a series of disrupted attachments is youth who do not want to feel anything because it hurts too much. Many Aboriginal gang members who engage in violence have a state of “terminal” thinking—they focus on survival only. Their wounds are so profoundly deep that their souls are barely alive. Many young Aboriginal gang members hide behind this armour of violence and emotional detachment; their sense of security, safety, and trust was never developed. Their unspeakable sorrow from invisible emotional wounds that are unrecognized and devalued is just as real as physical scars. Ken Hardy and Tracey Laszloffy (2005) theorize that the net impact of experiencing these lacerations to the soul is a state of psychological homelessness. Unresolved and buried grief results in monstrous acts of rage, which camouflage deep-rooted sorrow. Julie’s account is illustrative on this issue. She spoke about the loss she experienced when taken out of her grandmother’s care at a young age and placed in the child welfare system:

I still don’t know why she (grandmother) made me to go foster care. I came home at lunch one day and she was crying on the couch. I asked her what was the matter and she told me she couldn’t take care of me anymore. The foster mom was mean.

The fourth pathway revolves around the social exclusion and devaluation of many Aboriginal young people due to social class, race, sexual orientation, and gender. Colonization and forced assimilation has resulted in the disintegration of family units, language, culture, economic status, and parenting capacity in many communities. The loss of cultural identity, combined with social and economic marginalization, fuels gang violence. Gang-related activities offer employment and good income for many members.

The final pathway into Aboriginal youth gangs relates to the development of hyper-masculinities and sexualized femininities. Gender identities are malleable traits, constructed and reconstructed daily in social relationships. Dominant and subordinate gender types are the outcome of passive gender role socialization and active negotiation and resistance. Violence is a resource to construct masculinity, and sexuality is a resource to construct femininity. Aboriginal youth are located in very different “structural spaces” compared to all other youth in Canada. Trauma and loss are key factors that drive identity construction. The pain of grief, guilt, stigmatization, and shame defines gender identity for many. For male gang members, the experience of prolonged sexual abuse at the hands of men relates directly to the construction of violent gang identities. Many of these young men who were abused around the time that they reached puberty report having deep-seated fears about their sexual identities. They report feeling responsible for the abuse because they became sexually aroused; many believe that they must be gay because they “had sex” with men. Violence compensates for these threats to heterosexuality (Totten 2000, 2009a, b). For example, 43% of the youth in the Prince Albert study reported having attacked someone many times with the idea

of seriously hurting them during the previous six months. Seventy-five percent said that they almost always carried a knife for protection and hurting others, almost all of whom began doing this under age sixteen. Ten of these ninety-one youth reported regularly carrying a handgun. Even for those male gang members who have not suffered violent trauma, the elimination of traditional means of achieving masculinity (such as supporting families through hunting and trapping) is compensated for by a hyper-masculine exertion of power and control over women and children (Blagg 2000). Aboriginal girls in gangs resist and negotiate gender roles outside of traditional femininity—the gang is a space to “do gender differently” (Campbell 1987).

## **Are Aboriginal Gang Members Killing the Indian Within?**

Aboriginal youth gang violence is likely very different compared to those forms of violence exhibited by other youth gangs in Canada. Preliminary data from Canadian Aboriginal gang projects suggest that young Aboriginal gang members are killing the Indian part of themselves through extreme acts of violence. Rates of *internalized* violence—including suicide, drug overdose, and self-injurious behaviours—are far higher than *externalized* criminal forms of violence by these young gang members. Self-hatred is often a key motivator for acts of internalized violence. Although there is a lack of published data on internalized violence, data from the Prince Albert and Regina projects suggest that far more Aboriginal youth gang members die, or try to die, from suicide and drug overdoses compared to homicide (Totten 2009a, b). These data also point to extremely high rates of other forms of self-injurious behaviours, such as slashing and burning, particularly among young Aboriginal women. Paul is a twenty-three-year-old Aboriginal gang leader who was born addicted to cocaine and is an IV drug abuser. He has FASD and a speech impediment. He made the decision to try to get out of his gang after having been shot eight times. He reported:

I never got to spend my teen years on the street. I have two bullets in me—two by my heart, one in my arm and I don't know where the other is. They said it could paralyze me. I feel uneven, in the middle. It is hard to fly straight now, like drunk driving all over the road. Like that commercial where they put one bottle in front of you. I just stay home—I hardly go out any more. I live in the 'hood. Everywhere I go I meet people .... Me—I'll do myself in. I'll be honest. It's not other people—it's myself. I am trying to look for a job but it's hard—I have forty-some convictions.

Sylie, reflecting on one of many suicide attempts, said:

My step-dad was in and out of jail, my mom was never home. I lost my virginity when I was nine to a family member that took advantage of me, I was helpless and couldn't do shit ... I think this is when I started to become bitter, angry and didn't care about nothing including life itself I hated myself, I started running away, drinking, using drugs, skipping school and doing crime .... There was a reason why I loved robbing white people when I was nine years old because my abuser was a white person and I hated him. I became

racist at nine years old because of the things he did to me...from that day forward my life changed drastically. I was in a gang called (name of gang) when I was ten 'til I was twelve. That gang was pretty much all about stealing cars and doing break and enters ... I became really suicidal at twelve years old. My Grandma found me hangin' at my Mom's basement and I woke up at the hospital. I just remember cryin' and feeling helpless before I slipped the noose around my neck ... I was looking for something to numb the pain.

Most acts of physical violence (i.e., externalized violence) in Aboriginal youth gangs are motivated by revenge, retaliation, and reputation. Threats posed by other Aboriginal gangs are real or perceived. These young Aboriginal men are killing other young Aboriginal men. It is extremely rare for these gang members to seriously harm non-Aboriginals. Further, in many cases, the male victims of this extreme physical violence are other gang-involved *family members*—cousins, uncles, stepbrothers. In the RAGS project, of the thirty participants in the evaluation study, twenty-seven reported that they had many close and extended family members who were gang involved—and often these family members were involved in different gangs. Most of these participants said that they had *ten or more family members* who were gang-involved, and eight reported that they had *over twenty family members* in various gangs. It was not uncommon for these participants to have many family members belonging to rival gangs.

When females are harmed, they tend to be extended family members or intimates of the perpetrators. Several in-depth interviews with gang leaders who are trafficking and exploiting young women reveal an intergenerational dynamic of mothers, aunts, and grandmothers having been forced to work in the sex trade and/or trafficked. Many of these young men bitterly report that their mothers were absent throughout their childhood—some having been murdered or missing for extended periods of time. Some expressed hatred for their mothers. These gang leaders seem to have learned how to sexually exploit and traffic girls in their own families at a very young age. George's case is illustrative of the dynamics of trafficking. He is a twenty-four-year-old Aboriginal male gang member with a long history of engaging in extreme violence against female intimates and gang girls. He is the father of two girls and is an IV crack addict.

My mother worked the streets all her life and she was one of the murdered women found in (name of city) ... I used to treat girls really badly—I tortured them. I would be all nice to them—I have a good smile—I know I was born with that gift. I would be all sweet, then get them all hooked on pills, morphine, crack. I would fill their needles for them. Then I would lock them in a room for three or four days and not let them out. They would scream and moan and yell—they were hooked on my drugs—and I tortured them by locking them in that room for days with no drugs. Then they would work for me on the streets. I guess I treat them like that because of my mother .... My girlfriend pressed charges for assault against me to control me. I'm going to court to get the no-contact order taken off. I told my woman that she had to do this if she wants me to stay with her.

The process behind Aboriginal youth gang violence involves a number of identifiable steps: 1) Members feel loose bonds to the gang and there is fluid membership. Most have a fatalistic outlook on life, believing that they will die through

suicide or homicide in the near future; 2) Patriarchal and misogynistic gender relations construct and reaffirm the identities of gang members; 3) Members collectively perceive a threat from a rival gang—which increases gang cohesion and solidifies temporary membership. The threat is often irrational, given the high degree of trauma most members have suffered. Intergenerational family ties are important, and often one family is at war with another family; 4) An incident takes place which sparks an escalation of gang activity (such as showing disrespect, treading on another gang's established turf); 5) A rival gang responds in a chaotic and violent manner, similar to the process of spontaneous combustion. The fact that most gang members have cognitive impairments due to FASD contributes to the impulsive and unplanned nature of the violence; 6) The other gang retaliates. In this tinderbox-like environment, violent crime is understood as meaningful and gainful employment. This helps to spread gangs across neighbourhoods and reserves and increases membership (Totten, 2009c).

Collective and individual acts of violence by Aboriginal gang members, whether directed internally or at other gangs, serve many purposes: it produces more collective violence through the processes of threat and unpredictable combustion; it increases solidarity of gang members for a brief time, serving to unite them against a common enemy by increasing their dependence on each other and/or disciplining members; it perpetuates gang values, norms, and the conditions of membership; it reinforces familial ties in marginalized and transient communities; it provides members with a structure and sense of purpose, combatting hopelessness and a sense of powerlessness over their lives. Members talk about feeling a sense of honour, self-respect, and self-esteem when they engage in violence (Totten 2009a, b); it secures employment and income which members would otherwise be without; it results in the splitting of larger gangs into smaller cells and motivates some members to exit when violence reaches unacceptable levels; and finally, it functions to impede efforts to settle land claims, implement self-government, and address the criminalization of Aboriginal peoples—thereby benefiting the White power brokers in Canada. Previous researchers have identified some of these benefits in African and Latino gangs, including Sanders 1993; Klein 1971, 1995; Decker 1996. George's case is typical of how quickly members of the same gang can turn on each other. In his case, he was shot by a young man in the same gang who thought George had stolen money profited from crack he was dealing:

I started drugs when I was real young, crack, meth, pills, mo (morphine), pot, needles. Last year I got shot, rolled up in a plastic sheet and thrown in a bathtub and left to die. I was all caught up. I paid out what I had to pay out (money made from crack dealing) and I took my share. I loaded up my rig and took it (crack, intravenously) and was chillin' and I looked up and he (a member of the same gang) had a gun pointed at my head. The next thing I knew it felt like I had been punched really hard. I felt my gut and I was bleeding and I fell down. I was stoned so I didn't feel any pain and I got up and they wrapped me in plastic and threw me in the tub—to die I guess.

## Quality Gang Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression Approaches

Julie, now in an employment training and academic upgrading program reflected on what would have prevented her from joining a gang:

What would I do different? I witnessed my bro' stabbed to death at a party a couple of years ago. I woulda went to school and took care of myself and my son. I would of stayed connected to my family and Grandma. I would have stayed home. And stayed outta jail .... Maybe if my teachers paid attention more to me. And realized that I needed help. And maybe if I would of listened to my Grandma instead of pushing her and the rest of my family away. And if my Mom and Dad weren't using drugs and alcohol it would of made a difference. If I learned more about parenting I probably would of done better. No one taught me anything. I didn't even smudge or go to a sweat till I went to (secure facility). Maybe if I didn't grow up in a low-income household maybe I wouldn't want the money so much. I hung around a lot of older guys. And girls that we used to get each other in trouble. I lived in a good neighbourhood but the 'hood and (area of city) attracted me that's where my friends were. It's different now. It feels good to make legit money that I worked hard for. I still have some of the same friends but I'm closer to my Grandma after I opened up to her and she knew what I was involved in. I was drawn to the (neighbourhood) 'cause that's where the money was and the bros (gang members) were.

Although there are many Canadian gang prevention, intervention, and suppression initiatives, few focus exclusively on Aboriginal youth, and most have not been adequately evaluated. The lack of data concerning why and how Aboriginal gangs form and dissolve, along with the involvement of young women, is indicative of the absence of theoretical foundations driving these programs. It is hoped that this situation will change in the near future, given that the National Crime Prevention Centre is currently funding a number of multi-year projects, all with robust evaluation designs.

### ***What Doesn't Work?***

Historically in Canada, gang suppression strategies have won out over evidence-based treatment and prevention. Unfortunately, scarce resources have been spent on “get tough” approaches, where young gang members are incarcerated at a huge financial cost. Program models are male-oriented and the unique needs of young women are not being addressed. Gender-responsiveness is founded upon specific principles rooted in the developmental, psychological, and social characteristics of females. Gang prevention programs must address the particular issues, problems, and assets of Aboriginal young women—it is not good enough to simply group girls together in the same program. Young women need non-punitive, strength-based and non-hierarchical, relationship-based programs. It is dangerous to mix both genders of high-risk youth in the same program. Many females report physical, sexual, and verbal abuse by young men in facilities and hyper-sexualized relations with male peers and staff are common (Totten 2004, 2002). There are excellent examples of quality programs in Ontario youth justice (see Covington 2003; Myhand and Kivel 1998).

Approaches described below are proven to be ineffective and should be stopped. These include:

- *Gang suppression program* evaluations have found mixed results. These programs are based on the prosecution and conviction of gang members, especially targeting gang leaders. Although effective in decreasing gang-related crime in the short term, these programs fail to address important psycho-social issues such as child maltreatment, mental health, substance abuse, education, and employment. Suppression initiatives should only be used to complement a range of interventions.
- *Incarcerating gang members* does not reduce future criminal behaviour (Aos, Miller and Drake 2006). Studies in the US and Canada demonstrate that locking up gang members *increases* the chances of re-offending and staying in the gang (Benda and Tollet 1999; Olson, Dooley and Kane 2004; Nafekh 2002; Nafekh and Stys 2004). Grouping early onset, high-risk youth together increases the negative bonding amongst members and leads to even more entrenched anti-social and criminal behaviour. Grouping young women with young men in the same facility or program can do more harm than good. The boys tend to prey on the girls, and programs designed for males do not address the unique needs of young women (Totten 2004). When gang members are incarcerated, individualized approaches in facilities work best (such as cognitive-behavioural individual and family therapy), but gains are only maintained if adequate resources are provided to support long-term transition into the community following release.
- *Curriculum-based prevention programs* targeting youth at-risk for gang involvement, such as the American Gang Resistance Education and Training program (G.R.E.A.T.) and the RCMP Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) program result in modest, short-term change. However, follow-up studies have found program participants to be as likely as non-participants to become gang members in the long-term (Esbensen and Osgood 1999; Esbensen et al. 2001; DHHS 2001; NIJ 1998).
- *Traditional detached-worker programs*, which use social workers, youth and recreation workers or Aboriginal leaders to outreach into gangs are ineffective and can do more harm than good by increasing gang cohesion (Klein 1995). Modern detached-worker programs have included curriculum components addressing consequences of gang involvement, peer pressure, and substance abuse. These programs remain ineffective unless they are integrated into a comprehensive and coordinated community-wide approach.
- *Community development approaches* founded on the premise that there is a singular and cohesive “Aboriginal community” do not work. In reality, there are many competing interests in most reserves and urban

neighbourhoods, resulting in divisions along religious and spiritual lines, access to income and wealth, gender, clans and ethnicities, familial bloodlines, and gang allegiances. Programs must, therefore, effectively engage these subgroups and address the concerns and priorities of each.

- *Child welfare models* based on bringing youth into care are replicating Canada's sad legacy of residential schools. Grouping teens in child welfare with varying degrees of antisocial conduct and attitudes leads to delinquency training. Negative attention-forcing behaviour is highly resistant to change: reprimands serve as rewards because they are reinforced by the reaction of peers. Longitudinal studies repeatedly show that the association with deviant peers is the strongest correlate of escalation in problem behaviours in adolescence. Children living in group care face much higher risks of being victimized by bullying, sexual abuse, physical restraints by staff, and ultimately being criminalized. A lack of permanency planning contributes to many Aboriginal children being moved from placement to placement, which contributes to attachment problems and deep-rooted feelings of rejection and shame.

### ***What Works?***

Evidence-based approaches are categorized into five key policy areas: 1) collaboration and problem-solving partnerships; 2) concentrating investments on highest needs; 3) developing and sustaining community capacity; 4) adequate and sustained supports and resources; and 5) public engagement. Lessons learned from Canadian projects are integrated into this discussion. Three such projects, all of which are being evaluated by this author, end in June 2011. All of the projects have mainly Aboriginal staff teams, many of whom have direct life experience in gangs, the sex trade, and street life. Male and female elders are employed in each project. All of the programs are gender-responsive, culturally competent, and have the capacity to respond twenty-four hours daily, year-round.

The Warrior Spirit Walking Project, delivered by the Prince Albert Outreach Program Inc., targets twelve- to twenty-year-old Aboriginal gang members and youth at high-risk of gang membership. The Circle of Courage model is the foundation for all programs, including: Won-Ska Cultural School; Youth Activity Centre; van outreach to sexually exploited youth; Presentation Team; court outreach; intensive counselling; Young Women's Group; and employment services. The North Central Community Association's Regina Anti-Gang Service project (RAGS) targets sixteen- to twenty-eight-year-old gang leaders and their partners/family members. Core services are based upon the Wrap-around and Multi-systemic Therapy (MST) models, including: gender-specific life skills groups; intensive individual, crisis, and family counselling; gang exit (geographic relocation with intensive supports); and outreach to gang-involved young persons in correctional institutions, court, and inner city schools. The final project, the Vancouver Aboriginal Youth–Vancouver Police Department Working

Group CHARM Project (Creating Healthy Aboriginal Role Models) targets youth aged twelve- to eighteen-years in East Vancouver who are most at risk of being recruited into gangs. All core services are based upon principles of positive youth development and asset building, including a basketball program; late night resource program; anti-violence and safety workshops; and individual support and counselling. Most programs operate from 10 p.m. to 8 a.m. daily.

### ***Collaboration and Problem-Solving Partnerships***

Community-wide, cross-sectoral strategies are required to address the individual, economic, and social factors which are related to gang activity. Silos, separating sectors (such as public health, education, corrections, child welfare, recreation), including Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), must come down. There are excellent models in other parts of the world (Capobianco, 2006; Capobianco, Shaw and Dubuc 2003). In the US, Irving Spergel's Comprehensive Gang Model is a good example of a community-wide response to gangs. It consists of five core strategies which flow from an integrated and team oriented problem solving approach using secondary and tertiary prevention. The foundation of the model is that a lack of social opportunities and the degree of social disorganization in a community explain the youth gang problem. Contributing factors such as poverty, institutional racism, poor social policies, and a lack of or misdirected social controls are important. The core strategies include community mobilization; social intervention; provision of academic, economic, and social opportunities; gang suppression; and facilitating organizational change and development (Howell 2000; Spergel 1995; OJJDP 2006). Gang violence can never be prevented unless the Aboriginal burden of suffering is reduced in Canada.

The RAGS project is the only Aboriginal gang project in Canada which targets gang leaders who are motivated to exit their gangs. It is an excellent example of how a community-wide and cross-sectoral approach in a marginalized neighbourhood can address gang problems. The project is nested within a community-based network of organizations and programs which serve high-risk Aboriginal young people, including drug and alcohol detox, treatment, and methadone programs; baby wellness and child welfare services; policing and correctional services; employability and educational upgrading programs; faith-based programs; counselling and mental health services; recreational and arts programs; and grassroots advocacy programs. Initial comparative data from baseline and follow-up evaluation surveys, along with qualitative in-depth interviews with clients, suggests that the RAGS project is having considerable success in this area. Exit status is categorized into four groups: 1) medium-term disengagement (no gang affiliation for a minimum of twenty-four weeks or more); 2) short-term disengagement (no gang affiliation for twelve to twenty-three weeks); 3) immediate disengagement (no gang affiliation for eight to ten weeks; and 4) attempting to disengage (client is demonstrating behaviours that indicate he/she is attempting to remove themselves from gang activity but is also engaged in some gang activities). Of twenty-nine

clients who are in the disengagement process, nine are medium-term disengagers, five are short-term, three are immediate, and twelve are attempting to disengage. Two of the first group are female, one of the five short-term disengages is female, and one of the attempters is female. The average age of the start of disengagement for these twenty-nine clients is 21.1 years.

Paul's case is reflective of the participants who are attempting to disengage from their gangs. One month prior to the interview, Paul was kidnapped by the gang leader who only set him free after Paul disclosed information on the gang exit program (the person who kidnapped Paul wanted to harm the staff of this program). It is evident from his account that a cross-sectoral and comprehensive plan is required to address his many complex needs:

I dropped my other gang life and I was trying to be solo. I made up my mind one day. I was raised in the Y.O. system then did the rest of my time in adult—for robbery. Since I was twelve—old enough to be charged—I did ten years total. My cousins are in (two different notorious gangs). I tell my cousins to leave me alone. It's my choice to drop (gang colours). It's my life and I want to change my life ... I want to work here (at the gang program). That's my plan. I'm not willing to try to give up—I wanna do more...the hardest thing for me to quit was leaving gang life. I said in detox that the drugs were the second hardest thing to quit. The gang was the hardest—I grew up in them. Everyone I grew up with is in gangs and in jail. They offer me shit—positions—I got offered to run the (name of city) for them (gang). I said no. They said why? I said because I don't want to. I don't have nobody to go kick with, to go visit. I've been home—but it is no good for me. I have lost all my friends—the only ones I had—the people I grew up with. I went out a few times to see my family on reserve. Both times I got into trouble. Fist fights, guns.

We all left the gang for the worst way. Like (name of friend) got shot. This one guy he said it was because of his mom. That's not the way for us. We left because we got shot.

(I need) treatment. Then school. I was thinking of going to (name of a city) to get away. I know everyone here. Honour blood. My uncle got it on his neck—for me, he said. After I got shot. My cousin used to be (gang name) and my brother used to be a (different gang). I'm living at my Dad's. My bed's been a couch since I was living in the city. My goal is to have a bed. I've never had my own room.

True partnerships are required to develop new models of child welfare and Aboriginal justice. Many young Aboriginals are harmed for no other reason than the fact that they involuntarily came in contact with these systems. Aboriginal leaders, various levels of government and representatives of these two sectors must develop effective mechanisms for sharing information. This begins with the early identification and support of high-risk children and families, in order to provide intensive programs and practices that maintain permanent family connections for all children. Family empowerment and connectedness should be targeted in a flexible manner; the goal is to have a continuum of connections—not all family members can be together full-time, or without on-going support. We must repatriate kids to their natural environments—schools, peers, neighbourhoods, and informal supports. Today, however, the federal government does not fund Aboriginal Child and Family Services agencies for prevention nor support

services. Instead, the Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) Child and Family Services Program gives 22% less funding per child compared to provincially-funded child welfare agencies. A proven method to reduce reliance on residential placement and keep youth in their neighbourhoods with intensive supports is the Wraparound Process. There are many examples of the effectiveness of this approach with Aboriginal peoples in other countries (for example, see Wyles 2007).

New models of youth justice are also required. Often, Aboriginal young people are criminalized because they have suffered maltreatment as a child; the child welfare system acts as a pipeline directly into the youth justice system. Incarceration often takes place before youth are recruited into gangs, or it serves to increase gang cohesion and membership for those who are already gang-involved. The Canadian Aboriginal Justice Strategy is broken. There has not been a reduction in rates of crime, victimization, and incarceration among Aboriginal people since the strategy was introduced over one decade ago. The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (YCJA) has a special set of criteria and measures for Aboriginal youth: Provinces and Territories are not abiding by the Act in many instances. Unless we can dramatically reduce the number of young Aboriginals who are incarcerated, gang violence will only increase.

New collaboration and problem-solving partnerships are required to increase the culture and gender competencies of all groups and sectors having an interest in preventing and suppressing youth gang violence. True competence in Aboriginal culture goes far beyond “cultural awareness” (knowledge about a particular group) and “cultural sensitivity” (knowledge as well as some level of experience with a group other than one’s own). The Medicine Wheel is an important symbol founded in ancient Aboriginal teachings; it is a circular, holistic approach to knowledge rather than the linear approach used in many Western settings. Aboriginal ways of learning place communal generosity and sharing above individualistic and materialistic gain. The Wheel is highly valued by the Prince Albert, Regina, and Vancouver gang projects as a holistic model for preventing violence and supporting gang-involved youth to understand their world and figure out their journey in life. In these projects, the principle of gender responsiveness is just as highly valued as cultural competency. Addressing the unique needs of females is prioritized.

### ***Concentrating Investments on Highest Needs***

It is less costly and more effective to prevent youth from joining gangs than it is to support members to exit gangs. The best way to prevent Aboriginal youth gang violence is to intervene very early in the lives of high-risk children and families: the zero to six years bracket. These young people usually have early onset aggression prior to age six years. If left untreated, most turn into serious and violent offenders and gang members. What works? In-home, culturally competent public health nurse visitation with young, high-risk mothers over the long-term, using

the “Families First” model (Browne et al. 2001). If implemented in an intensive manner, physical child abuse and neglect can be reduced by as much as 80% in high-risk communities. Comprehensive FASD prevention programs are required, as are school readiness and family literacy programs, infant stimulation and head start programs, and other health promotion programs. The best way to address the sexual exploitation and trafficking of gang-involved Aboriginal girls and women is to prevent child sexual abuse and implement broad-based education programs to confront misogyny, sexism, and the early sexualization of girls. Gender inequalities can be reduced by engaging women in positions of power and leadership in individual communities. Finally, quality programs for men who sexually abuse should be implemented in a comprehensive manner.

The cultural competencies of schools can be enhanced by increasing the number of Aboriginal teachers and administrators, teaching traditional language acquisition, reducing the suspension and expulsion of Aboriginal students, and reshaping the curriculum to reflect Aboriginal approaches to knowledge and teachings. Primary schools are excellent places where children can safely work on grief and trauma; creative arts techniques and play therapy are proven interventions (Sklarew et al. 2002; Crenshaw and Garbarino 2007). Schools are also good venues to implement quality suicide prevention programs which address known risk and protective factors. We must surmount aggressive and violent behaviours to see the suffering, traumatized child who craves meaningful connection and emotional intimacy.

### ***Developing and Sustaining Community Capacity***

We must examine crime in a broader social context by addressing the link between individual life experiences and the social and economic inequalities of Aboriginal people. Strategies must confront the lack of social opportunities and social disorganization characteristic of many communities. Gang-related activities offer employment and a good income; therefore, we cannot reduce gang violence without replacing the income and jobs that gangs provide to members. Quality programs include those that confront low educational attainment, unemployment, poverty, unstable and crowded housing conditions, high residential mobility, and substance abuse. Programs must respond to the many competing interests on many reserves and urban neighbourhoods, including the North Central neighbourhood in Regina, Vancouver’s Downtown East Side, and Hobbema Reserve in Alberta. There is a sound body of evidence supporting the relationship between Aboriginal self-government (in the areas of child welfare, health, education, fire/police services, women in government) and positive socio-economic, health, and child development outcomes. Efficient settlement of land claims is directly related to improving the overall standard of living for Aboriginal peoples.

***Adequate and Sustained Supports and Resources***

Almost all resources dedicated to addressing the gang problem in Canada go to law enforcement and corrections—yet, things will never get better unless more resources are dedicated to prevention. This means re-dedicating existing resources and getting players in the justice sector to behave differently. There is much resistance to doing this. Police need to get out of the existing prevention business. One small example is the proven ineffectiveness of curriculum-based drug and gang prevention programs. These programs should be stopped and the money reinvested in proven school-based programs involving police, such as the intensive mentoring and tracking of very high-risk students and their families, beginning in elementary school. Although the most effective method of preventing youth gang involvement is reducing child maltreatment, the vast majority of Aboriginal child welfare funds target strategies do not work, as they involve the removal of Aboriginal young people from their families and placement in residential facilities. A tremendous amount of money can be saved by closing some facilities and reinvesting the savings in intensive, home-based programs. Finally, provinces, territories, and municipalities should partner with the federal government to extend NCPG Aboriginal gang prevention projects far beyond 2011. Other prevention initiatives require long-term funding and robust evaluation budgets.

***Public Engagement***

In Canada, few people seem to care about the immense burden of suffering of Aboriginal youth. Young gang members, most of whom have survived unspeakable trauma in childhood, are committing suicide and killing each other at alarmingly high rates, and things will only get worse with the rapidly shifting demographics in many communities. There are thousands of missing and sexually trafficked Aboriginal girls in this country, most of whom are gang-involved. Surely, we would address this tragedy if Caucasian children were being exploited in this manner. Racism in part fuels the large gap between public perceptions about crime and dysfunction in Aboriginal communities and official data. The average Canadian faces little or no risk of being harmed by young gang members, who arguably are killing the Aboriginal part of themselves. The many success stories of healthy and thriving bands and reserves should be communicated to the broader Canadian public. We cannot afford to wait. Public education is required to confront the huge gap between what we are currently doing to address gang problems and what the evidence says works. The Federal Public Apology in June 2008 and the Residential School Truth and Reconciliation Commission present excellent opportunities to engage the Canadian public on the unique historic, social, and economic context enveloping Aboriginal youth gang violence.

## Conclusion

The development of gang culture must be contextualized through the historical lens of the destruction of Aboriginal identity and culture. The intergenerational footprint of colonization and forced assimilation is found in the minority of youth who join gangs. The grandparents and parents of today's Aboriginal gang members were stripped of their parenting capacity. Sheer survival—a sense of family, an identity, protection, steady income—are all key reasons why Aboriginal youth join gangs. Many are recruited in the very facilities which are supposed to be helping them—child welfare and justice centres.

Aboriginal youth gang violence in Canada—suicide, homicide, sexual trafficking, and other acts of extreme violence—has reached epidemic levels in many communities. Now is the time to implement viable and comprehensive prevention strategies. If we fail to act now, we will pay dearly within the next decade. Many remote and urban communities in Western Canada will have double the number of young Aboriginals within the next ten years—which translates into large increases in gang membership and women who will be victimized through exploitation and trafficking. Prevention strategies must interrupt the main pathways into gang violence, including serious and prolonged child maltreatment, long-term institutionalization in child welfare and youth justice facilities, brain and mental health disorders caused by trauma and FASD, social exclusion and devaluation, and the development of violent and sexualized gender identities. Prevention models must be gender-responsive and incorporate factors related to loss, trauma, and developmental impairments, as well as having a focus on historic, social, and economic conditions. Current strategies to address the youth gang problem in Canada are not based on sound evidence. Most are not culturally competent, nor do they address the unique needs of young women. Repression approaches are very costly and do not offer long-term solutions; in fact, a substantial body of evidence suggests that law and order approaches actually increase gang activities.

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