

# Literature Review

## Building Safer Communities Fund

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## Overview

The City of Edmonton has been allocated funds from Public Safety Canada's Building Safer Communities Fund (BSCF), which is designed to help municipalities and Indigenous communities prevent gun and gang violence by tackling its root causes. The City of Edmonton is completing a developmental phase to have a deeper understanding on the gaps, needs and current ecosystem of initiatives surrounding the issue in Edmonton through an ecosystem map, data collection and literature review.

This literature review will focus on academic and grey literature surrounding a multitude of topics impacting gang involvement and desistance. With an Edmonton, Alberta focus, but also pulling from sources across Canada, this research is broken down into four (4) central themes: federal, provincial and municipal strategies and/or toolkits, prevention and intervention for youth, effects of Colonization, and gang desistance.

Current research on gang involvement and gang violence, as well as prevention, intervention, suppression and desistance has a largely U.S. and Canadian national focus. While there does exist literature focused on Indigenous involvement in gangs, the vast majority takes a view of "Western Canada" as a whole rather than specific cities. Nonetheless, the literature available combines an expansive view of the impacts that colonization, poverty and systemic racism have on gang involvement with prevention, intervention and suppression strategies. Over the last decade (2013-2023), there has been a growing cohort of social scientists and researchers focusing on gang disengagement which will be included within this literature review. Finally, according to Grekul (2023), the majority of the research that currently exists does not specifically focus on Indigenous youth, who, "are particularly marginalized and subjected to the lingering consequences of colonialism. Their marginalization in society is mirrored by their invisibility in scholarly work."

## Definitions

### Gang

While the research literature on gangs has grown substantially over the past decades, there are still varying definitions of the term "gang." According to the U.S. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the range of what constitutes a gang can be quite broad. For the purposes of this review, we will use the following definition.

“A gang is an organized social system that is both quasiprivate and quasisecretive and whose size and goals have necessitated that social interaction be governed by a leadership structure that has defined roles; where the authority associated with these roles has been legitimized to the extent that social codes are operational to regulate the behavior of both leadership and rank and file; that plans and provides not only for the social and economic services of its members but also for its own maintenance as an organization; that pursues such goals irrespective of whether the action is legal.” (OJJDP, 2015)

Additionally, research defines the following additional characteristics of gangs:

- A denotable group consisting primarily of males who are committed to delinquent (including criminal) behavior or values and call forth a consistent negative response from the community such that the community comes to see them as qualitatively different from other groups (Klein 1995).
- A gang is a group of individuals who have symbols of membership, permanence, and criminal involvement.
- A gang member is a person who acknowledges membership in the gang and is regarded as a gang member by other members (Decker and Curry 1999).
- A gang is a formal organizational structure (not a syndicate), it has identifiable leadership, territory, and engages in serious or violent behavior (Howell 1994).

It is important to address the last point which mentions territory. In an Edmonton or Alberta context, multiple gangs generally operate throughout the entire city and may have broader understandings of ‘territory’.

## **Prevention, Intervention, and Suppression**

Gang programs can be grouped broadly into three categories: prevention, intervention, and suppression. In general, prevention strategies keep youths from joining gangs, while intervention strategies seek to reduce the criminal activities of gangs by pulling youths away from gangs. Prevention programs typically include community organization, early childhood programs, school-based interventions, and afterschool programs. These strategies look to address root causes of gang involvement.

Successful intervention programs and efforts address the brief time between the initial gang involvement and the age of first arrest. A second period of opportunity between the time gang members are first arrested and when they might move to more serious violent crimes.

According to the United States Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), “suppression programs use the full force of the law—generally through a combination of policing, prosecution, and incarceration—to deter the criminal activities of entire gangs, dissolve gangs, and remove individual gang members from gangs (Howell 2000).”

# Themes

## Federal, Provincial, Municipal, and Enforcement Approaches

Federal, provincial and municipal led strategies, toolkits, and guides have taken varying approaches to prevention, intervention and suppression of gangs and gang involvement.

From 2007-2012, [Public Safety Canada's National Crime Prevention Centre \(NCPC\)](#) tracked their financial and technical support for the implementation and evaluation of community-based projects. Projects included prevention programs that addressed the following: children 6–11 who demonstrate early risk factors such as premature police contact, systematic difficulties adapting to school or high levels of impulsiveness and aggression; youth 12–17 who demonstrate multiple risk factors such as substance abuse, school drop-out or contact with the youth criminal justice system; young adults who have a known history of offending and incarceration; Indigenous Peoples because of their significant over-representation as offenders and victims; and gang-involved youth.

NCPC identified three US-based programs: the Comprehensive Gang Model (Spergel model), Milwaukee wraparound and the Gang Prevention through Targeted Outreach as potential viable models to implement and evaluate in Canada ([NCPC, Youth Gang Prevention Fund](#)). NCPC put out calls for letters of Intent (LOI) asking potential eligible project recipients to describe how they would implement one of the three selected gang prevention models. Successful LOIs led to full project development with support from program developers and NCPC staff. Of note, the WrapED program in Edmonton which works to offer strength-based support, prevention, and intervention to youth and their families to address root causes of social disorder, was originally funded through a LOI process.

The findings of the ten selected programs included five areas relating to this study. First, *Changes in Knowledge* or an educational aspect of the program was effective for participants. "...over half of the participants (57–66%) increased their knowledge about the risks of crime and gangs. Changes in knowledge increase the likelihood that attitudes, risk and protective factors may also be favourably modified." *Changes in Attitude* was measured by six of the programs. Outcomes that demonstrated the most positive change included: increases in pro-social attitudes, increases in positive attitudes towards law enforcement, and decreases in attitudes about aggression and violence. The *Gang Prevention Strategy* which looked at anti-social attitudes/beliefs, showed a reduction in these attitudes among participants. The *Youth Alliance Against Gang Violence* measured the extent to which participants believed it was desirable to be in a gang. "Findings suggest that acceptance of gangs declined with time spent in the program. Significant changes were observed in the long term follow-up stages. Acceptance of gangs had declined by 38% and 42% between entry and 24 and 30 months respectively" (NCPC, Youth Gang Prevention Fund). Finally, *Changes in Risk and Protective Factors* showed that projects that can successfully reduce risk factors (i.e. association with negative peers) and increase protective factors (i.e. parental support) significantly and positively contribute to the prevention of youth involvement in gang activity.

Overall, the Wraparound prevention model yielded the most positive change to participants' behaviours and attitudes according to the NCPC YGPF research.

One of the key lessons included in the study is the need to apply these models to a Canadian context. This is essential. These programs were developed to address specific needs in specific cities in the U.S. and without an understanding of how the City of Edmonton and other Canadian municipalities differ significantly from those cities; the approach is flawed.

In practice, aspects of the NCPC research have been implemented in cities such as Calgary and Edmonton. The Calgary Gang Strategy, developed by the Calgary Police Service (CPS), includes four areas of focus: Education, Prevention, Disruption, and Investigation. The education aspect of the plan includes a campaign in which open-house presentations for citizens, presentations to schools, public awareness activations for vulnerable youth, media education services, and workshops for media and stakeholders are all utilized.

The CPS approach to prevention involves working closely with youth who are associating with gangs and those at risk of being recruited. It includes *connecting with the community, working with youth, and monitoring known offenders*.

The Disruption arm of the CPS plan includes: directed patrols, saturation patrols (police units attend pre-selected gang hotspots when intelligence reveals that an illegal activity may be planned), special prosecutions, work with stakeholder agencies, and court monitor (helping disrupt gang activity by assisting Crown Prosecutors working on gang-related cases.)

Lastly, the Intervention aspect of the CPS plan includes a centrally coordinated unit to focus specifically on gangs and gang activity. The Organized Crime Operations Center (OCOC) is an initiative that coordinates, focuses, and manages all investigations related to gangs.

According to the research, engagement and ecosystem mapping that is part of the BSCF project, the CPS plan has gaps and does not put an emphasis on prevention. The prevention arm of the plan is much more focused on intervention rather than looking at root causes that contribute to gang involvement. A successful prevention model or plan looks at mental health, housing, addictions, family support, and a multitude of other risk factors. The CPS plan does not. Additionally, the "intervention" section is focused much more on suppression activities rather than intervention models.

Similarly, the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) 2023-2025 Guns and Gang Strategy has four (4) strategic pillars:

- Partnerships: formal arrangements to promote collaboration with law enforcement partners and social agencies to address organized crime and provide intervention and prevention support.
- Awareness: education of stakeholders to create awareness, buy-in, and organizational support for a holistic approach to prevent and address gang-related crime in communities.

- Intelligence: use of a robust intelligence model to identify and target violent gang and organized crime. The intelligence model will be GBA+ focused<sup>1</sup> and aligned to potential Statistics Canada race-based data collection practices.
- Integration: Increased collaboration across EPS areas to efficiently utilize our resources and expertise.

These pillars are guided by the principles of prevention, intervention, suppression and education. Overall, these pillars and principles represent a comprehensive approach supported by research regarding gang involvement and violence. However, the strategy outlines three (3) areas of focus to approach these pillars. They include: focused deterrence, investigative excellence, and young people intervention. Some of the actions in these areas include items such as doubling the Edmonton Police Service's overt gang suppression and Firearms Investigation Units capacity to enable everyday coverage of the city and response to shooting events, monitoring gang members' compliance with bail or parole conditions, disrupt street-level drug trafficking, and working with partners to support the diversion of young people already involved in gang activities.

While these are the actions that fall within the purview of the EPS, they do not address needed prevention areas for youth who have not yet entered gangs. Root causes are not addressed and as such, prevention in the context of this literature review does not apply to the EPS strategy. The EPS does offer education and awareness efforts that are referred to as 'prevention'. The educational approach is part of the prevention equation but it should not be the sole focus of prevention efforts according to research.

## Prevention and Intervention

The 2022 report from the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security, [A Path Forward: Reducing Gun and Gang Violence in Canada](#), speaks to the root causes of gun and gang violence and the structure that prevention methods should take.

*"The underlying causes of gun and gang violence are varied, complex and interrelated, especially as regards Indigenous people. During the Committee's study, poverty, inequality, Indigeneity, racism, mental illness, social isolation, substance abuse, extremist ideologies, access to affordable housing, education and health were presented as risk factors rendering some individuals more susceptible to engage in gun and gang violence."*

Additionally, Dr. Robert Henry, Assistant Professor in the Department of Indigenous Studies at University of Saskatchewan, is cited as saying:

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<sup>1</sup> **Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+)** is an analytical tool often used with the intention of advancing gender equality. The "plus" in the name highlights that Gender-based Analysis goes beyond gender, and includes the examination of a range of factors such as age, education, race, language, geography, culture, and income.

*"Violence creates trauma. Trauma without proper supports moves people to find alternatives to deal with the trauma. This then moves to substance misuse, with substances used to numb the trauma and pain."*

In an article published in 2022 from Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, Criminologie titled *Why Not Crime Prevention? An Evidence-based Perspective*, author Lisa Monchalin looks at primary and secondary prevention efforts.

Primary prevention includes efforts made to adjust, "universal policies and living conditions, in social, educational and economic terms. It is directed to changing the conditions in the physical and social environment that can lead to crime." (Monchalin, 2022)

Monchalin identifies secondary prevention as "pre-crime" efforts. Secondary prevention is defined by targeting those at-risk of being accused or victimized and includes early detection followed by strategic prevention and intervention approaches.

*"Once the individuals, situations, places or opportunities at risk are identified, interventions designed to change risk factors are implemented in the hope that they can prevent certain criminal activities."*

Additionally, Monchalin points to the evidence-based approach to prevention. The elements necessary for effective prevention implementation encompass many of the same themes:

- A Permanent Responsibility Centre.
  - According to Monchalin: *"The research calls for national, provincial, and municipal level responsibility centres, which would receive sustained funding (National Crime Prevention Council, 1996) and rely on leadership by a central figure. For example, in the case of a national centre, this would be someone who oversees the entire crime prevention strategy in Canada, where in the case of municipalities; this might be someone in an existing regional leadership role, such as the mayor."*
- The Mobilization and Coordination of Many Sectors and Partners.
- Safety Diagnosis of Problems.
- The Development of an Action Plan.
- Implementing the Action Plan.
- Monitoring and Evaluating the Action Plan.

From an Alberta context, Monchalin points to Alberta's crime reduction and safe communities task force, developed in 2007 as a model that encompasses this approach to prevention.

Researcher Michael Osei published a paper in 2022 looking at why some youth who experience one or more factors that would generally lead to gang involvement still desist.

The study found that young participants who experience a wide range of risk factors including offending, concerns over personal safety, weak parental supervision, school exclusion, and close association with gang members have an increased probability of gang membership.

*"However, protective factors that appeared to buffer risk factors included fear of violent victimization, feeling safe in the community, resilience during setbacks, positive relationship with parents, positive relationship with teachers, and dissociation from peers who engage in criminal activities. Moreover, the results indicated that some single protective factors are able to nullify the effects of multiple risk factors." (Osei, 2022)*

Osei posits that evidence from the study suggests that parental support, law abiding friends, community activities, and positive relationships with teachers coupled with educated decision making can help a young person to resist gang membership.

*"The current research provides cautious optimism that with the right support, a young person may experience more risk factors than protective factors and still avoid gang membership. Although previous research has highlighted the quantity of protective mechanisms as pertinent, this research found that the quality of the protective factors may be equally important."*

Osei's work highlights the need for sustainable, evidence-based, quality programming rather than pilot projects that may increase the quantity of programming directed at prevention but the overall success of those programs may be elusive.

In Eric Osmond's 2019 research titled *Youth Gang Prevention Strategies: Analyzing Intensive Support and Supervision Programs and Wraparound Approaches* they analyze intensive support and supervision programs (ISSP) and wraparound services as prevention and intervention approaches for youth involved in gangs.

Osmond's study uses the results from a survey administered to five Intensive Support and Supervision Programs (ISSP) workers and five youth probation officers to look at why youth join gangs, the needs of at-risk youth who may be involved in gangs, common challenges youth experience when disengaging from gangs, and the types of approaches used to assist youth leave a gang.

Findings showed that both ISSP and Youth Probation Officers found ISSP programs to be not as effective as wraparound services at preventing at-risk youth from joining gangs. The strengths of the ISSP programs included their commitment to employment support, educational assistance, recreational support, and mentorship. Wraparound services strengths also included educational assistance and employment support, as well as a significant mentorship component.

As mentioned by Osei and reiterated by Osmond, increasing a young person's protective factors may lower their likelihood of engaging in gang activities. Osmond shares,

*"according to the data identified by Dunbar (2017), it appears that wraparound services do attempt to strengthen many of the main protective factors of their clients."*

## Indigenous Gang Involvement and Colonization

When looking at root causes of gang involvement and violence in an Alberta and Edmonton context and the overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in gang activity, approaches to planning and program development in this work need to consider the unique impact of colonization on Indigenous Peoples.

Dr. Jana Grekul, Associate Professor, Faculty of Arts - Sociology Dept, at the University of Alberta has written extensively on this topic in her most recent study. In relation to gang involvement, Grekul writes,

*"...we must ask how systemic discrimination and intergenerational trauma have impacted the attachment these young people have to their families, communities, and social institutions."*

Grekul also shares that we as a society, "...must move beyond such constrictive ideas of "the gang" and to connect individual-focused theories of trauma, attachment, and hope to broader sociological theory and systemic considerations regarding gangs in Canada." (Grekul, 2023)

The impacts of colonization and assimilation and the strategies taken by Canadian institutions still heavily impact Indigenous Peoples today. Indian Residential Schools and the genocidal acts of Canadians included emotional, physical and sexual abuse, disease, and starvation. The Sixties Scoop continued the process of forcibly removing Indigenous Children from their families, which furthered the efforts to strip Indigenous People of their language, traditions, and culture. Colonialism has a perpetual and ongoing impact on the inequality and systemic barriers that affect Indigenous Peoples today. Overrepresentation of Indigenous People in the justice and child welfare system is a major, ongoing issue in Canada and it is important to include this brief framing of issues faced by Indigenous People when discussing gang involvement.

The 2021 article in the Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies by Sandra M. Bucerius, Daniel J. Jones and Kevin D. Haggerty titled, *Indigenous gangs in Western Canada* shares the following::

*"While Indigenous people constitute only 4% of the overall Canadian population, they account for 23.2% of federal inmates, 27% of the provincial and territorial inmate population, and 13.5% of offenders supervised in the community."*

Bucerius, Jones and Haggerty point to the fact that while there has been little academic research done on Indigenous gang activity in Western Canada, primarily the prairies, the research does show that Indigenous gang involvement has been increasing steadily in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba since the 1990's (Bucerius, Jones and Haggerty, 2021). They also share that a consensus amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars is that Indigenous gangs have grown as a result of living conditions characterized by "inequity, racism, dislocation, marginalization, and cultural and spiritual alienation."

According to Bucerius, Jones and Haggerty the Indigenous gang situation demands public and political attention, "given their growing size and disconcerting levels of violence and homicide associated with these groups."

*"In 2017, for example, the Canadian police reported 163 gang-related homicides, which account for one quarter of all homicides in the country. The prairie provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan – where Indigenous gangs are most pronounced – account for almost half (47%) of all gang homicides in Canada (Statistics Canada 2017)."*

It is important to note, however, as Bucerius, Jones and Haggerty do, that this too can at times be overstated with those in the media and enforcement drawing upon, "longstanding derogatory caricatures of dysfunctional Indigenous communities." As such, all involved must sensitively address the realities of a complex and occasionally exaggerated situation – "bearing in mind lingering histories of colonization."

## **Gang Desistance and Disengagement**

Research shows that gang desistance or the cessation of gang activities and disengagement from gang identity (Bolden and Iliff, 2022), often occurs in a passive manner rather than a violent one despite widespread myths. While there is research around programming and promising practices in the realm of desistance, it is a very personalized and complex process that differs for most.

However, Bolden and Iliff point out in their 2022 work *Gang Desistance*,

*"The motivations and exit strategies may be individualized, making it difficult to narrow down precise programming for gang exit, but the amount of research demonstrating successful gang exits is quite promising."*

The process of desistance is not linear. It can be lengthy and involve multiple setbacks and regressions dependant on a myriad of variables or individual characteristics. As Bolden and Iliff address, "gang membership is categorized by differing levels of involvement, which can influence as well as complicate paths and processes of desistance. Differing roles within the gang, as well as levels of membership intensity, can create varying levels of ambivalence surrounding desistance."

For some, according to Bolden and Iliff, there are legitimate obstacles to transition away from gangs. While the individual may enter a decision-making phase to de-identify from the gang, things such as criminal records, barriers to employment, and lack of prosocial empowerment caused them to return.

Interestingly, research found that Indigenous gangs in Canada presented unique elements of involvement in gangs and desistance. Due to social barriers and systemic racism, in some instances Indigenous gangs formed to create a community because members were considered outsiders to the rest of society. "Successful desistance from crime was still documented without members having to leave their gang," (Bolden and Iliff, 2022).

A 2013 study completed by Lisa McRae-Kirsa titled *Exiting Gangs: Examining Processes and Best Practice Within an Alberta Context* explored available academic and grey literature on gang exit to support the development of gang exit interventions in the province. Findings from the review point to the, "diversity

and complexity of gang involvement and membership, and the consequent need for multidimensional approaches to gang exit.”

There are a number of factors that prevent individuals from leaving gangs including: mental health, lack of respect in pro-social circles, perceived barriers to any future success, negative attitudes toward the criminal justice system and institutions, and substance abuse. Additionally, factors that caused individuals to enter gangs remain as factors preventing them from leaving such as family consistency, attachment, violence, poverty, abuse, or exposure to substance abuse.

According to McRae-Krisa, any kind of exit programs, “must address the root causes of membership – identified risk factors related to individual, family, peer, community, and school domains – as well as provide legitimate alternatives to fulfilling basic physical and social needs.”

These programs need to include the following according to McRae-Krisa:

- Providing a safe place to go;
- Individual counselling and cognitive-behavioural development;
- Education, training, and job opportunities;
- Peer mentoring;
- Addressing social determinants of health (e.g., health, mental health, substance abuse, family counselling, life skills, system supports, basic needs); and,
- Suppression.

In 2019, the journal of Psychiatry, Psychology and Law published Sarah Tonks and Zoe Stephenson’s *Disengagement from street gangs: a systematic review of the literature*. The review that gang membership continues to be a unique and complex phenomenon. Those who have distanced themselves from gang involvement have done so because it, “no longer serves their needs, values or priorities.” The desire to leave their gang may be prompted by a life-changing event or a shift in circumstances. As a result, these individuals then require an alternative path to follow such as gaining legitimate employment or furthering their education in order to continue to maintain this process of desistance.

Every source that Tonks and Stephenson review revealed the complexity and individuality of gang desistance. “This strengthens the idea that disengagement should be viewed as a combination of individual and structural factors wherein true insight can only be gained through the subjective perspective of the individual.”

Any meaningful approach to desistance or disengagement programs must focus on working with individuals and providing opportunities to build relationships with systems that can support them. It is imperative to meet them where they are at and develop a plan for disengagement that fits their goals and addresses their specific needs or challenges.

## Gaps

It is important to note the significant gaps in research in gang activity, gang violence, and programs and interventions from an Edmonton, an Alberta, and a Western Canadian context. While the issue of gang prevention, involvement, and desistance disproportionately impacts many different demographics and communities, there is little to no research or evaluations of program interventions specific to Black, refugee, immigrant, or other racialized communities. This frustrated efforts to include those perspectives in this review, and should be a consideration in resourcing efforts moving forward.

According to the Government of Canada's *The Nature of Canadian Urban Gangs and their use of Firearms: A Review of the Literature and Police Survey*: "The Astwood (2004) police survey reported on the composition of gang members across Canada: African-Canadian (25%), First Nations (22%), Caucasian (18%), Asian (12%), East Indian (14%), Latino/Hispanic (6%), and Middle Eastern (3%). British Columbia had the highest proportion of Asian members (37%). Saskatchewan, Alberta and Manitoba had the highest representation of First Nations members (96%, 58%, and 58% respectively). Ontario had the greatest percentage of East Indian members (21%). Ontario also reported a high proportion of African Canadian members (36%) as did Quebec (51%) and Nova Scotia (48%). Nova Scotia had a high proportion of Caucasian members (47%)."

Without question, there is a wide range of distinct ethnic groups disproportionately represented within gangs with variation from region to region with little research conducted for and by these communities to understand solutions that are working for them.

## Conclusion

This review looked at 16 sources both grey and academic surrounding gang involvement, prevention, intervention and youth. The focus of the research was approached with an Edmonton and Alberta context but also with an understanding that there is a limitation to the amount of academic research in this area.

Four major themes emerged from the literature that was reviewed: federal, provincial and municipal strategies and/or toolkits, prevention and intervention for youth, effects of Colonization, and gang desistance.

Academic research overwhelmingly suggests that prevention efforts surrounding gang involvement and violence need to address root causes. Wraparound services that take into account supports for mental health, housing, employment opportunities, addictions, family dynamics, and education are proven to have the greatest positive impact on reducing youth involvement in gangs. Additionally, culturally specific supports need to be incorporated into programming.

A root cause approach also applies to gang desistance and disengagement. There are intervention efforts that have proven to be effective in this field as well but the majority of studies reviewed pointed to the fact that the challenges youth face when turning to gang involvement are very similar to those

faced by gang members looking to exit and de-identify from the gang. Desistance research also points to the extremely complex, individualized nature of leaving gangs. Programming needs to be flexible and able to meet people where they are at in the process and understand the nonlinear nature of leaving gangs.

Strategies developed by Calgary and Edmonton police services have implemented measures that, while titled as prevention, are much closer to suppression and intervention. Research shows that while there is a need for an enforcement arm of gang prevention, it is imperative that it be paired with or led by the thorough, real prevention programming mentioned above.

Overall, programming focused on preventing gang involvement both at initial entry and at exit, is extremely complex. It involves strategic cooperation from all social service areas if it is to make a significant impact. It must be sustainable and focused on relationality and understanding of root causes.

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