



The problem with 'the problem with gangs': Reflections on practice and offender desistance

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Author biography

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Abstract

Gang membership is considered to be a criminogenic factor that negatively impacts an individual's ability to successfully desist from offending and presents special management challenges across Corrections' service delivery. Despite the durability of gangs in New Zealand, these groups are poorly defined with little known about disengagement processes that may inform broader criminal desistance pathways. This paper argues that a *theory* of gangs is a necessary step to inform constructive and sustainable behaviour change practices. A transitional perspective of gang-centred lifestyles is proposed as a starting point to considering efficacious intervention efforts with offenders who identify with these complex and challenging groups.

Gangs have been a recognisable and conspicuous part of the social landscape in New Zealand since the 1950s (Dennehey & Newbold, 2001; Gilbert, 2013; Manning, 1958; Payne, 1997). Gangs also tend not to elicit much by way of public sympathies, with many members existing at the margins of society, facing long-term alienation from mainstream communities due to the 'triple prejudice' of ethnicity, low socioeconomic status, and antisociality. However, gang membership is also a significant contributing factor for involvement in crime with members of these communities presenting challenges to correctional practice in terms of prison management and an impaired ability to successfully reintegrate into the community (Fleisher & Decker, 2001; Nadesu, 2009; Wilson & Tamatea, 2010). Despite considerable efforts that have been conducted by the Corrections Department over recent years to develop policies directed towards improved management of these offenders, 'gangs' as a social phenomenon appear to be largely under-researched with even less known about the process of gang disengagement and its relationship with offender desistance efforts (Pyrooz &

Decker, 2014). Such a knowledge gap invites a rethink of practice responses that are conducive to community wellbeing as well as supported by an evidence-base. This brief article emphasises some of the ongoing issues that gangs present for Corrections and offers some suggestions for offender management practices.

The problem with gangs: Communities of resistance

Gang membership is considered to be a primary criminogenic factor that negatively impacts an individual's ability to successfully desist from offending (Wood & Alleyne, 2010). Despite recent challenges to the extent of this impact in New Zealand, Corrections' reconviction data revealed that identified gang members tended to reoffend more often and more seriously at 60 months post-release than other offenders – up to three times as much (Nadesu, 2009). Such a finding is not surprising given the range of offence-specific dynamic factors that are concomitant with membership in groups that, amongst other things, promote antisocial ideals.

What is less known is the process of desistance from gang-centred lifestyles (and crime) by members, how this occurs, and what critical factors are involved in hindering and facilitating this transition. Leaving a gang community is often problematic for members. For instance, the *structure* of gangs itself can be prohibitive to exiting. Decker, Katz and Webb (2008) commented that even low levels of gang organisation relate to increased involvement in offending, with higher levels of organisation implying a greater streamlining of gang norms. In addition, the *culture* of gangs is complex and permits a network of relationships that members rely on for validation and social support. A collective outlook that is explicitly oppositional and antisocial threatens to subvert deterrence efforts (Maxson, Matsuda, & Hennigan, 2009) and to facilitate ongoing offending by exposing individuals to violence and risky situations (Rosenfeld, Bray, & Egley, 1999). For instance:

"These details [of my leaving] would get to the National Boss. He orders whatever he orders and it gets carried out. I was five minutes away from getting my head blown off. I couldn't stop the process. My chapter had narked me off as to my whereabouts. My [close, former-associate] had the hitman in the car with him, but he stopped it – gave them the wrong details. He saved my life. 'Uproot and leave' he had said. But I wouldn't...I've fought criticisms, I've fought hits, I've got the beat-downs a few times since then – but I lived." (from Tamatea, 2010)

Furthermore, exclusivity and longevity of many gang chapters means that many members lose alternative social networks outside of the gang (Fleisher & Decker, 2001).

The problem with 'the problem with gangs': Poor definition and theory

Given that gangs tend to draw a disproportionate degree of attention and resource from law enforcement and correctional agencies worldwide, it is of note that 'gangs' as a social phenomenon are poorly defined (Ball & Curry, 1995). A lack of operationalised definition risks developing reactive policies and practices that emphasise containment and restriction of offenders based on affiliation rather than behaviour and needs. Furthermore, poor conceptual understandings of gangs undermine the ability to develop a *theory* of gangs that would serve to guide appropriate research, form an evidence base of salient variables that can inform desistance, and refine efficacious practices that support safe and sustainable change with men whose gang-centred lifestyle presents both recidivism risks as well as a barrier to treatment responsiveness.

Much of the recent international literature regards gangs as a transitory phenomenon that is framed as almost exclusively a youth issue (e.g., Carson, Peterson, & Esbensen, 2013; Taylor, 2013).

However, there is a need to recognise, first and foremost, that New Zealand gangs are forms of *community* with norms, values, processes and practices that possess an internal logic that is understood by members. So, arguably, any behaviour change efforts initiated with members of these groups would benefit from being 'gang-informed' – that is, an approach that recognises the specific contextual issues faced by gang members that illuminates the difficulties of change, such as safety and other costs likely to result from leaving the gang. Again, operationalising gangs is critical to developing an understanding of relevant mechanisms that inform disengagement from these groups.

Understanding gang involvement as a life transition

Although gang desistance is an emerging theme in the criminal justice literature, international sentiment supports the idea that leaving a gang is more accurately described as a *process* than an event (e.g., Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013). In this spirit, an ethnographic study of 21 former New Zealand gang members revealed an emerging picture of gang involvement as a transitional process that involved the following features (Tamatea, 2010):

First, *common developmental precursors* of gang members included a dysfunctional childhood and abusive home, school failure, peer rejection, delinquent behaviour, and early exposure to gangs. Overt pathways into gang-centred lifestyles included availability of access points such as family and peers; acceptance of group norms and antithetical attitudes towards authority, society, and employment; a heightened sense of hostility from others – especially rival factions; and, access to social and material rewards (e.g., money, illicit substances).

Secondly, *engagement factors* that served to sustain a member's commitment to a gang-centred lifestyle involved fulfilment of *individual* needs such as stimulation-seeking (drugs, aggression), affiliation, status (reputation and position in hierarchy), and material rewards; and, *collective* concerns, such as protection from rivals or law enforcement (uncertainty reduction), social stability (including the ability for members to exert influence on other's behaviour to monitor and shape expectations of personal conduct), and a coherent sense of internal structure that defined in-group/out-group relationships.

Lastly, *exit pathways* for these men occurred in relation to common life-course turning points such as maturation, change of responsibilities (e.g., having grandchildren), relationship strain with family and partners, or changing attitudes towards gang and prosocial lifestyles. The effects of post-gang life revealed few short-term benefits, where ostracism

or threats to life were a common reality. However, almost all of these men recognised long-term pay-offs in developing a prosocial lifestyle, an active and meaningful role in their families, as well as an increased sense of personal agency. Indeed, self-determination in the absence of group pressure was seen as a valuable, albeit costly, outcome.

Taken together, conceptualising gang desistance as a transitory process recognises differing demands and challenges for members at distinct phases of their journey, and intervention efforts that address these stage-specific demands may be more effective than standardised approaches that are not sensitive to these constraints. For instance, individuals are likely to be at their most precontemplative to disengage from gangs when incentives for maintaining membership are lucrative and/or the costs for leaving are too high. Whereas members who have alternative competing rewards outside of the boundaries of the gang (e.g., a new relationship) may exhibit more ambivalence about continuing a gang-centred lifestyle. Both scenarios would require different therapeutic responses to recognise the individual's manifest stage of commitment.

Suggestions for practice

In addition to good rehabilitative practices in general offender management, the following suggestions are proposed to enhance constructive desistance efforts with men who present with gang-centred lifestyles:

First, *understand the issues faced by gang members*. Pathways into gangs, factors that sustain membership, and those that promote (or deter) desistance are likely to be differential, so standard approaches to facilitate withdrawals from this lifestyle are likely to be ineffectual if (1) specific motivation for change and disengagement are not identified, (2) the individual indicates a low degree of readiness to make initial steps, and (3) their safety is neither certain nor assured. The hazards of gang desistance can impact on the person's ability to comply with their sentence conditions, as illustrated by the following former member:

"I had just been released and was given an ultimatum ... to either leave ... and keep my freedom, or stay with the club and go back to jail. I chose the latter [because] they had threatened to turn up to my family home in full Club presence in order to draw attention to my home and make it a target." (from Tamatea, 2010)

"I had just been released and was given an ultimatum ... to either leave ... and keep my freedom, or stay with the club and go back to jail."

As can be seen, gang membership presents dilemmas for those members seeking to leave a gang-centred lifestyle without generating conflict and potential harm as a consequence. Key practice questions: *What gang-specific challenges will have a foreseeable impact for this person? What would those consequences look like? What alternative approaches can I use to support pro-desistance change talk without compromising safety?*

Secondly, seek to *increase relatedness and reduce marginality*. Like any offender engagement, developing a therapeutic alliance is an essential condition to promote change. Needless to say, such alliances can be hard won, especially with individuals who have oppositional and hostile attitudes to authority. Furthermore, ostracism is a real possibility for men who no longer have access to the social resource that gangs or the wider community offer. Creating connections is critical if responsiveness to interventions is likely to be a foreseeable challenge. Consider what might be impeding the individual's ability to access appropriate services, employment, accommodation, and prosocial relationships that elicit trust and alternative social values. Key practice question: *What are the barriers to inclusiveness for this particular individual?*

Thirdly, assist the individual to *increase active participation in the community and reduce their reliance on crime* to meet needs. Effectiveness of interventions may well be the result of long-range investments for the individual members themselves as well as practitioners and agencies

charged with their management. Indeed, given the complex and embedded nature of gang-centred lifestyles, it is realistic to expect change to be a lengthy process. Developing a collaborative approach to rehabilitation avoids placing the individual in an inferior position to the practitioner that might otherwise imply serious reservations of their own capacities and interests in their own welfare. Key practice questions: *If leaving the gang lifestyle is a priority for the individual, what factors are getting in the way? How can I best support their efforts to address these barriers?*

Fourthly, *increase personal agency and reduce reliance on the gang*. Conversations with a number of community agencies and organisations that had a history of regularly assisting gang members to reintegrate into the community revealed that relinquishing gang membership was found to be a highly sensitive issue because of potential hazards for ambivalent members if conditions for change were insufficient to support safe passages from the gang community. In this regard, the individual's *safety* was seen as a first-order priority that

informed the timing and approach to addressing gang membership as a secondary matter. Finally, eliciting alternative (to gang/crime) life narratives and imagined futures might assist in mobilising the individual's efforts to focus their energies in non-gang lifestyle choices. Key practice questions: *How does this individual want to be known (what kind of father, partner, role model)? What legacy do they want to create for themselves? How can I assist them to move closer to those goals?*

Final comment

The enduring presence of gangs in criminal justice contexts speaks to the ongoing challenges of rehabilitation for members as well as an imperative to understand these marginalised communities. Ideally, the development of a theory of gangs would inform a *philosophy of treatment* that promotes meaningful and sustainable behaviour change, reconciling legal conformity with community growth as well as desisting from gangs/crime with improved self and community wellbeing.

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