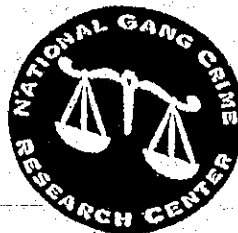


Journal of Gang Research

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Gangster Girlfriends in British Columbia: The Allure of Louboutin, Chanel, and Tiffany

by

Neela Gottenbos, Keiron McConnell PhD, and Andy Bain PhD

Abstract

According to Peterson (2014) female members may account for as much as 40% of the gang membership in the United States, and yet we still know so little about the female role, membership, association to, and relationships with known gang members. Indeed, Decker (2017: xvii) has noted that "In too many studies of organized crime groups, women are either not dealt with or are treated as appendages." Our research goes some way to correcting this, adding to the body of evidence by understanding the decision for involvement with gangs, as non-gang members. The main objective was to explore the romantic relationships between females and gang members. The research examines why young females, who do not identify as gang members, enter relationships with gang members and what the nature of these relationships are. In doing so, the research is able to offer a number of recommendations for intervention, which may be effective at deterring gang involvement, and supporting 'exit strategies' of young women involved with gang members. The data used to recommend intervention and prevention strategies was produced from qualitative interviews with three women from British Columbia who have previously been in a relationship with a gang member. The results contribute to the ongoing debate about whether females become involved with gangs because they are victims or through conscious decision. A rational choice. The present study argues that women need to be viewed as active decision makers in their own lives, while still acknowledging that dating a gang member is a dangerous and abusive experience. The research also finds support for the glamorization of gangs and suggests that this is an integral factor in entering a relationship with a gang member. This study argues that prevention and intervention methods that aim to de-glamourize gangs are needed to deter young women from entering these relationships.

Introduction

Nicole Alemy, Breanna Kinnear, Jessica Illes and Mandie Johnson were all victims of gang-related homicide. All four of these young women, who were all in their early 20s when they were fatally shot, share the common thread of being involved with a man who was affiliated with a gang. These women serve to be regrettable reminders of the violence associated with gangs and the unfathomable

dangers posed to those who become involved with members of criminal groups. Brianna Kinnear was gunned down in a truck while she was selling drugs for her boyfriend while he was in jail. Nicole Alemy was shot to death with her four-year-old son in the back seat of the car because she was mistaken for her husband. Jessica Amber Illes was found shot to death in an Abbotsford basement suite, three days after her boyfriend Bobby Degarrio was found dead in a burned car. Mandie Johnson was gunned down by rival gang members in their attempts to shoot her boyfriend Gator Brown. These victims illustrate the importance of the required research needed to understand gang relationships in British Columbia. Although these and other incidents have received media attention, little has been done in terms of academic research to explore the growth of female gangs, and female involvement with gangs. We acknowledge that this is not new, and would direct the reader to Moore and Hagedorn's report which acknowledges that much of the research on gangs (to that point) had either "ignored females or trivialized female gangs." (2001: 1). Indeed, we have been unable to identify adequate research which specifically addresses female involvement and gangs globally, and note that its absence in the research from British Columbia is of significant concern. Thus, we submit that research on female gang involvement is of foremost importance, but argue that an understanding of the decision to date gang members is essential in terms of exploring why women enter relationships with gang members and how these relationships unfold.

The primary focus of the present study is to determine why, when the dangers of gang association are apparent (though on an individual level, not necessarily obvious), young women enter relationships with men who are gang affiliated. To date, the few studies that involve women and gangs have focused on female only gangs and mixed gender gangs (King, Voisin, & Diclemente, 2014). Due to this, little is known about young women who do not identify as gang involved but have boyfriends who are gang members (Campbell, 1990; Miller, 1998). The major concern associated with young women dating gang members is the potential for these relationships to be dangerous. It is highly likely that relationships between young women and gang members can have adverse consequences. Structural gender and power dynamics of gang relationships have significant influences on a woman's sexual vulnerability and has detrimental consequences on their psychosocial wellbeing (Wingood & Diclemente, 2000) perpetuated through the "performative masculine power structures that exist within gangs" (King et al, 2014: 9).

Further, as this research aims to encourage and foster an understanding of women who are romantically involved with gang members, it is equally necessary to recommend available or attainable means, based upon the research findings, which could prevent young women from entering relationships with gang members or assist them in exiting them. Given the violent murders of Nicole Alemy, Breanna Kinnear, Jessica Illes, and Mandie Johnson, it is discernible that prevention and intervention techniques and programs may prove valuable to prevent any further loss

of life in regard to women who enter relationships with gang members. Their families and friends all shared the similar struggle of failing to convince their daughters to leave their partners before it was too late, as well as failing to prevent them from engaging in the relationship in the first place. Looking at what motivates women to enter into these relationships, what their experiences are, and what advanced their interests to leave will provide recommendations for prevention and intervention methods that will address their unique needs.

Literature Review

British Columbia – A Unique Gang Landscape

Numerous studies have been undertaken to explain what motivates young people to join and partake in gang activity (see for example, Decker & Curry, 2000; Lachman, Roman, & Cahill, 2013; and Thornberry, 1998, 2001); however, much remains to be known about female gang involvement in the available academia. Due to the lack of related academic research, it is difficult to assess the nature and extent of female gang involvement in Canada. Further gaps in the research become inflated when the exclusive gang landscape that exists in British Columbia is taken into consideration. Various organizations suggest that the gang experience in British Columbia has a unique and changing gang landscape (CFSEU, 2016: 1). Further, McConnell (2016) suggests that gangs in BC are comparatively different from other gangs located in regions across Canada and the United States. In many respects, he suggests the gang situation in British Columbia to be unique. Further he suggests that because of this uniqueness and construction of British Columbia's gangs, other research may fall short in providing a comprehensive understanding of gang-related issues as they apply to British Columbia; more specifically, research related to women involved in gangs and with male gang members.

When investigating relationships with females and gang members, it is imperative to understand what constitutes gang involvement, a position complicated by its continued and constant debate in literature (Ezeonu, 2014). The term "gang" or "gang involved" is interpreted in a variety of ways by academics, policy makers, and more widely by popular culture. While one may be directly involved in a gang, there may be other players who are more indirectly involved, and the lines and boundaries become more blurred in these circumstances. In British Columbia "there are significant consequences of police believing that someone is involved in gangs" (McConnell, 2016: 17). When young women are pulled over or caught associating with a known gang member in British Columbia, they are marked in the police database, PRIME, as a gang associate. They are then potentially targeted by the police and subjected to increased negative attention by law enforcement agencies. Being tagged as gang associated can prevent young women from getting any job that requires a police records check (McConnell, 2016). There are also anti-gang ejection programs in British Columbia that prevent those labelled as gang affiliated from

drinking in many of the bars and restaurants, or from attending popular social events. The initial Barwatch program began in 1995 and provided the basis for the introduction of Restaurant Watch in 2008. These programs seek to target male gang members who would frequent local bars and restaurants, and were enacted to limit access these individuals had to popular social establishments. Since then the legislation has been added to, allowing for the exclusion of females dating gang members (McConnell, 2016). This is on the basis that it is known that gangster girlfriends are often targets during gang disputes, and therefore endanger the public around them. For example, if a young woman in a restaurant is shot at due to her affiliation with a gang member, everyone in the immediate area is at risk of harm. Removing gang affiliated subjects from certain facilities mitigates this risk and aims to displace gang violence away from the public.

Girls and Gangs

Research on gangs has almost exclusively focused on male behaviour. Indeed, in what many consider the original gang study, Thrasher (1927) found no evidence of female gangs and argued that females lacked the "ganging instinct", describing the gangs as resulting from "the spontaneous efforts of boys to create a society for themselves where none adequate to their needs exists" (Thrasher, 1927: 32). Thrasher further argues that female gang involvement is restricted to interfering with the gang's structure by pulling males away from the gang. He found that females initiated male departure from gangs by seducing them or encouraging them to get legitimate jobs and to get married. Even today, research continues to focus on the "sensational aspects of female gangs including sexuality, and deprivations from public expectations of gender-appropriate behaviour" (St. Cyr & Decker, 2003: 424). A position which is slow to change. Indeed, the work of Joe and Chesney-Lind (1995: 412) reflect the same, stating that females in the gang literature at that time were more often "... neglected, sexualized and oversimplified". Research carried out in the United Kingdom suggests that stereotypical viewpoints about females who are gang involved fail "to understand female involvement within the broader context of their lives (Nurge 2003) and to assess the extent to which violence, marginalization and neglect impacts upon their friendship choices and group membership" (Young, 2009: 235).

The majority of research available on females and gangs has focused on female only gangs and mixed gender gangs (King et al, 2014). Campbell (1990) and Miller (1998) suggest that because of this, little is known about young women who do not identify as gang involved but have boyfriends who are gang members. King et al (2014) make reference to the work of Berrett et al (2013), Lopez et al (2011), and Voisin et al (2012), and argue that the research which is available on female gang involvement has the tendency to focus on individual level risk factors, which are criminogenic factors such as, depression, substance abuse, and age of first offence,

while ignoring partner characteristics. However, Davies-Robinson and Bain (2017) have noted the important role that the so-called 'molls' and 'dolls' played in the relationships to gang members and mobsters during the mid-part of the 20th century. In this discussion, they have argued that these women were "... more than just sexual partners to the men they were involved with", and conclude that they "... became confidants, couriers, and in some cases co-conspirators." (Davies-Robinson & Bain, 2017: 32). This is also similarly seen with the Mexican Mafia, and Mexican prison gangs, where women can play an important part in the gangs, but remain subordinate to their male partners. Understanding partner characteristics and the role that female partners play may prove fundamental in answering the question of why women become involved with gang members.

Relationships between young women and gang members may have adverse consequences. Totten (2000) has argued that women who date gang members are at a higher risk of victimization versus female gang members themselves. King et al (2014) and Minnis et al (2008) found distinct differences among girls who claimed relationships with gang members and those who did not, with a specific emphasis on increased likelihood of pregnancy. The findings of these studies suggest that resources should be allocated to the creation of prevention programs aimed at young women in romantic relationships with gang members, and especially for attempts at reducing drug use and risky sexual behaviour (King et al, 2014: 10). Davies-Robinson and Bain (2017) and Barker (2015) have noted that in other situations and circumstance, women become attached romantically to gang members and are then forced into street prostitution. Totten (2009) makes note that it is relatively unacknowledged that females become prostitutes because of gang involvement and males do not. The research notably emphasizes that it is crucial for future research to focus attention towards "the intersection between partner gang involvement and interpersonal romantic relationships for high-risk girls, who do not report a history of gang involvement" (King et al, 2014: 10). In this present study we suggest that what is often missed from the academic discourse is the acknowledgement that these women, very often make the decision to form the relationship, and even in the full knowledge of the dangerous circumstance which may surround that decision.

A Rational Choice

The present study is guided by Rational Choice Theory (RCT). Historically, the fields of sociology and criminology have rejected rational choice theory as a legitimate theory of human behaviour (Hirschi, 1986; and, Loughran, Paternoster, Chalfin, & Wilson, 2016). Some theorists would suggest that rational choice theory has been proved false by scientific research (Hirschi, 1986, and Kiser, E. & Hechter, M. (1998)). More specifically, "because rational choice theory assumed that people are free to choose their course of action, it was at odds with the basic premise of science that events are caused by prior events" (Hirschi, 1986: 317). Unlike other

theories used to explain human decision and crime, such as labeling theory, social structure theory and social conflict theory, RCT does not assume people's actions are exclusively controlled by external factors. This point of view aligns with perspectives that acknowledge "the agency or choice in the lives of women and their potential to engage in violent and criminal behaviour" (Aulakh, 2008: 56). This is important as it does not assume women as victims, which often happens in gang literature that trivializes the role of women and girlfriends (Aulakh, 2008).

RCT suggests that people anticipate the outcomes of their actions, and make a calculated decision that is predicated on what will be best for them (Scott, 2000). As Egharevba (2016: 92) notes; "rational individuals choose the alternative that is likely to give them the greatest satisfaction". One common criticism of rational choice theory is that it renders humans as logical, calculated beings. This criticism comes especially strong from criminologists, who argue that a person's decision to engage in criminal activity is often very irrational. They argue, that there are many factors which may influence one to make the irrational decision to commit a crime. Therefore, RCT fails to consider the surrounding events and circumstances that cause an individual to act in a certain manner (Hirschi, 1986). However, this criticism arguably stems from a misunderstanding of the theory. Although the basic assumption of rational choice theory suggests that people act according to their preferences, it does not suggest that their decision must adhere to what a reasonable and objective individual would do. There are many outstanding circumstances that may influence one to act out of the norm, "the requirement that one's preferences be rational does not concern nor restrict the specific contents of the person's preferences." (Chung, 2014: 27). The second criticism of RCT suggests that humans are self-serving individuals who only act to better their own lives; this is another misconception about the theory. One may act in a self-sacrificing, altruistic manner while still making a rational choice (Chung, 2014). The potentially favorable outcome or preference that RCT discusses does not necessarily have to be one that is selfish. The results of the present study are consistent with RCT, and support the work of Loughran et al (2016) that suggests the perception of rational choice theory among criminologists has been too narrow. For the purposes of the study, it is important to discuss some of the misconceptions about RCT and its application to human behaviour.

Methodology

The study utilized a purposive sampling method, a staple of the qualitative research design. At times, the qualitative methodology has been criticized for not being generalizable, but when identifying meaning and reasoning (certainly in individual action and behaviour), it can also be seen to be an advantage. In this instance, we were mindful not only of the purpose of the research, but also the wish to provide the individual with an opportunity to be heard - enabling the individual to

tell their own story (Bain, 2013; and Maruna & Matravers, 2007). With little known of (female) gang membership, and even less known about the specific focus of female relationships with gang members, we considered this to be an important step in the development of academic knowledge.

All participants were recruited through available professional networks. Based on the obscure identities of the women involved, this method was needed to reach out to participants who met the study's necessary inclusion criteria which required participants to have previously dated a gang member and to no longer be involved with their partner. Participants still involved with their partner were excluded to ensure the safety of the participant and the research team. Participants below the age of 19 were also excluded due to the sensitive nature of the subject and the increased risks involved with having research participants that are not legal consenting adults. Among the five potential participants, three met the inclusion criteria required to participate in the study.

A semi-structured interview was selected as the nature of the subject required that we focus on specific topics or themes, but also allowed the participant to tell their own story in their own way, with a list of pre-determined questions which provided for uniformity in the information collected. This is important because the most substantial consideration when asking questions of a sensitive nature, is the emotional, physical and psychological well-being of the participant. It was a major concern that the interview process could evoke trauma when the women were asked to discuss their prior relationship, and in order to put the participant at ease, they must feel comfortable and in control (Milne & Bull, 2006). Furthermore, Milne and Bull (2006), contend that wherever possible the interview should resemble a conversation and not (in its strictest sense) an interview at all. Additionally, and aside from ensuring their comfort during the research process, the research team wanted to ensure that the women were not negatively impacted later, and as a result of their participation in the study. Thus, once concluded, the female participants were provided with a variety of resources, including information on how to access programs, counselling services and hotlines that are designed to meet the needs of females. Each of the interviews took approximately forty-five to sixty minutes to complete, and participants were then offered the opportunity to add any final statements or observations.

Finally, and due in the main to the lack of academic research on girls and gangs, an inductive approach was taken to analyze the data. Inductive reasoning would normally suggest a new theory arising from the data generated, and in this sense, we wanted to see if RCT was indeed a sound evidential basis for the behaviour of the participants, making use of the themes that arose in the conversations. This was done by asking the question: *does the data provide evidence of a rationale. A choice being made to seek out and enter a relationship with a known gang member, and was that same process of choice still there at the end of the relationship?*

Findings

Three distinct relationships between females and gang members were assessed. Each relationship put the women into dangerous and vulnerable situations. In the present study, each of the participants agreed that they made the active decision to enter into a relationship with a gang member; even after discovering their illegal lifestyle. In fact, there are many aspects of the gang lifestyle that the women saw as both attractive and beneficial. Although each participant discussed their love for their partner, glamour, status and protection was what distinguished dating a gang member from a traditional relationship.

I: Motivation to Enter Relationship

A. Glamour and Status

Each participant noted that glamour was an attractive aspect of dating a gang member at a young age. The women were all still teenagers when they met their partners and knew little to nothing about gangs in British Columbia. Alexandra shared that her former partner bought her a Maserati, designer bags, and that their monthly bills alone exceeded \$30,000 (CAN). This was especially enticing to her after growing up relatively poor and feeling inadequate, and she shared that meeting someone who was willing to spend money on her made her feel appreciated. Liv said that her boyfriend took care of most of her finances:

"I was working but I didn't have enough to finance my own shit. He took care of me, he took care of [whispers] everything" (Liv)

"I mean I remember when I was 17 guys picking me up with dropped shock cars" (Liv)

When asked what attracted her to her former partner, Liv immediately laughed and replied:

"His Escalade. I mean I was attracted to him, I was, but he drove a badass car. I like nice cars, I like driving nice cars. He had money to do things, wanna go away for the weekend? Let's go. I don't know any guy in my grade who'd do that, they'd be at house parties on the weekend. It's fucking lame. I am going to the spa man, fuck."

The status and ability to do things that most people their age could not do was especially enticing to the participants. Liv admitted that after a year of contemplation, the reason she started dating her former partner was because he got her fake identification to go clubbing. Kris and Alexandra stories bear many similarities to Liv's. Kris also emphasized that going out to bars underage was a huge benefit of dating someone involved in the gang lifestyle. She described showing up to a nightclub at seventeen years old and having "thirty shots lined up and knowing

everyone". Alexandra explained it like this:

"The 18-30-year-old male who is working has no money to go out, and the ones who are 30-40 are just too old for you. So, the cool crowd that you start to associate yourself with in Vancouver at that age is usually involved in drugs."

My boyfriend was out of high school and he was dealing with guys in my high school. I was in grade ten [...] He pursued me for over a year. I was not into him but in grade 11 I wanted to go clubbing, [...] so I asked him to hook me up with fake identification (Liv)

"I liked him because he had money, if you wanted to go to Whistler for the weekend, lets go. Guys in my grade would be at house parties on the weekend and that was fucking lame. [...] He bought me nice stuff, he took care of everything (Liv)

B. Protection

Aside from financial stability, protection seemed to be another enticing aspect of dating a gang member. There seemed to be something glamorous about having a partner that would take care of *their* woman and make sure that no one would harm her. Liv did not want to provide specific details of her past experiences, but described that unwanted attention and harassment from other men was an issue prior to meeting her former partner. As she put it:

"I felt protected with him, from harassment and other weird things. As soon as he came into the picture, guys knew that I was with him they backed off right away. That I really liked. It felt like okay I'm safer here; I'm good."

"He was very street smart [...] to have someone who was older and established in their own way. He worked people around him. He knew a lot of people. He knew things. He knew lots of people. I felt protected by him. I had people around me doing stupid shit, like harassment and some weird ass stuff. So as soon as he came into the picture and guys knew that she was with so an so they backed off [...] He had presence, I felt safe here" (Liv)

Like Liv, Alexandra expressed that having a partner that was gang involved provided a level of protection. She said that protection separated her partner from other guys, stating that "even if they are a bit more overprotective" her boyfriend had a mentality of "you are my woman you are my girl". This mentality she suggests made him care for her safety in a unique way.

C. Partner Qualities & Characteristics

Alexandra emphasized that growing up poor and never feeling good enough made meeting someone who had money very attractive. She explained that she was aware of her boyfriend's illegal activities, but his big heart was more important to her than his business. Her decision to enter the relationship was also based on perceived qualities that she determined her partner to possess. The rationality behind her decision was emphasized when she stated that although illegal activity was not a deal breaker, work that involved "actively hurting people" was.

"There was no extortion or human trafficking like with the Hell's Angels. For me, it was always about does this person have a good heart? I would never associate myself with someone selling crack or meth, there's my line right there" (Alexandra).

D. Exhilaration/Liberation

All the women admitted to acknowledging that they were engaging with someone who lived a dangerous lifestyle. However, it seems that the thrill, excitement and glamour outweighed the potential for danger.

"You said did it fulfil something missing in my life. Yes; excitement, thrill, being rebellious with someone I knew who I was safe with...well, where I felt like as safe anyway [laughter]" (Liv)

Not only did each of the women emphasize their choice to enter into their relationship, that choice always involved a weighing of the costs and benefits associated with the potential relationship. Dating a gang member was not an easy, spontaneous decision for any of the participants, but rather one that required contemplation and thought. The perceived glamour, status, sense of protection, appealing partner characteristics and desire for exhilaration were all attractive components in the participant's decision to enter into a relationship with their gang involved partners.

II: Motivations to Exit the Relationship

A. Negative Stigma

Each participant initiated the break up with their partners and chose to leave them. The decision to end the relationship, was once again based on a cost benefit analysis. Kris described that the negative stigma associated with dating a gang member could not be overlooked by her any longer. She described that she felt shame for dating her partner throughout their entire relationship and this fundamentally influenced her ultimate decision to leave him.

I never was openly dating him I knew from the beginning there was a stigma. Something in my gut told me that "this is not good". BUT it was cool to get into bars all the time. [...] I would deny trips to Mexico, "I went on one mini vacation that's it" he hated I wouldn't be open in public, he knew I was ashamed. He hated it.

Her story significantly supports the research of Young (2009), who found that women that affiliated with gang members in their social networks recognized and struggled with the fact that they were associating themselves with people who had 'gang-like qualities'. Kris never officially called herself the girlfriend of her partner because she always knew it would never work out. Even though she loved and cared for him, the bad stigma associated with his lifestyle could not be overlooked.

Liv also found that her boyfriend's lifestyle became a negative factor in their life.

He was running a few grow ops [...] I grew tired of him not doing anything outside of the criminal world. Like I said to him you are living a very short and fast life [...] but more than anything it was the aggressiveness, the harassment, the violence, the screaming matches that led to the break up (Liv)

Further to the negative stigma with the introduction of anti-gang patron ejection programs in Vancouver, the club scene became closed off to these people due to their gang lifestyle.

Its not as glamorous anymore, you can't go to bars anymore. Its just not fun anymore. [...] It used to be fun. It used to be glamorous. It'd used to be the way you watch like old gang movies. You just walked into bars, now its like you are kind of hiding. Now for girls to actually get involved, its actually stupid.

B. Negative Changes in the Relationship

Alexandra ended her relationship because her partner's gambling eventually became uncontrollable. She said that when he used up the last of their assets, she was officially done because she knew she could no longer depend on him. It was not about just her needs, but also those of the child they had together as well. Liv emphasized that although she deeply loved her partner, control issues, domestic violence and infidelity ultimately made her leave. Although all the participants were initially attracted by the glamour associated with dating a gang member, when the relationships turned for the worst, the women made the conscious decision to leave. This accentuates the women's roles as what St. Cyr & Decker (2003) would describe

as active agents, ones who have an appreciation for their actions and choices. The women identified the situation as dangerous and made the informed and rational decision to end the relationship rather than stay with their partners.

Although the females in the study made a decision to begin dating someone gang involved, it not does take away from the fact that all of the relationships were extremely dangerous. Physical violence, aggression and control issues were prevalent characteristics among all three of the participants' partners. In the present study, it seems that the threat of violence and abuse escalated near the end of the relationship, and was at its peak when the women broke up with their partners.

Liv's relationship ended with a restraining order and harassment charges. She noted that verbal arguments which escalated into physical fights were regular occurrences. Like Alexandra, Liv liked that her boyfriend was protective, but further into the relationship it began to escalate into obsession and control issues. He completely isolated her from all of her friends and began telling her who she could see, how she should dress, and the places that she could go and could not go. Liv explained that violence, harassment, jealousy and late-night screaming matches in parking lots at 3:00am became her norm.

"He got very possessive, he would tell me who I could hang around and what I could wear, the places I could go." (Liv)

Things took a turn for the absolute worst when Liv tried to break up with her partner after discovering he was being unfaithful to her.

She described the break up as "planning the great escape":

"I tried to break off the relationship, but he wasn't having any of it. He was like, you are not going anywhere. His I love you was different. It was love in a twisted way, like I was a possession, like I was his car or a Louis Vuitton bag." (Liv)

Kris's relationship ended because her boyfriend's aggression began to escalate and the pressures of dating someone gang involved became too much. Kris described her boyfriend and other gang guys as being possessive and controlling. One night, her partner wanted Kris to leave a bar with him, but she wanted to stay.

"He banged on the wall beside me and said what's wrong with you, when he banged on the wall something inside me was like shit, this isn't where I wanna be." (Kris)

He cornered her into a wall and began yelling at her for embarrassing him and banged his fist on the wall next to her head. This terrified Kris and she ran away. She explained that "nothing was the same" after this and the relationship soon ended.

C. Developed Understanding

As we noted earlier in this paper, each participant was a teenager when they first met their partners. Initially, they knew little to nothing about the reality of gangs in British Columbia. The limited knowledge they did possess, aside from first-hand experience, was gained through the media; which includes movies, television and newspapers. Each participant described where their knowledge of gangs came from:

"I've always had an interest in gangster movies, like Scarface and Al Capone and all that stuff. I learned a lot from that, and particularly being the girl of a gangster guy, that character, has always fascinated me." (Liv)

"Newspapers, nothing else." (Alexandra)

"I was so young, I didn't know much prior to meeting him." (Kris)

"When I think of gangs, I think of dangerously armed bad boys who drive nice cars and have a lot of money. A rich an expensive lifestyle but also a dangerous lifestyle. People always say you are always looking over your shoulder". (Liv)

Following first-hand experience and direct exposure to gang-life and the adverse actualities of being a gang girlfriend, their perceptions began to evolve as the factors which once attracted them to the lifestyle began to become less desirable. An aspect which influenced all of the participants to leave their relationships was their acknowledgment that the gang lifestyle leaves one with little room to grow. Liv said that although her boyfriend's aggressive behaviour sparked the breakup:

"It was also me getting tired of not him not doing anything else outside of the criminal world, I was like you are living a really fast and short life here."

Alexandra also questioned how long her former partner could live a dangerous lifestyle without something terrible happening. She explained that towards the end of their relationship, she started working like crazy because she knew:

"He's gonna get shot, gonna go to jail or get deported."

III: The Exit

When Alexandra told her partner that she wanted to break up, she said he was "blindsided". As noted previously, for Alexandra, the relationship ended when her boyfriend's gambling addiction spiraled out of control, causing them to go into immense debt. It made her realize that he was unable to protect her as she had once believed:

"I fell out of love with him because that wasn't behaviour that was protective, and I no longer felt that he could protect me." (Alexandra)

They decided to try living together for the sake of their child, but her partner made doing so miserable:

"He'd drag me out of bed, yell at me, harass me, smash my phone." (Alexandra)

After deciding that she could not live this way, she moved out and things continued to get worse. Her ex-partner began using their child as a way to get at her. She described that if she would drop off her daughter instead of the nanny, he would verbally attack and threaten her:

"If I showed up to drop my daughter off instead of the nanny he'd freak out, he came out and punched my window in front of my child and started screaming at me; 'don't ever fucking come around here!'" (Alexandra)

After the relationship ended Alexandra's partner also became increasingly involved in gang activity. When he began arguing with another group, she said that the rival gang members came to her work threatening her, describing locations that they had been following her and her child. After multiple death threats, Alexandra had to temporarily leave work and had to put her child into hiding in another city. Not only did Alexandra have her life threatened because of her ex-partner's gang activity, but he also continued to terrorize her and prevent her from moving on. When Alexandra started dating her new boyfriend her ex-partner put a contract killing on his head. Alexandra explained that to this day, she still battles with her ex-partner over custody for their child.

In Liv's case the relationship ended on a very bad note with having to involve the police and getting a restraining order against her ex-boyfriend.

Discussion

For each of the women involved in this study, their motivations to both enter and exit their relationships with men who were involved in gangs alludes to the importance of how this research is situated. Individual risk factors, although important, are not sufficient alone in explaining why women enter relationships with the knowledge of their partner's gang involvement. Indeed, as Aulakh (2008) has noted, the sparsity of available research in the area of female gang involvement (and more so when considering their role as partners of gang members), makes it extremely difficult to understand and assess the field. It becomes even more perplexing to explain this phenomenon within the context of British Columbia due to its exceptionally unique landscape which progressively contradicts traditional gang knowledge (McConnell, 2016). British Columbia is not like many other areas

of the world where gangs are products of traditional criminogenic factors such as poverty, marginalization, self-protection. This study confirms the work of McConnell (2016) and McCuish, Bouchard and Corrado (2015). These young women were not seeking basic needs to remove themselves from a life of poverty, they were involved in these relationships due to desire to live in the upper echelon of society-fast cars, fast drugs and fast parties.

It becomes clear through the data that partner characteristics account for an extensive influence that ought to be considered when understanding why women choose to engage in and leave the relationship. Further, the theoretical implications of Rational Choice Theory become more evident through engagement with these women's stories. Scott (2000) notes that, within RCT, people take into consideration the possible outcomes of their choices and through these possible outcomes, they develop a response that is calculated in determination with their best interests. Thought and deliberation is allocated to what possible decision may potentially provide increased benefits over consequences. In entering the relationship, the women believed they would gain status, glamour, material benefits, and protection. In exiting their relationships, their decisions were made based on their inclination to escape the negative stigmas, the violence, and encourage a better lifestyle for themselves. The underlying reasons and factors that contributed to these women's decisions throughout the course of their relationships promotes RCT to be understandably relevant in its application to this research.

Although the females in the study knew their partners were involved in illegal activity, they all experienced various forms of victimization from these men. These results support current research that suggests labelling women as either hyper vigilant criminals or victims distorts the reality of gang involved females (Aulakh, 2008; Young, 2009). Although the violent, harmful nature of these relationships must not be overlooked, we cannot ignore "the agency or choice in the lives of women and their potential to engage in violent and criminal behaviour" (Aulakh, 2008; pp. 56). The women in this study engaged in gang relationships for many of the same reasons that Aulakh (2008) uses to explain why women commit crimes and violent acts, these include financial gain, recognition, to gain a sense of belonging and/or to alleviate boredom. As argued by St. Cyr & Decker (2003), it is essential that efforts to reach out to gang involved women acknowledge them as both victims and active agents. If women are not seen as so, their experiences in gangs will continued to be distorted and therefore ineffectively approached in prevention and intervention efforts.

Recommendations for Intervention and Prevention Efforts

The glamorization of gangs plays a significantly influential role in the female participants' decision to enter into a relationship with a gang member. Furthermore, the nature of the women's relationships were all found to be dangerous. Each

included elements of aggression, possessiveness and physical/emotional abuse. The dangerous nature of these relationships advocates an imperative need for prevention and intervention efforts aimed towards young women who are at risk of dating gang members. The results suggest that prevention and intervention efforts should aim to deglamorize gangs and need to include gender-based programming that is relatable to young women.

The glamorous perceptions about gangs heavily influenced the women in the study to enter relationships with gang members. For the average adult, entering a relationship with a gang member may seem entirely irrational. However, for a young teenage girl that knows little about gangs, apart from the glamorized media depictions she may be exposed to, entering a relationship with an older and financially stable male is an attractive idea. Aside from the information they gained from popular culture, none of the women claimed to receive knowledge of gangs from their schools, family members or literature. This would seem to suggest that the media plays a greater role in the perception of young females, and maybe more so than their parents, peers, and schools. This maybe something that should be considered further in future research.

Images depicted through representations such as *Scarface* and the glamorization of Al Capone's 'gangster' persona witnessed by the women propagate many myths about gangs. One particular myth about gangs discussed in the present study was that gangster boyfriends serve as a means of protection for young women. After hearing the stories of these women, we quickly learn that dating a gang member inherently increases the risk of victimization. This echoes previous research, which argues that women who become involved with gang members face a drastically higher risk of becoming a victim than those who do not (see for example, Marshall et al, 2015; Chatterjee, 2006; Miller, 1998; St.Cyr & Decker 2003; Totten, 2009; Dorais & Corriveau, 2009; Wortley, 2010). These results lead to suggestion that the de-glamorization of gangs plays an imperative role in preventing young women from entering into gangs and relationships with gang members. The de-glamorization of gangs may include discussing the dangerous nature of gangs and all of other negative aspects that are relative. It also includes calling upon the media and government to create campaigns that expose the truths about gangs.

RCT suggests that if one is presented with a situation that involves minimal benefits and high risk, one will be less likely to engage in that activity. Known gang member and gang affiliate ejection programs such as, British Columbia's 'Bar Watch' and 'Restaurant Watch', may be highly effective in decreasing the perceived benefits of dating a gang member. Entering into nightclubs and eating at high-end establishments is intrinsic to the preconceived notions of the glamour and prestige associated with dating a gang member. 'Bar Watch' and 'Restaurant Watch' actively engage in ejecting and preventing gang members from accessing participating venues. The inability to attend these establishments and the humiliation of being

ejected may promote women to understand the less attractive aspects of dating a gang member. McConnell (2016) further notes that women who are known to be involved with a gang member may be marked as a gang associate in police databases. This being the case, their known affiliations may result in negative attention from law enforcement. As a consequence, they may be unable to secure a job that requires a police records check. Providing young women with this knowledge may be fundamental in the intervention and prevention of relationships with gang members. The negative stigma associated with dating their partners and a developed realistic understanding of gangs were key catalysts for the women to leave their relationships. Encouraging further knowledge of the negative consequences, the increased risk of victimization and the false depictions of the glamourized gangster can hold great potential in discouraging women to choose to enter into a relationship with a gang involved male. Instead, through rational choice, they would be better equipped to make their informed decision based on their more accurate and complete knowledge of gang members which would ultimately persuade the consequences to heavily outweigh any perceived benefits.

Conclusion

Although the present study found that women enter into relationships with gang members by choice, it does not suggest they are at fault for the abusive things that happen to them as a result of these relationships. Women involved with gang members are neither weak, fragile victims nor are they blameworthy criminals. Rather, the research reveals that females are intelligent, active decision makers in their own lives. In this particular study, all of the women entered into relationships with gang involved men who, at a young age, seemed to be fun and glamorous. Consequently, and most unfortunately, all of these relationships involved abuse, whether it be physical, emotional or psychological. Once faced with abuse, the women's decision to end the relationship must not be overlooked. All of the participants recognized a dangerous situation, and showed great courage when they made the decision to leave their abusive partner. This is ultimately empowering, as it emphasizes these females as independent and liberated actors who have the ability to make their own decisions. Their decisions were intelligent, well-reasoned and rational.

This study may have only focused on three women, but all of their stories send out the same message; dating a gang member is a dangerous and likely victimizing experience. Their stories also provide evidence of the dangers of the gang lifestyle are not exclusive to males. If literature continues to disregard females, the harm done to women involved with gang members will continue to be neglected. This study therefore advocates for more academic research. The glamour and status provided by these unique relationships will always come at a tremendous price. This message is consistent with many families in British Columbia who have mothers, daughters,

and sisters, now deceased, because they fell in love with men involved in gang violence. It does an injustice to these victims of gang violence and their families to not investigate and dedicate further research to prevent future women and girls from meeting the same fate as Nicole Alemy, Breanna Kinnear, Jessica Illes, and Mandie Johnson. Young women involved with gang members in British Columbia, and elsewhere, are in incredibly dangerous situations, and as educators and researchers we can enhance the safety of young women by being aware of the risks and how to mitigate them. Prevention and intervention methods that are tailored to young women involved with gangs are necessary. Their voices need to be heard and their experiences recognized. Until then, we will continue to only hear about females dating gang members in the movies or on the news when another woman is murdered.

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About the Authors

Ms. Neela Gottenbos is an Honors student with Kwantlan Polytechnic University, British Columbia. Neela will continue her work with youth impacted by gangs for the foreseeable future.

Dr. Keiron McConnell is Professor of Criminology, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, British Columbia. Keiron is a police officer with 28 years police service, with 15 years in gang suppression. He is a former recipient of the Fredrick Milton Thrasher Award, for his work on gangs in North America.

Dr. Andy Bain is Director of Criminal Justice Studies, University of Mount Union, Ohio, USA. Andy has published in a number of leading international journals and authored numerous criminal justice and law enforcement reports. He is the author of *Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs: A Theoretical Perspective* (2015, with Mark Lauchs and Peter Bell); and *Professional Risk and Working with People* (2008, with David Carson); he is the editor of the texts *Law Enforcement and Technology* (2016); and *Understanding the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs: International Perspectives* (2017, with Mark Lauchs). His current research interests include social-psychology of offending and risk-taking behaviour; social investigations of criminal behaviour; tattoo, culture, gangs and coded language; and the social perception of criminal justice.