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# **Youth gang membership: Factors influencing and maintaining membership.**

*A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**WAIKATO**  
*Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of young people who were actively engaged in youth gangs. This included developing an understanding of the factors that both influenced and maintained their desire for youth gang membership. This was achieved by carrying out seven semi-structured interviews with young people aged between sixteen and twenty-three who were residing in the city of Hamilton, New Zealand. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the experiences of these young people were accurately recorded. A thematic analysis of the data was then carried out, highlighting both the themes and subthemes across the data set.

Five primary themes were identified within this data set to highlight the factors that both influenced and maintained a desire for youth gang membership. This included the influence of friends, the availability of money, and a desire to participate in antisocial behaviours within the gang. Participants also explained the importance of their neighbourhood surroundings in facilitating youth gang membership. While these overarching themes have been previously reported within literature (Goldstein, 1991; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith & Tobin, 2003), the young people in this study offered their subtly unique experiences and journey into the gang lifestyle. The final theme highlighted the negative evaluation that these young people perceived to experience from others which influenced and maintained their desire to pursue the gang lifestyle. This finding is not as prevalent in the existing youth gang literature, but is discussed within the social psychology literature as the "self-fulfilling prophecy".

One of the main findings of this study was that these young people were engaged in the youth gang lifestyle from as young as nine years of age. Once

accepted into the gang, participants explained that they then began to withdraw from school and other mainstream activities to pursue their life in the gang. It then became difficult to present these young people with an alternative to their chosen lifestyle as they had access to the support, tangible goods and respect that was desired. They were also accepted into a group of like-minded friends who existed as a substitute family. Further research is needed to better understand the variety of experiences that young people in New Zealand have when joining a youth gang.

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# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **Introduction and Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Public concern associated with the emergence of nationwide youth subcultures has existed in New Zealand since initial reports in 1892. The public have largely been concerned with youth participation in inter-rival fighting, rebellion, musical influences, sexual promiscuity, and criminal conduct (Yska, 1993). These concerns were encompassed in the first official youth gangs, the Bodgies and Widgies, during the 1950's. Young people who participated in these gangs were frequently disregarded by society and on one occasion were described as resembling "active boils on the body of society" (Eggleston, 2000; Manning, 1958, p. 85/6). More recently, it has been suggested that it was the global saturation of the American culture in the late 1980s that changed the face and organisation of youth gangs in New Zealand, with this influence still present today (Ritzer, 1993). Eggleston suggests that New Zealand youth have become saturated with American television programmes, clothing, music and celebrities, and the consequent portrayal of African-American gangs such as the Crips and the Bloods (Eggleston, 2000). These depictions are arguably a romanticised, but convincing and alluring version of the youth gang lifestyle that is prominent in urban areas of the United States today (Eggleston, 2000). The popularity of African-American gangs in New Zealand has infiltrated many youth cultures, but is thought to have had the biggest impact on Māori and Pacifica youth living in lower socio-economic urban areas (Bellamy, 2009). It must, however, be acknowledged that youth gangs in New Zealand are diverse and varied, despite the general public and media having a tendency to associate the term

'youth gang' with the Māori and Pacifica ethnic gangs that exist (Winter, 1998).

The aim of this research was to allow youth gang members to discuss their journey through youth gang culture in New Zealand and explore the meaning they attribute to that membership. Qualitative research methods were utilised to facilitate an in-depth analysis of each individual's experience through this journey. More specifically, a non-judgemental semi-structured interview was conducted with each individual participant. The flexibility of this interview technique allowed the researcher and the participants to explore unique but relevant narratives that were salient to each individual.

## **Overview**

The purpose of this chapter is to present the reader with the findings of both local and international research on youth gang membership. To begin, the known prevalence rates of youth gang membership in New Zealand will be discussed. As this study attempts to contribute to our understanding of the nature of youth gang membership in the city of Hamilton, a summary of relevant demographic and geographic data specific to this location will be provided. Definitions of a youth gang are then discussed from a variety of different researcher perspectives. This is followed by a brief history of different youth gang populations in New Zealand and an overview of the current research on why youth decide to join a gang. Here, emphasis is placed on the five main characteristics known to increase the risk of youth gang membership. These include individual characteristics, parental and family dynamics, peer influences, educational involvement, and neighbourhood characteristics. While it is recognised that there is no single pathway to youth gang membership, current research suggests that the more risk factors an individual experiences, the more likely it is young people will seek youth gang membership. Finally, the maintaining factors which

encourage youth to pursue a youth gang lifestyle for a distinct period of time will be discussed.

## **Prevalence of youth gangs in New Zealand**

The prevalence and extent of youth gang membership in New Zealand is unknown. Despite the lack of robust data, media reports and public fears around youth gang activities have increased both locally and nationally (Ministry of Social Development, 2006). A discussion of the variety of different definitions that have been proposed for youth gang groupings will be provided shortly. When considering youth gang membership in its most general sense, government departments have started to respond to mounting media and public attention by launching an investigation into the nature and extent of youth gangs in South Auckland. This is an area portrayed in the media as being burdened by the violent and delinquent acts of an increasing youth gang population ("Police say youth gangs", 2005). In the comprehensive Ministry of Social Development study, it was estimated that there were 600 youth gang members in Counties Manukau, South Auckland who were affiliated with 73 different youth gangs. Due to the fluid nature of youth gang existence and the lack of recorded statistics, researchers have been unable to comment on whether youth gang membership is becoming more prevalent in South Auckland or whether youth gang dynamics and sizes have changed over time.

Estimates of youth gang membership in other regions of New Zealand are scarce. This lack of robust data makes it difficult to adequately portray the extent of the problem in the central North Island city of Hamilton where the current study was based. One known study conducted by the Hamilton City Council estimated that there may be up to 25 different youth gangs within the city (Paki, 2008). These gangs were said to be heavily influenced by the well-established adult gang, the Mongrel Mob, as well as American youth gangs

such as the 'Crips' and 'Bloods' (Paki, 2008). While this information is not dissimilar to the findings in South Auckland, it is important not to assume that distinct youth gang populations are homogenous in urban areas of New Zealand. Hamilton, like all metropolitan cities, has a distinct demographic and geographic profile which creates a unique environment for youth and their families to exist (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

### **Hamilton city's demographic and geographic profile**

Due to the lack of New Zealand data available on young people who participate in youth gang activities, it is necessary to further consider their financial, social and environmental contexts. An analysis of the New Zealand 2006 Census data shows that the communities or suburbs that experience high rates of youth gang activity in Hamilton appear to be burdened with relative socio-economic deprivation in comparison to other communities (Hamilton City Council, 2008). It is therefore appropriate to discuss some of the demographic data available to better understand the youth population in Hamilton and the challenges that they encounter. These statistics are summarised in Table 1. At the time of the 2006 census Hamilton City was the fourth largest city in New Zealand with a population of 129,249. Of this total population, there were a comparatively high number of young people, with 21.9 percent of individuals aged fifteen years or younger. Hamilton's ethnic profile was made up of 19.9 percent of residents identifying as Māori and 65.3 percent of residents identifying as European. A smaller percentage of individuals identified as Asian, Pacific, and Middle Eastern/African ethnicity. With respect to education, 22.2 percent of Hamilton's population over the age of fifteen were without any formal qualifications. An elevated 33.8 percent of Māori within this age bracket reported to have no formal qualifications.

Hamilton City unemployment rates, according to the 2006 census data, were higher when compared to those for New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand,

2006). Of Hamilton city's total population, 6.8 percent of residents, and 13.6 percent of Māori were unemployed. For those that were employed, there was an over-representation of families who had an annual income of \$20,000 or less when compared to the remainder of New Zealand. The median annual income for individuals over the age of fifteen and living in Hamilton city was \$24,000. For Māori residing in the city, the median annual income was only \$20,600.

The 2006 Census data also highlighted that there was an over-representation of one parent families in Hamilton. This included 21.6 percent of residents defined as one-parent-with-children families, compared with 18.1 percent of New Zealand's population as a whole.

**Table 1:** 2006 New Zealand Census Statistics

	<b>Hamilton City</b>	<b>Māori Hamilton</b>	<b>New Zealand</b>
Ethnic Composition			
Pākehā	65.3%	-	67.6%
Māori	19.9%	-	14.6%
Pacific Island	4.2%	-	6.9%
Asian	10.6%	-	9.2%
Middle Eastern/African	1.5%	-	0.9%
No formal education	22.2%	33.8%	25.0%
Unemployment rate	6.8%	13.6%	5.1%
Median annual income	\$24,000	\$20,600	\$24,400
One parent with child(ren)	21.6%	-	18.1%

(Adapted from: Statistics New Zealand, 2000).

While these statistics in isolation do not directly portray the nature of the youth gang phenomenon within Hamilton City, they do represent some of the

challenges that youth and minority groups may face when residing in this location. Much of the local and international literature that is to be discussed in the following paragraphs suggests that an increase in the social and economic hardships faced by communities increases the risk for youth gang membership in both children and adolescents (Howell & Egley, 2005).

### **Definitions of a youth gang**

The term 'youth gang' has become an expression used by both academics and the general public to describe a heterogeneous youth subculture (Sullivan, 2005). Defining the specific attributes of a youth gang for the purpose of research has therefore been difficult due to the lack of definitive criteria available. In comparison to adult gangs, youth gangs are often understood to be more fluid and less organised (Howell, 2000). Further complicating the provision of clear definitive criteria is the accepted premise that teenage populations in general often participate in similar activities to 'youth gangs' independently of any gang membership. This includes participation in antisocial behaviour, drug use, sexual promiscuity and violence (White & Mason, 2006). Despite the absence of a universal definition, researchers have continued to investigate youth gang membership by traditionally defining these groups on the basis of their criminal behaviour (Bjerregaard, 2002). Some researchers have also defined youth gangs by analysing the way in which gangs are formed (Bjerregaard, 2002).

Thrasher (1927/1963, pp. 36-46) was one of the first researchers to highlight the need for a distinct set of criteria that defined youth gangs. This was prompted after his investigations into gang dynamics in the American city of Chicago. Thrasher argued that a universal definition of youth gangs should focus on what is typical behaviour rather than what is unique to particular gangs. The behaviours that he considered to be typical of youth gangs include:

- (a) Informal structures
- (b) Personal relations between members
- (c) Evidence of organisation, solidarity and morale towards the gang
- (d) A tendency to be nomadic and engage in hostility, which can be a precursor to organised conflict
- (e) The development of a common tradition or culture
- (f) A tendency to display ownership of some defined geographic space, which therefore requires defending through force if necessary.

Thrasher did not include criminal offending as an activity undertaken by youth gangs universally, although other researchers have since emphasised that criminal behaviour is a key definitive characteristic (Esbensen, Winfree, He & Taylor, 2001). This emphasis on criminal offending is thought to have evolved as researchers investigated the delinquent nature of youth groups more generally (Bjerregaard, 2002). A major criticism of this approach is that some research has centred on the function of delinquency in youth gangs and fails to acknowledge other typical behaviours (Erickson & Jensen, 1977). It has also been noted that studies investigating delinquency have been restricted to the experiences of a small percentage of the population, relying solely on the experiences of youth gang members (Zimring, 1981). This is a seemingly important distinction as research has demonstrated that delinquent and criminal behaviours such as substance use, harm to others, and vandalism are often carried out as a group activity, not just within youth gangs (Erickson & Jensen, 1997). By emphasising delinquency and criminal offending as being a key characteristic of youth gang behaviour, it has made it difficult to distinguish delinquent gangs from delinquent teenage groups (Bjerregaard, 2002).

Klein (1971), another influential researcher in this area, agreed with Thrashers definitive criteria, however added that self-nomination was an equally reliable measure youth gang membership. Researchers have

supported self-nomination as a robust measure and have suggested that it is capable of differentiating gang members from non-gang members (Sullivan, 2005; White & Mason, 2006). By allowing individuals to self-nominate, researchers have deemed it necessary to further define the different types of youth gangs that exist. This is to ensure that the different characteristics of youth gangs and the function that they serve for young people can be better understood (Ministry of Social Development, 2006; White, 2002).

White (2002) has broken down gang-related behaviour into four main subtypes. These include criminal, conflict, retreat and street culture youth gang categories. Firstly, he proposed that 'criminal' youth gangs are focused on making money illegally. Offences could include property theft, crimes of dishonesty, or drug sales and were described as occurring either sporadically or episodically. He also suggested that these criminal gangs require an element of organisation and an acquisition of skills to ensure that they are viable and lucrative. Secondly, White defined 'conflict' youth gangs as being primarily involved with street fighting and violence. He proposed that these activities were undertaken by the gang in an attempt to gain social status, street reputation and served to defend the gang's territory. Thirdly, 'retreat' youth gangs were defined on the basis of their heavy drug use. As a result of this drug use, White proposed that gang members would often withdraw from mainstream social interactions. He also suggested that this preoccupation with heavy drug use may provoke members to partake in impulsive property crimes and violence. Finally, White proposed that 'street culture' youth gangs primarily adopted a gang image that is familiar to the public. He described groups in this category as creating an identity based on popular types of music, fashion, hand signals, slang, and graffiti amongst other things. The authors of the Ministry of Social Development study (2006) described these gangs 'wannabes' and characterised them as a group of friends or 'crew' due to their lack of interest in criminal offending.

Curry and Decker (1998) summarised the numerous definitions that have been proposed and suggested that the following characteristics were all typical of youth gang members in general:

- a) Being a social group.
- b) Using common identifiers or symbols.
- c) Partaking in both verbal and non-verbal communication to depict their gang connections.
- d) Displaying evidence of some permanence.
- e) Identification of gang territory.
- f) An association with criminal activity.

### **A Brief History of Youth Gangs in New Zealand**

While there is still controversy over the definition of youth gangs both in New Zealand and internationally, groups of rebellious adolescents who behave in an antisocial manner have existed for some time. Records show that perceived delinquent youth groupings have existed in New Zealand since the 1950s (Eggleston, 2000). They were first termed the 'Bodgies' and the 'Widgies' and were known for consuming excessive amounts of alcohol, their sexual promiscuity and interest in rock'n'roll. While these behaviours were considered to be extremely rebellious during this era, they would no longer meet the criteria for a youth gang when considering the proposed definition above (Ministry of Social Development, 2006). During the 1960s and 1970s, delinquent youth became increasingly affiliated with the newly established adult gangs 'Black Power', the 'Mongrel Mob', 'King Cobras' and motorcycle gangs such as the 'Hells Angels' (Eggleston, 2000). These adult gangs rapidly gained a reputation for their involvement in violent and antisocial activities, with headquarters appearing in relatively depressed rural and urban regions nationwide (Ministry of Social Development, 2006).

It was also during the 1970s that aspects of the American culture became increasingly accessible to New Zealand populations. This was primarily through television programs, musical influences, clothing trends, and sports or film celebrities (Eggleston, 2000). While not all depictions of the American culture were gang-based, there were antisocial and violent representations of the American 'gangsta' which appealed to a portion of New Zealand youth (Bellamy, 2009). These depictions have continued to exist and are largely encompassed within the popular hip-hop culture of rap music, break dancing, American cars and unique slang (Bellamy, 2009). Rap music in particular has been hypothesised to be extremely influential in describing this 'gangsta lifestyle'. Youth seemingly identify with the lyrics of this genre as they express the struggles and conflict experienced on the streets in American neighbourhoods (Grennan, Britz, Rush & Barker, 2000). Furthermore, these lyrics are one medium in which hatred and violent intentions can be conveyed towards rival gangs. Specific gang personas commonly referred to in the lyrics have notably been adopted within New Zealand in the form of rival African-American gangs of Los Angeles, the 'Crips' and 'Bloods'. These two gangs have arguably appealed predominantly, but not exclusively, to Polynesian and Māori youth, while the European based 'skinheads' have been adopted more so by Pākehā youth (Eggleston, 2000). There is a distinct lack of research in New Zealand which compares local gangs to those similarly termed in America.

### **Current Research on the risk factors for youth gang membership**

At this point, there appears to be a relatively restricted array of research conducted in New Zealand on the reasons why young people participate in youth gangs. Current findings worldwide suggest that risk factors for gang membership are extremely complex. They span the broad domains of individual characteristics, family factors, peer groups, schooling and community conditions (Howell & Egley, 2005). Within America, these five

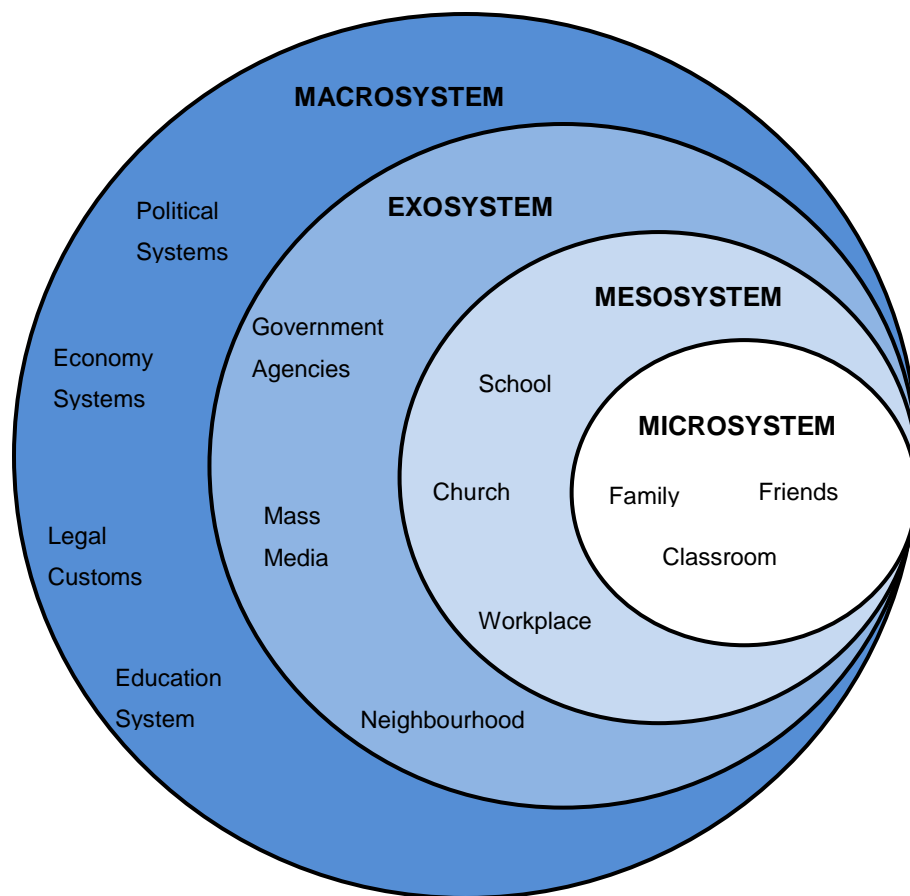
factor domains have been analysed in four important longitudinal studies: The Denver Youth Survey (Browning & Huizinga, 1999), The Rochester Youth Development Study (Browning, Thornberry & Porter, 1999), The Pittsburgh Youth Study (Browning & Loeber, 1999), and The Seattle Social Development Project (Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999). Findings from the Rochester Youth Development Study suggested that poor parental attachment, poor parental involvement, poor commitment to education, poor school achievement, having delinquent peers and having delinquent beliefs were all significantly related to both delinquent behaviour and gang membership (Browning, Thornberry & Porter, 1999). Similar findings were reported in the Seattle Social Development Project. In this project, youth gang membership was found to evolve from antisocial influences in neighbourhoods, antisocial attitudes held by peers and family members, poor school performance, and an early onset of individual problematic behaviours (Hill, Lui & Hawkins, 2001).

Research conducted by the Ministry of Social Development (2006) in New Zealand found a multitude of risk factors that could influence young people to join youth gangs. These factors included economic deprivation, disorganised parenting practices, parental disengagement, and the provision of gangs to act as a proxy family unit. Financial and material gain, the alleviation of boredom, enhanced status and protection were also found to be significant risk factors within this study. Finally, the excitement associated with crime, adult gang prospecting and a lack of formal education were also implicated as risk factors. While each of these risk factors may contribute to an individual being tempted to join a gang, the authors suggest that the likelihood of youth gang membership increases as youth are exposed to the greater variety of environmental, familial and social risk factors identified (Browning & Loeber, 1999; Hill, Lui & Hawkins, 2001; Howell & Egley, 2005).

The identification of these risk factor domains partly reflects Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Theory of Development (see figure 1). Bronfenbrenner theorised that there were four general spheres that influence a child's development and behaviour. He referred to these as the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem and Macrosystem. Closest to the individual is their Microsystem. Bronfenbrenner described this as "the complex relationships between the developing person and environment in an immediate setting containing that person" (pg. 514). He further emphasised that it is important to consider both the behaviour and content of the interactions within the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner then refers to the Mesosystem. This is defined as the "interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life" (pg. 515). This could include interactions between the individual and their family, school, church or workplace. Bronfenbrenner then refers to is the Exosystem. This is defined as "embracing other specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate setting in which that person is found" (pg. 515). This could include the neighbourhood system, mass media, and governmental agencies.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner describes the Macrosystem as the overarching system. He defines this as the "general prototypes, existing in the culture or subculture that set the pattern for the structures and activities occurring at the concrete level" (pg. 515). This includes the economic, social, educational and legal customs that are acknowledged within society. This system was considered to be important when understanding child development as it determines how the young person and their guardians interact. Bronfenbrenner also alludes to the importance of the Macrosystem as he suggests that it determines the treatment the child and their carers receive in different settings. Initially, Bronfenbrenner used this theory to understand positive human development. He suggested that on-going reciprocal

relationships between the individual and the people, symbols and objects within the different systems would result in positive developmental outcomes. These relationships were exemplified by parent-child relationships, play based activities, the acquisition of new skills, involvement in sporting activities, and performing complex tasks. Furthermore, he theorised that human development is affected by the form, content, power and direction of these reciprocal interactions. Positive interactions were therefore theorised to be dependent on the individual, the environment facilitating the interactions and the nature of the developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gauvain & Cole, 1993). The interactions between these different systems are exemplified in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: Ecological Theory of Development**

Research has been conducted to apply Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model to adolescent problem behaviours. It has been concluded that poor relationships between the individual and the people, symbols and objects in their environment can result in problem behaviours. Further research into problem behaviours has found that in addition to the factors highlighted within the Ecological Model, individual characteristics must also be considered in the development of problem behaviours (Hawkins, Catalano & Arthur, 1992).

Extensive studies have provided some insight into the range of different risk factors that are associated with youth gang membership. To better understand these risk factors and the reciprocal relationships that exist, they are discussed below in more detail. The individual characteristics found to influence a desire for youth gang membership will first be discussed, followed by parental and family characteristics, peer influences, educational involvement and neighbourhood characteristics. It must be cautioned that each of these categories merely illustrate potential risk factors for youth gang membership, not causal effects.

### **Individual Characteristics**

There have been numerous attempts by theorists and researchers to identify individual characteristics that are capable of predicting youth gang membership. Some of these characteristics include the development of early problem behaviours, temperament, personality factors, and delinquent beliefs or antisocial attitudes (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith & Tobin, 2003).

Academics have argued that boys in particular have a tendency to develop disruptive and delinquent behaviour in an orderly, progressive manner (Browning & Loeber, 1999). Developmental theorists have been influential in describing a variety of pathways whereby antisocial behaviour and youth gang membership may result (Ingoldsby, Shaw, Winslow, Schonberg, Gilliom

& Criss, 2003). One prominent developmental theory is that delinquency evolves and develops in a stepping stone pattern, with less serious problem behaviours preceding more serious antisocial behaviours. The first step is understood to begin when the child exhibits conduct type behaviours as early as three to four years of age (Loeber & Farrington, 1998). These problem behaviours have been characterised by stubbornness, defiance and disobedience. According to this theory, once a child starts exhibiting these behaviours, they are then understood to be at greater risk of going on to avoid authority figures in late childhood and adolescence. This can include truancy, running away from home and partaking in more serious overt (violent, aggressive, fighting) and covert (lying, property crime) behaviours (Farrington, 2005; Howell & Egley, 2005; Loeber & Farrington, 1998). Other studies which support this underlying developmental model have suggested that a behavioural profile which combines hyperactivity, low levels of prosociality and low levels of anxiety at kindergarten age is more predictive of youth gang membership during early adolescence (Lacourse, Nagin, Vitaro, Cote, Arseneault & Tremblay, 2006). Despite the specific behavioural patterns that are evident in early childhood, this developmental model suggests that children who develop antisocial tendencies at a young age are more likely to persist with a more severe, aggressive and lasting pattern of antisocial behaviour in adolescence and adulthood (Dandreaux & Frick, 2008).

As opposed to searching for a developmental pattern to youth gang membership, other authors have argued that an individual's temperament and personality factors can predict the likelihood of youth gang membership (Cappi, 2000; Farrington, 2005). Childhood temperament within this context has primarily been examined from a biological perspective. As a result, researchers have either hypothesised that a neuropsychological deficit may have impaired the child's cognitive capacity and behavioural inhibitions or that the child is genetically predisposed to behave in an antisocial manner (Van

Domburgh, Loeber, Bezemer, Stallings, & Stouthamer-Loeber, 2009; Moffitt, 1993). Unlike the developmental model, these hypotheses would suggest that an antisocial propensity is not progressive, but instead genetically determined, stable and visible at a very young age. These observations have been discussed in the Dunedin longitudinal study of New Zealand (Capsi, 2000) in which researchers assessed 1037 children at regular intervals between the ages of 3 and 21. At the age of 3, each child's temperament was rated and later analysed to test the predictability of the links between childhood temperament and the development of problem behaviour. This study confirmed that at the age of 3, children with a difficult or undercontrolled temperament (characterised by impulsiveness, restlessness, negativity, distractibility and labile when responding emotionally) were more likely to exhibit externalising problems (fighting, bullying, lying and disobeying) at ages 5, 7, 9, and 11 (Capsi, 2000). These behavioural links have been discussed by other authors, who have also suggested that a child aged between 3 and 4 who exhibits a difficult temperament is more likely to develop behavioural difficulties and poor psychiatric adjustment in adolescence (Chess & Thomas, 1984).

Other individual characteristics that have been found to be predictive of youth gang membership and an antisocial propensity more broadly are antisocial attitudes and/or the rejection of conventional beliefs (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Hill et al., 1999; Howell & Egley, 2005). Antisocial attitudes and beliefs have been studied by investigating how an individual assesses the appropriateness of becoming involved with different types of delinquent acts (Browning *et al.*, 1999). Antisocial attitudes have been found to remain relatively stable over time and often result in individuals being drawn to and influenced by deviant friends who have similar beliefs and behave in a delinquent manner (Vitaro, Brendgen & Tremblay, 2000).

While the effects of these individual characteristics are often compelling, researchers seldom conclude that they are solely responsible for predicting youth gang membership and delinquency more generally. Instead, it is assumed that there is a bidirectional interaction between the individual and their environment which increases the desire for youth gang membership (Howell & Egley, 2005).

## **Parental and Family Dynamics**

There has been mixed evidence for the influence of family dynamics on youth gang membership. Due to the broad array of potential risk factors that have been identified within the literature, researchers have divided variables into two categories: structural variables and social process variables (Howell & Egley, 2005). A commonly discussed structural variable predictive of youth gang membership is a non-intact family living situation, where the child or adolescent does not reside with their biological parents (Hill *et al.*, 1999; Howell & Egley, 2005). Alternatively, social process variables implicate family management problems, including poor parental supervision, poor attachment, poor engagement and parental conflict (Browning *et al.*, 1999; Farrington, 2005; Hill *et al.*, 1999; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994).

### *Structural variables*

International studies have indicated that youth who reside with only one parent or who do not reside with either of their biological parents are at significantly greater risk of joining a gang and partaking in serious antisocial behaviours (Hill *et al.*, 1999; Farrington, 2005; Ferguson, Horwood & Lynskey, 1994). This finding was demonstrated in the Christchurch Longitudinal Study in New Zealand which found that children who were separated from their parents, especially before the age of 5, were more likely to display severe antisocial behaviours at the age of 15 (Fergusson, Horwood

& Lynskey, 1994). The Ontario Child Health Study supported the finding that being raised within a single parent family predicted later antisocial behaviour. However, this latter investigation indicated that a disruption in the family configuration was intertwined with poverty and reliance upon welfare benefits (Blum, Boyle & Offord, 1988). Further research has also indicated that a disruption to the family structure also increases parental conflict, reduces disposable income, changes authority figures and parental roles, and impacts child rearing practices. These factors have been identified as risk factors for adolescent antisocial behaviour which is exemplified in youth gang membership (Buehler, Anthony, Krishnakumar, Gerard & Pemberton, 1997; Farrington, 2005; Henry, Moffitt, Robins, Earls & Silva, 1993).

Farrington (2005) has looked further into the disrupted family structure by focusing on the sense of loss that may be felt by children when a parent or guardian leaves. Farrington found that children who are separated both temporarily and permanently from a biological parent between the age of 5 and 10 were at greater risk of being convicted of a crime and self-reporting to delinquent acts. This finding was not supported when children lost a parent due to death or hospitalisation.

The influence of a disrupted family structure has, however, been contested by findings in other studies. Research conducted by Lahey and colleagues (1999) did not support these findings which suggested that single-parent families were correlated with a greater risk for gang membership. Instead, these authors found that friendship selection and antisocial attitudes were predictive of young people seeking gang membership. This finding has been supported by other ethnographic researchers who found that even if youth gang members came from single parent homes, they would choose their family over the gang if this choice was forced upon them (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

### *Social process variables*

Researchers have similarly focused their investigations on the social processes of a family and the ability that these have to influence youth gang membership. The primary social processes thought to influence youth gang membership include antisocial attitudes held by parents, antisocial behaviour modelled by siblings, parental gang affiliations, poor family management practices and poor parental attachment styles.

Research has shown that antisocial attitudes held by parents are predictive of child delinquency. Results from the Seattle Social Development Project suggest that children aged between 10 and 12 who are exposed to antisocial or violent parental attitudes are at a significantly greater risk of later gang membership (Hill *et al.*, 1999). Parental involvement in criminal offending, gang membership or substance use is also highly predictive of child and adolescent antisocial behaviour (Farrington, 2005; Loeber, Green, Keenan & Lahey, 1995). Research indicates that the most influential antisocial relative is the father, however the arrest of the child's mother, siblings and extended family more broadly have all predicted a boy's own delinquency (Farrington, 2005). Due to the consistency within these findings, researchers have attempted to explain why transference occurs between family members. One possible explanation is that the modelling of criminal and antisocial behaviours may increase the likelihood that other family members partake in such activities (Farrington, Jolliffe, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber & Kalb, 2001). As yet, there is no clear and definitive explanation for this observation.

Poor family management practices are viewed as reliable predictors of delinquency and youth gang membership (Hill *et al.*, 1999; Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994; Smith & Stern, 1997). These practices include poor parental supervision, physical and sexual abuse, along with inconsistent discipline practices and household rules. In isolation, physical punishment and child

abuse suggest a series of adverse short-term and long-term consequences for the child (Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Wisdom, 1994). These consequences include brain injury caused by physical contact, desensitization to pain, impulsive coping styles, and lowered self-esteem (Farrington, 2005). These outcomes are often recognised as being individual characteristics which predispose young people to seek youth gang membership during adolescence. Conversely, poor parental supervision has been shown to increase the risk of youth joining a gang (Lahey, Gordon, Loeber, Stouthamer-Loeber, & Farrington, 1999). The influence of supervision has however been shown to be dependent on the age of the child. As the child moves into later adolescence, parental supervision seems to be less influential as youth become more independent and influenced by their peers and environment (Browning *et al.*, 1999).

When discussing poor parental management and supervision, it is important to recognise that there are distinct cultural expectations and norms that differ considerably between various populations. During the process of immigration or colonisation, families often report that they become confused regarding the appropriate ways to bring up the children as traditional parenting practices can conflict with those practiced by the host country (Ministry of Social Development, 2006). This can be further complicated as the children and youth amalgamate with the dominant culture, while the elders and parents attempt to maintain their cultural heritage and traditions in the new environment. This conflict is exemplified when Pacific (i.e., Pasifika) peoples immigrate to New Zealand (Le Va & Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui, 2009). Pasifika families often describe the shift from a collective village structure, where child rearing responsibilities are shared by the entire community, as being extremely difficult (Ministry of Social Development, 2006). Not only do many Pasifika families lose the support of the village, but they become confused when they are expected to adopt an individualistic parenting style as practiced by the dominant Pākehā or European culture. This change is

often seen as negatively impacting on the child rearing process for Pasifika peoples (Ministry of Social Development, 2009).

Similarly, colonisation and urbanisation in New Zealand has disrupted traditional collective parenting practices for Māori (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). Over time, there has been a breakdown of wider whānau networks and support structures as Māori have had to move away from their places of birth, their iwi and their hapu in search of work and opportunities (Ministry of Social Development, 2006). Like the experiences of the Pasifika peoples, this process has negatively impacted on traditional Māori parenting practices as they have become increasingly isolated from the support that has been provided by family in the past. This disruption in parenting ideals for both Māori and Pasifika peoples is extremely important, and it has been identified as a potential causal mechanism for why youth of these cultures are over represented in figures of delinquency and youth gang membership (Ministry of Social Development, 2006).

Finally, parental attachment styles have been implicated as a risk factor for youth gang membership. Bowlby (1982) developed attachment theory by arguing that the adaptive response to an infant's helplessness is to remain in close proximity to their caregiver. He suggested that the infant acquires a positive and secure attachment with the caregiver when their needs for survival are met and their safety is assured by the caregiver. Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) later noticed that there appeared to be four distinctive patterns of attachment. These included secure attachment, insecure-avoidant attachment, insecure-resistant attachment and insecure-disorganised attachment. Longitudinal studies have often concluded the quality of the attachment between the child and their caregivers is related to the child's quality of life up to their adolescent years (Kerig & Wenar, 2006). The Rochester Youth Development Study concluded that poor attachment during

childhood was significantly related to delinquency in adolescence (Browning *et al.*, 1999).

The findings from such longitudinal studies have prompted both theorists and researchers to investigate whether children with poor parental attachment align themselves with a gang in an attempt to achieve a substitute family (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Spergel (1995) found that those enticed to join a gang tended to have a history of family dysfunction which left them longing for an affiliation and sense of belonging. In these circumstances, the gang was shown to provide youth with the social, emotional and moral support that was perceived to be missing from their immediate family. While the nature and expectations of a family role differs within cultural and social environments, the ability of a gang to act as a proxy unit has been reported in studies conducted on Asian gangs, Hispanic gangs, and African-American gangs (Anderson, 1990; Moore, 1991; Spergel, 1995).

This observation has also been investigated within Samoan youth gang groups that exist in South Auckland, New Zealand with slightly different results (Nakhid, 2009). Nakhid found that fellow youth gang members were considered as family, but not at the expense of their biological relatives. This was interpreted to mean that the young people in this study perceived their relatives to be primary support people. However, fellow gang members were elevated to family status as they were always there to support them when they were in trouble and were fun to be around (Nakhid, 2009). The results of this study may suggest that poor parental attachment is not implicated in the desire for youth gang membership amongst some Samoan youth in South Auckland, however further research and collaborative information from parents may be needed to better support this contention.

Hill and colleagues (2001) found that adolescent gang membership was not significantly predicted by poor attachment to parents at ages 10 to 12. Their

results instead highlighted that there are other more influential variables that encourage youth to pursue gang membership such as individual characteristics, peer influences and neighbourhood factors (Hill *et al.*, 1999).

## **Peer Influences**

It has been widely acknowledged that during adolescence, peer influences play a significant role in shaping and developing a young person's identity (Harper, Davidson & Hosek, 2008; Thornberry *et al.*, 2003). While it has been acknowledged that peer influences are an important part of one's development, they can also expose adolescents to potentially self-destructive behaviours including substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, and general delinquent behaviour (Dolcini, Harper, Watson, Ellen, & Catania, 2005). Deviant peer influences may also have a distinct influence on the desire for youth gang membership (Thornberry *et al.*, 2003).

Joining a youth gang is understood to be heavily dependent on the friendship and acceptance of existing youth gang members (Spergel, 1995). As part of the recruitment process, prospective youth gang members are generally expected to impress and befriend existing members to ensure their approval into the gang (Spergel, 1995). This has been described as occurring while partying, socialising and drinking amongst other activities in the gang setting. The acceptance that follows from these interactions allows youth to construct an identity consistent with other like-minded and established gang communities (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004).

While peers can be crucial in encouraging youth gang membership, it is important to recognise that their influence is not in isolation. Lahey and colleagues (1999) found that when they controlled individual and family variables, antisocial friends only influenced youth gang entry during early adolescence. Developmental theorists have interpreted these findings to

suggest that a child's decision to associate with antisocial friends is not the first step towards delinquency, but is part of a progressive pattern whereby an individual has previously chosen to participate in a delinquent environment. Alternatively, those individuals who seek antisocial friendships during later adolescence may do so when they find themselves excluded from other peer groupings as a result of their antisocial behaviour (Lahey *et al.*, 1999).

These findings are consistent with the prominent *selection theory* used to explain youth gang entry. The selection theory suggests that gangs recruit young people who have previously participated in criminal and delinquent activities (Gatti, Tremblay, Vitaro & McDuff, 2005; Thornberry *et al.*, 2003). The gang in this context is not believed to instigate antisocial tendencies in new members, but instead allows antisocial individuals to network and associate with other likeminded young people (Gatti *et al.*, 2005). While this theory is accepted by many authors, there are alternative theories that have been proposed to explain youth gang entry. The *facilitation model* is one of these, suggesting instead that it is the process of an individual joining a gang that facilitates delinquency (Gatti *et al.*, 2005). Prior to their gang associations, the facilitation model suggests that individuals behaved no differently to any other young person. In an attempt to amalgamate these two theories, the *enhancement model* was proposed by Thornberry and his colleagues (2003) who suggested that both selection and facilitation effects may account for the high rates of delinquency in the youth gang population. They argued that youth gangs recruit individuals who have previously partaken in delinquent behaviours. They further argue that once an individual is accepted into the gang, the group norms and processes enhance the individual's antisocial and delinquent tendencies (Thornberry *et al.*, 2003).

## **Education Involvement for Gang Members**

Educational achievement and commitment to schooling is believed to be an important factor in fostering positive development within children and adolescents. When there is little emphasis on obtaining an education, adolescents are at increased risk of being attracted to an antisocial lifestyle that can have detrimental effects for their future. The Rochester Youth Development Study found that weak school commitment and poor educational achievement were predictive of delinquent behaviour, youth gang membership and drug use. Other researchers have found that youth who have few educational goals, poor relationships with their teachers and whose parents have limited expectations for their child to achieve at school are also at risk of youth gang membership during adolescence (Esbensen, Huizinga & Weiher, 1993). In addition to poor school engagement, youth gang members are often truant, making it difficult for them to be up to date with the syllabus (White & Mason, 2006). Truancy further perpetuates a negative cycle by alienating youth gang members from their teachers and the wider school body, making help and support less accessible (White & Mason, 2006).

Not only are the attitudes that youth have towards their education important, but the quality of the school and the way in which they are organised can also influence the desire for youth to join a gang (Howell & Egley, 2005). Schools that are disorganised or who adopt zero-tolerance (e.g., regarding drug use) policies have been identified as facilitating delinquency and youth gang membership due to the high rates of suspensions, expulsions and drop outs that result (Howell & Egley, 2005). When adolescents are removed from the school for any period of time, they become susceptible to deviant peer influences due to the lack of adult supervision and guidance available during the day (Vigil, 2002). Schools that have high rates of bullying may also be contributing to the matrix of risk factors for youth gang membership as individuals have few options other than to seek protection from established

gangs when they feel vulnerable in a school environment (Howell & Egley, 2005; Ministry of Social Development, 2006).

In summary, a number of variables have been identified in an attempt to understand why children and youth experience problems at school (Howell & Egley, 2005). It is understood that child delinquency, pro-social peer rejection and family dysfunction may all contribute to poor academic achievement at school (Howell & Egley, 2005). Further to this, it is understood that having a learning disability or having a low level of educational achievement while at primary school may also result in poor attachment to an education provider (Hill *et al.*, 1999).

## **Neighbourhood and Community Dynamics**

Neighbourhoods are often understood to function as both physical and psychological spaces (Goldstein, 1991). Research on the ways in which a neighbourhood can influence youth gang membership is diverse and relatively inconclusive. Despite this, there is substantial evidence to suggest that there are disadvantaged geographical hotspots or neighbourhoods where youth gangs are more prevalent (Dupéré, Lacourse, Willms, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2007; Sampson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). The consequence of the economic disadvantage experienced in these neighbourhoods is further thought to impact on the resources and support available to residents (Goldstein, 1991). Goldstein (1991) asserted that youth gangs can therefore exist within these disadvantaged neighbourhoods due to the confounding risk factors that are experienced by residents. Firstly, he suggested that these disadvantaged areas are not sufficiently resourced to appropriately socialise young people to behave according to wider societal norms. As a result, he argued that prevailing knowledge, acceptable social values, and appropriate behaviour patterns are not being passed on to the young people within the neighbourhoods. Further to this, he argued that there

are limited opportunities for pro-social participation in these neighbourhoods due to the lack of physical amenities available. In conjunction with these aspects of disadvantage, residents are understood to have little mutual support from both other residents and external communities (Goldstein, 1991).

As a result of multilevel disadvantages, it has been argued that these communities do not have the capacity to implement effective social controls over unwanted youth activities and groupings (Dupéré *et al.*, 2007; Tita, Cohen & Engberg, 2005). Sampson and colleagues (2002) proposed that these neighbourhoods leave residents feeling excluded and powerless. As a result, residents have a limited capacity to build the social cohesion necessary to monitor and remove these antisocial youth groupings. In addition, the transient nature of these neighbourhoods may reduce community cohesion as residents are constantly moving in and out of rented accommodation. In these situations, residents are unlikely to build trust and connection with their neighbours due to the high population turnover. Finally, these authors suggest that an agglomeration of rented housing reduces the willingness of tenants and home owners to invest in the improvement of the neighbourhood. If tenants recognise that there is a neighbourhood problem, they will often choose to move from the area if they have the financial means to do so (Sampson *et al.*, 2002).

As youth gang members exist within these wider social environments, it has been argued that some young people will be attracted to youth gang memberships as there is little opportunity to escape from the poverty and overturn the marginalised status that they withhold in these disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004). Some youth may respond to these aversive circumstances by rebelling against society, while also searching for opportunities to gain status and respect in an environment that has limited resources to facilitate this. In turn, this may lead such youth to gang

membership as they seek camaraderie, pride, and a sense of belonging (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004).

While these findings have been replicated in a number of studies, it is seldom suggested that the neighbourhood is solely responsible for influencing the desire to become a youth gang member. Despite some neighbourhoods providing individuals with more opportunities to join youth gangs, only a small number of adolescents chose to become active members. Dupéré and colleagues (2007) found in their study of Canadian youth that children growing up in deprived neighbourhoods were more likely to join a gang, but only if they displayed the individual characteristics that are also predictive of youth gang membership. These findings are consistent with popular theories of delinquency, whereby an individual propensity is most predictive in an environment which readily produces opportunities to commit crimes and act in a delinquent manner (Agnew, Brezina, Wright & Cullen, 2002).

### **Maintaining Factors in Youth Gang Membership**

So far, this literature review has focused on identifying key risk factors or antecedents for youth gang entry and membership. As yet, there has been little discussion about the factors that keep youth affiliated with their chosen gang for any duration of time. While this information is considered to be important, there is comparatively less research in this area. Nonetheless, researchers have been able to identify a few key factors which appear to encourage youth to maintain a youth gang lifestyle. These factors include the support provided by the gang, the perceived protection offered by gang members, and the alleviation of boredom and thrill seeking activities that are carried out by the gang (Eggleston, 2000; Maclure & Sotelo, 2004; Nakhid, 2009).

Eggleston's (2000) findings on New Zealand youth gangs suggested that the factors initially encouraging youth gang membership continued to reinforce young people to pursue this lifestyle over time. Eggleston described the brotherhood and protection that results from joining the gang as being particularly reinforcing and resulting in individuals feeling compelled to further protect other members from rival gangs and hostile situations (Eggleston, 2000). Goldstein (1991), an influential researcher in this area also discussed the role of reinforcement in maintaining youth gang membership. Drawing on social learning theory, Goldstein proposed that there are a number of external reinforcers which reward the individual for their gang affiliations. These rewards may be tangible when individuals acquire objects, money or material products. There may also be social rewards which manifest in the form of increased status, recognition and approval. Goldstein argued that the persistence of youth gang membership is therefore dependent on the function of the reinforcement and the degree of reward that is received.

The theory of reinforcement has been noted by numerous other researchers who have found that as an individual becomes fully immersed in the youth gang lifestyle they fail to see how they can exist as an individual in the world (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004). The gang has consistently provided the social support and means to gain material goods in ways that are not permissible individually, on the streets, or by attending school or a legitimate job (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004). Essentially, the gang provides a way for youth to improve their material and social status in neighbourhoods or environments filled with deprivation and poverty (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004).

Further to this, it would appear that youth gang members have an assumed responsibility to protect an area that they have defined as being their own (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004). For example, research with Pasifika youth who were involved with gangs in South Auckland found that youth gang members take it upon themselves to protect and defend the neighbourhoods that they

have daily interactions with (Nakhid, 2009). The neighbourhood was further used individually and collectively to define the gang and their territory. In some circumstances, the streets became an extension of the home, particularly when other gang members and friends lived in close proximity. In these instances, it was not uncommon for gang members to claim ownership of the streets, protecting and defending them from other rival gangs (Nakhid, 2009). The strength of the association between a defined neighbourhood and the protection provided by local youth gangs arguably makes it difficult for youth to continue to reside in these locations but remove themselves from the gang lifestyle.

These findings have prompted this researcher to investigate how young people in the city of Hamilton explain their journey to youth gang membership. It would appear from the literature presented in this chapter that theorists and researchers have proposed a variety of different individual, environmental and social variables that may both influence and maintain membership to a youth gang. An investigation into how young people make sense of their affiliation to a gang will allow for a better understanding of the needs of this population and the challenges they face. It may also help to inform intervention strategies to better support young people in making more pro-social lifestyle choices.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Methodology**

The primary focus of this chapter is to provide the reader with a detailed outline of the methods used to collect and analyse the data for this study. Firstly, a description of the participants included in this study will be discussed. This will include the process used to recruit participants and any ethical issues that needed consideration. Following this, the theoretical orientation of this study will be discussed. Included in this section is an introduction to qualitative research and the benefits and limitations to this approach. Insight into the researcher is also included to highlight any biases she may have had during either the interview process or analysis stage. The research procedure is then outlined, followed by the process used to conduct the data analysis.

#### **Participants**

Participants were required to be residents of Hamilton, New Zealand to be included in this study. This geographical constraint was put in place in recognition of the different experiences that may be evident for youth gang members in different geographical regions of New Zealand. Like all cities, different demographic profiles reflect different population age groups, ethnicities, vocational choices, and education levels which may contribute to different experiences of residents. Further to this, it was important to recognize the differences that may exist between urban and rural youth populations in New Zealand. More specifically, this study aimed to focus solely on male youth currently in a gang. While participation in youth gangs is not exclusive to males, a comparison between male and female youth was beyond the scope of this research project.

For the purpose of this study, youth were defined as being between 16 and 23 years of age. This age restriction was guided by the Ministry of Social Development (2006) study; 'from wannabes to youth offenders: youth gangs in Counties Manakau'. While there was research to suggest that youth seek gang membership as young as 10 years of age, the researcher believed that the experiences of a 10 year old may be incomparable to those of a 23 year old. As a result, the age range was restricted for this study in an attempt gain a better understanding of the experiences and challenges facing those in a more specified age bracket.

Youth gang members were defined in accordance with criteria presented by Curry and Decker (1998). While there was no universal definition of what constitutes a youth gang member, the following criteria provided some structure in an attempt to exclude youth gang associates or 'wannabe' youth gang members from the study. Of most significance was that the participant self-nominated as a youth gang member. The full criteria (Curry & Decker, 1998) are as follows:

1. He can self-nominate to youth gang membership
2. He views the gang as a social group
3. He uses common identifiers or symbols
4. He partakes in both verbal and non-verbal communication to signify his gang affiliations
5. He is part of a gang that has some permanence
6. He has an association with criminal activity

### *Participant recruitment*

Participants were initially recruited for this study through alternative education providers and community agencies in Hamilton, New Zealand. Posters (Appendix A) were used to advertise the basic intentions of the study and were displayed in community youth centres in Hamilton. Selected Hamilton

school staff and school counsellors were also asked to kindly notify any students who they believed would fit the entry criteria for the study. If the young person demonstrated some interest in participating in the study, an information sheet (Appendix B) was made available which provided further details on the purpose of the study, the requirements and rights of the participant, and information on how to become involved in the study. Participants could then either fill in their details on the slip at the bottom of the information sheet and post them to the researcher in a prepaid and self-addressed envelope, or give their contact details to the respective staff member who would then contact the researcher. Upon receiving the participant's contact details, the researcher made telephone contact to arrange an interview date and time. A location for the interview was proposed by the researcher. Interviews were conducted in a neutral location specified by the researcher to ensure her safety. Reception staff or teachers were notified of the interview time and location. These rooms were either on the school premises or within the community agency.

A small number of participants were also recruited by participants informing other youth gang members of the study, a recruitment strategy commonly known as "snowballing" (Noy, 2008). Participants were asked on these occasions to provide other youth gang members who met the entry criteria with an information sheet. If they decided that they too would like to participate in the study, they were asked to provide the researcher with their details at the bottom of the information sheet and send it in the self-addressed envelope provided. The researcher then made telephone contact to arrange a time, date and location for the interview to commence. These interviews were conducted at a local community centre.

Participants were informed that they were entitled to bring along a support person if necessary. In the instance of a support person being present, the researcher asked that the details of the support person be known prior to the

interview commencing. Participants were also informed of their entitlement to a \$20 voucher as a token of appreciation for participating in the study.

### *Description of participant group*

A total of seven participants were interviewed for this study. Details of the participants' age, ethnicity, current employment status and age when first affiliated are highlighted in the table below. Participants' names and any specific details have been made anonymous to protect their identity.

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Current employment status	Age when first affiliated
Teine	17	Māori	Enrolled in preparation course	10
Rapata	16	Māori	Unemployed	12
Maui	22	Māori	Unemployed	10
Hemi	18	Māori	Enrolled in preparation course	10
Henare	23	Māori	Unemployed	9
Rua	18	Māori	Enrolled in preparation course	13
Taonga	19	Māori	Enrolled in preparation course	12

**Table 2:** Demographic profile of participants

In summary, participants all identified as Māori and were aged between 16 and 23 years of age. All participants were living in Hamilton at the time of the interview, however many participants said that as children, they lived in other regions of the North Island of New Zealand. All participants explained that they first became interested in gangs at a very young age, and began to affiliate with local youth gangs while at primary or intermediate school. Furthermore, all participants identified their youth gang membership as interfering with their future schooling. At the time of the interview, four

participants had returned to an alternative education provider in an attempt to gain their National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) credits. The remaining three participants explained that they left school while they were in their early teenage years and were currently unemployed.

### *Ethical considerations*

This study was approved by the University of Waikato ethics committee. All participants were informed of their rights as detailed in the information sheet they were given prior to the interview. Participants voluntarily consented to participating in this study and were encouraged to ask questions at any time throughout the process. All participants were asked whether they would consent to having the interview taped to ensure that their experiences were accurately recorded by the interviewer. Participants were informed that all interviews were kept confidential unless it became apparent that there was risk to either themselves or to others. This confidentiality was important when considering the power imbalance that existed between the researcher and participants. The researcher was aware that youth gang members may have already experienced stigmatisation, especially within the media and society more generally. It was therefore important to emphasise to the participants that confidentiality was paramount to this study. It was hoped that this would alleviate some of the distrust that may have existed within this population when an unknown outsider expresses an interest in understanding their stories. Further to this, the researcher explained and reassured participants both during the initial discussions and throughout the interview process that they were the experts and there were no incorrect answers to any of the questions that may have evolved during the interview. Both transcripts and audio recordings were destroyed after three months as instructed by the participants.

To ensure that the participants were supported both prior to and after the interview, the contact details of relevant youth support organisations in

Hamilton were made available to participants. They were encouraged to utilise these services if they felt that any of the discussions during the interview were unsettling at a later stage.

## **Introduction to Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is a process of analysing and interpreting texts and interviews in order to find meaningful patterns which describe a particular phenomenon or event (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The purpose of conducting qualitative research is to gain insight into the subjective understandings of people's socio-cultural context and the impact this context has on their feelings and behaviours (Yardley & Marks, 2004). Emphasis is therefore placed on understanding the quality of the experience, rather than identifying any cause-effect relationships (Willig, 2001). In order to achieve this, the researcher does not tend to predefine particular variables for the study. This is to ensure that any meaning attributed by the researcher does not impede respondents from expressing their way of interpreting the phenomenon under investigation (Willig, 2001). Qualitative data is therefore considered to be rich personal information which relates to a particular individual in a particular place and time (Yardley & Marks, 2004).

In order to analyse and interpret this rich qualitative information, it is necessary to align the study with a particular theory or epistemological position. Epistemology is an aspect of philosophy which is concerned with the theory of knowledge (Willig, 2001). It is a framework which can be used to answer the question; how and what, can we know (Willig, 2001).

Epistemology further requires the researcher to think about the nature of knowledge as a construct and the validity and reliability that claims of knowledge have. There are several different epistemological positions that can underpin qualitative research (Coyle, 2007; Willig, 2001). The epistemological position that best fits the nature and intent of this study is the relativist social constructionism position (Sullivan, 2010; Willig, 2001). This

position primarily advocates for the existences of multiples 'knowledges' rather than a single, overarching 'knowledge'. This variability in knowledge is theorised to exist as human experience is influenced by varying historical factors, cultural standpoints and expressions of language (Willig, 2001). Due to such diversity, relativist positions do not assume it is possible to determine a 'truth', but to merely investigate the subjective realities of individuals who are influenced by their value systems, moral beliefs, culture and the like (Sullivan, 2010). As opposed to viewing 'truth' as being something waiting to be found, relativists' define 'truth' as being a phenomenon that we create and develop through the process of making sense of our surroundings (Sullivan, 2010). Language therefore becomes paramount in understanding such realities as it is the medium most commonly used to describe human perception and understanding of the world (Sullivan, 2010).

### *Benefits*

The key benefits of conducting qualitative research are that it allows researchers to explore the complex meanings that participants attribute to various phenomena. In this regard, Coyle (2007) noted that the researcher has the ability to explore the participants' context and consider the influence this has on their attitudes and beliefs. She defined an individual's context as being far greater than their background, but further refers to the relationships they maintain with partners, family and friends, their occupational networks, their gender, social class, ethnicity, and sexuality. By emphasizing the importance of this information, researchers can begin to understand how it feels to experience particular conditions and the types of coping strategies participants employ in certain situations (Willig, 2001). The capacity to conduct research in such a manner is particularly beneficial when studying minority subcultures like youth gangs due to the lack of scientifically validated data that exists (Hughes, 2005). This lack of data makes it difficult for researcher to discuss, with any certainty, the antecedents to youth gang

membership or factors that maintain youth gang membership. An exploratory study then allows participants the freedom to discuss the meanings they attribute to their chosen lifestyle without being constrained by any truths that are assumed by the researcher or existing scientific data (Hughes, 2005).

### *Limitations*

While there are many benefits to conducting qualitative research, there are also known weaknesses to this approach. It may be assumed based on the ideals of qualitative research that the researcher has automatic access to all personal recollections of the research participants (Coyle, 2007). While it may be the focus of qualitative research to access this personal information, the processing of any accounts are conducted within the interpretive framework of the researcher (Coyle, 2007). The researcher must therefore be reflective, critical and honest about their role in the interpretation of the participants' dialogue. In light of this weakness, qualitative research also requires researchers to be as objective and non-judgmental during both the information gathering process and data coalition phase. However, an element of subjectivity is unavoidable in any study and perhaps in qualitative research in particular as there is a level of interest and personal attachment between the researcher and topic area (Diefenbach, 2009). Even in instances where the researcher does not consider themselves as being either theoretically, emotionally or practically attached to the topic, they still determine what is being researched and how this will occur (Diefenbach, 2009). It is therefore unrealistic to completely eradicate the influence of human factors in qualitative research, but one can minimize the impact of the researcher by being explicit about assumptions, interests and objectives of the research project (Diefenbach, 2009).

The way in which qualitative data is gathered and collated has further created some debate over the ability of consumers to evaluate the worth of qualitative

research (Coyle, 2007). Unlike quantitative research, which is evaluated on the basis of statistical calculations, qualitative research relies on a number of different methods and tools that can be used to analyse a data set (Diefenbach, 2009; Forrester, 2010). Commonly discussed qualitative methods include grounded theory, discourse analysis, interpretive phenomenological analysis and thematic analysis (Forrester, 2010). It is this variety that concerns some researchers who believe that the lack of a single process contributes to a lack of rigour (Diefenbach, 2009). Authors of these commonly used qualitative methods have however created thorough and descriptive guides on how to analyse data sets in a consistent manner. Despite the intentions of the authors, weaknesses may arise when researchers fail to follow through with the explicit instructions of a given qualitative approach (Diefenbach, 2009).

### *The Researcher*

As discussed, the efficacy of qualitative data collection and analysis is partly dependent on the researcher being able to critically evaluate their attitudes and assumptions around the topic area. After lengthy periods of reflection, the researcher became aware of several pre-existing belief and value systems that may have prompted a desire and degree of enthusiasm to better understand the youth gang subculture.

As a child, I spent a number of years living and travelling around third world countries primarily in South-East Asia and the Middle East. During this time, I was exposed to the hardships and daily struggles of populations who had few opportunities compared to those I knew and enjoyed as a child in New Zealand. During this time abroad, I also became very aware of the coping strategies and alternative ways living that were utilised by large populations to ensure their survival in times of hardship, war, political unrest and general poverty. These memories have remained with me today, and have in some

respects framed my vision and opinion for how change can be achieved for different populations here in New Zealand today.

My experiences suggest that many dominant populations create change by either verbally informing minority groups of their wrongdoings, or by giving them access to resources with the expectation they will be embraced. I have however observed that without understanding the history, circumstances and context of different subcultures, there may be a resistance to change and resentment towards the dominant population when change is enforced seemingly unnecessarily.

In the context of New Zealand, youth gang membership has constantly been brought to my attention through media sources, police statistics and public debate and discussion. I feel that the population majority of New Zealand has identified the youth gang subculture and all that it entails as a social problem that requires remedial action. This decision to remedy youth gang membership may have been done prematurely as there seems to be a lack of awareness and insight into the function youth gang membership serves for a subgroup of young people in New Zealand. Without young people having a forum to discuss the hardships and adversity they face, and the rationale for their existence, few alternatives can be effectively developed for youth. It must be acknowledged that the purpose of this study was not to explicitly advocate for all youth gang members who choose to partake in this study. In this sense, it is not my role to tailor the questions to best highlight the adversity faced by respective youth, but instead to allow young people to discuss antecedents to youth gang membership which are most salient to them.

Further to this, the researcher's distinct interest in clinical psychology has allowed her to become informed of some of the theories pertaining to youth gang membership and antisocial or delinquent lifestyle choices more

generally. I was however aware of the bias this may have posed in initially determining questions and latter in analysing the data. While the awareness of existing theories and international research is unchangeable, I developed a semi-structured interview format to allow the participants to discuss factors that are most salient to them with a degree of flexibility. Further to this, I was aware of the multitude of factors that may have influenced youth gang membership across numerous different facets of life. I was therefore open and willing to tailor the interview to best suit the participants' set of circumstances. Furthermore, I detailed a process for data analysis to ensure that my interpretation and influence on the raw data set was minimised.

The influence that I had on participants and the way in which they responded during interview must be also be considered. I am a Pākehā female in my early 20s. I have also attended university for the past 6 years. This was distinctly different to the participants in this study who were young Māori men between the age of 16 and 23 years. In recognising these differences, I consulted with a variety of different professionals who worked regularly with young Māori men. I also consulted with local Māori elders to ensure the interview structure and process was appropriate for these young men. From these discussions, it was considered appropriate to provide participants with food and drink prior to beginning the interview. During this time prior to the commencement of the interview, I re-introduced myself and made casual conversation with the young people.

## **Procedure**

Prior to the interview taking place, the researcher asked participants whether they had any questions about the details provided on the information sheet. Participants were then reminded by the researcher of what was going to be asked during the interview and were again reminded of their rights during the interview process. Participants were also asked whether they would consider

having the interview recorded. The researcher explained that this was important to ensure their story was recorded in the most accurate way. While the researcher explained that all participant details would be made anonymous, participants were given the option to use an alias if they were concerned about the recorder being used. Once participants agreed that they were happy with the research procedure, they were asked to sign the consent form.

A semi-structured interview was utilised to gain insight into the experiences of youth gang members and the culture of these youth gangs in New Zealand. This specific form of qualitative interviewing allowed the researcher to gain authentic accounts of the individuals' experiences in a flexible yet structured manner (Seale, 1998). Further to this, it allowed the interviewer to enquire further about any unique and interesting leads that become apparent in the interview (Seale, 1998). The interview (Appendix C) was guided by certain topics that had previously been formulated prior to the interviews commencing. This structure was important for a number of reasons, particularly as the experiences disclosed needed to be relevant to the research. It was further necessary to have had topic areas formulated to ensure that the interview could proceed smoothly to another area of relevance once a topic had been exhausted.

During the study, participants switched between topic areas as they became more comfortable with the interview process and felt compelled to share more personal information. Towards the end of the semi-structured interview, demographic information from each participant was collected to give further depth and context to the experiences of each interviewee. Interviews lasted anywhere from half an hour to an hour depending on how many different facets were considered to be important in contributing to youth gang

membership. The interview covered the following main areas as suggested within the literature that has previously been discussed;

1. Background information relevant to first time gang involvement
  - a) Neighbourhood factors influencing gang membership
  - b) Family factors influencing gang membership
  - c) School factors influencing gang membership
  - d) Cultural factors influencing gang membership
  - e) Criminal requirements influencing youth gang membership
2. Current youth gang involvement and influential factors
  - a) Drug and alcohol behaviours
  - b) Criminal behaviours
  - c) Friendship networks
3. Maintaining factors for youth gang membership
4. Demographic information
  - a) Age
  - b) Ethnicity
  - c) Current employment
  - d) Age when first affiliated to a youth gang

After the interview had been conducted, participants were either posted or e-mailed a copy of their transcripts if they so wished. If it was requested that transcripts be sent, they were sent with a post-paid return envelope. A cover letter describing ways in which they could make changes if deemed necessary was attached to the transcripts. Participants were informed that they had two weeks to return the transcripts. If they are were not returned, it was assumed that the information was correct.

## Data Analysis

The transcripts were analysed via thematic analysis, a method used to identify, analyse and report themes in qualitative studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is not described as being a unique qualitative method, but instead a process that can be used to transform qualitative information into a qualitative data set (Boyatzis, 1998). Upon transforming all respective information into a data set, the research can begin to identify emerging themes that exist within the data set.

A theme can be defined as a patterned response that captures something of importance in a data set and is of relevance to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The identification of a theme is therefore at the discretion of the researcher, and few rigid rules as to what constitutes a theme exist. Consistency in identifying themes is therefore necessary (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes identified in the data set derived from this study were those that described significant portions of the data set. The purpose of conducting a thematic analysis in this manner was to identify and report content reflective of the majority of the dataset. While it is acknowledged that some detail may be lost in identifying the broad and overarching themes, the lack of research that has been conducted in this area in New Zealand suggests this is necessary. As a more comprehensive body of literature about youth gang membership in New Zealand evolves, more detailed and specific themes can start to be analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The five steps taken throughout the thematic analysis have been summarised below and reflect those outlined in Braun & Clarke (2006).

- 1. Become familiar with the data:** This stage required the researcher to become immersed in the data set by transcribing all interviews, listening to the recorded audio and then re-reading over the transcripts.

- 2. Generate initial codes:** Once the researcher had become familiar with the data, interesting and prominent ideas (codes) were listed. All information was organised into the different code groups. Distinctions between the different codes were made by using different coloured pencils to highlight what data belongs to each code.
- 3. Search for themes:** This involves sorting the different codes into potential themes. A thematic map was used at this stage to look into the relationship between codes, between themes, and the different level of themes that may emerge.
- 4. Reviewing themes:** At this stage, themes were refined. This was particularly necessary when it became apparent that some themes did not have enough data to support them. Alternatively, some themes were intertwined and could therefore be merged. It was also noted that other themes were too complex and needed to be separated. Essentially, the validity of underlying themes was rectified during this phase. The use of a thematic map was helpful as it allowed the researcher to visualise the variety of themes that were emerging and the information that was available to support or justify their existence.
- 5. Defining and re-naming themes:** This stage began when the thematic map was accurate. Once the core themes were finalized, the researcher was required to go further than to paraphrase the raw data. Now, the researcher began to ask what is important about a theme and why. Each theme was considered individually, but also in comparison to others. Any sub-themes were also identified. At the end of this stage, each theme was clearly defined and given an appropriate label.

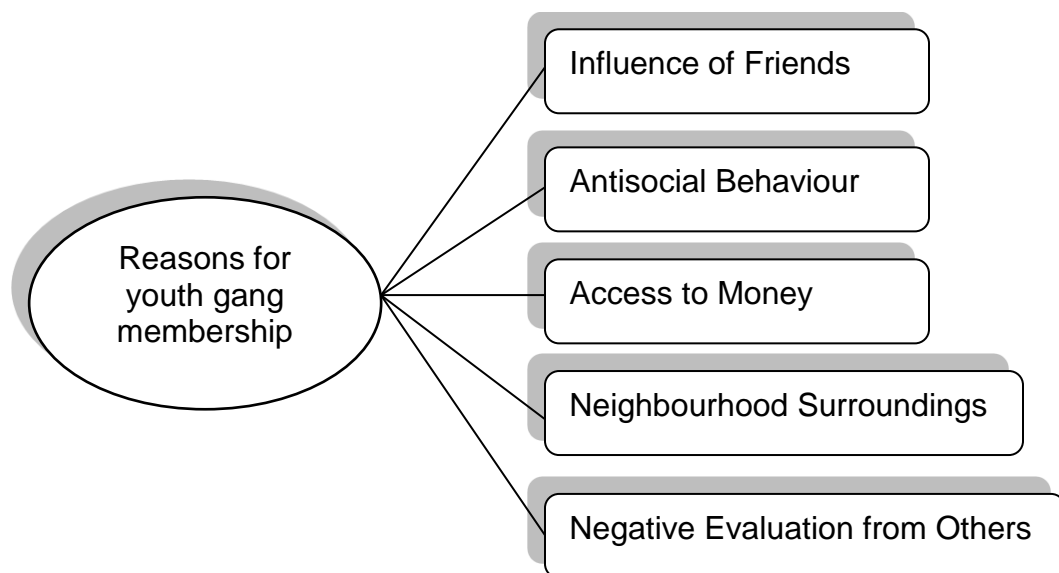
Upon completing this process, the discussion section (Chapter 5) was used to interpret the themes based on the availability of existing research and theories. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended that during this final discussion phase, the researcher explore the meaning of the themes, any assumptions that may underpin such themes, and the implications the

themes have for the population being explored. Further to this, they suggested that the researcher reflect on any conditions that may have influenced the way the participants described their story and any conclusions that can be drawn about the topic area.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Findings

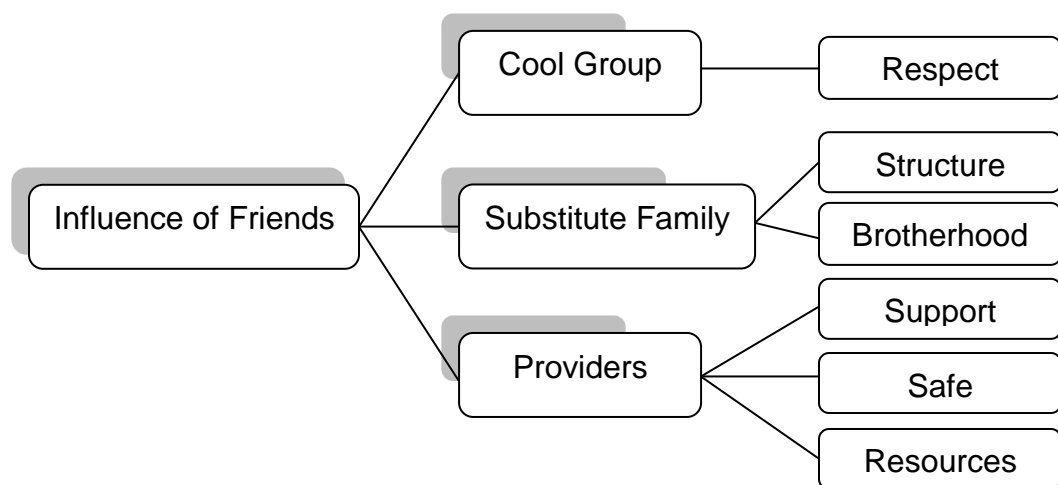
After conducting a comprehensive thematic analysis, it was apparent that five primary themes emerged from the data set as shown in *figure 2*. These themes seemed consistent across all seven transcripts and were determined to best describe why these young people chose to participate in gangs and why they chose to maintain their membership. The five core themes that were identified are as follows: Influence of Friends, Antisocial Behaviour, Access to Money, Neighbourhood Surroundings, and Negative Evaluation from Others. Within these core themes, subthemes were also identified to better explain specific aspects of each concept. Evidence for these themes in the above order will be provided in greater detail within this chapter. Following this will be a summary of the findings and overall themes. It must be noted that these themes were not always mutually exclusive, but have been separated to better extend on the variety of reasons that youth participate in gangs.



**Figure 2: Summary of the core themes of this data set**

## Influence of Friends

Participants spoke extensively about the influence of friends on the desire to become affiliated with a youth gang. *Figure 3* highlights the subthemes relevant to the 'influence of friends'. Initially, participants described the gang as being the "cool group" to be associated with, whether this was within their school environment or within their neighbourhood. They also explained that once in the gang, members became more than simply a group of friends, but instead a brotherhood or family group. Participants also explained that their friends or brothers in the gang provided them with the resources and safety that was not available in other facets of their life. Each of these subthemes will be extended in the following section and reference will be made to specific dialogue given by the participants.



**Figure 3: An outline of the subthemes relevant to 'Influence of Friends'**

### *Cool Group*

When participants were asked to reflect on the initial reasons for joining a youth gang, they described the gang as being the desirable or cool group to be associated with. Some of the advantages of being affiliated with this group included increased notoriety amongst both the wider school body and

community. Below are some of the explanations participants gave about the importance of being a part of the cool group:

*Maui: Ya no.. like the cool group. Yea... if you choose them you would be cool, or yea... scary. Cool groups would turn into gangs... getting like a different name and then it would all start from there. And then it was like whoever was the better... in fighting or whatever like that... yea...or who had the most numbers, something like that.*

*Taonga: Thought it looked cool being a gangster so you just get into it.*

*Hemi: All my cousins were in gangs and I just thought that they were cool. Oh I just thought that [the gang] was cool... because of my cousins and all my uncles and all them, they were all in gangs.*

While these participants felt that the gang initially appeared cool, their rationale of why the gang was cool differed slightly. Hemi described the gang as being cool because it was a lifestyle in which older male family members were involved. While Hemi did not chose to affiliate with the gangs that his family were members of, he saw that lifestyle as being cool. Alternatively, Maui and Taonga described their gangs as being cool because of the increase in social status that was associated with membership. Despite these differences in rationale, it would appear that these participants wanted to identify with a group that served to enhance the perception others had of them within their different environments.

### *Substitute Family*

As well as being accepted into a cool group of friends, participants spoke about their desire for a brotherhood or family unit separate from their biological relatives. For many participants, this desire for belonging was

instigated by the perceived lack of support and love they had from their biological families as children. When reflecting on their childhoods, some participants explained that their fathers, uncles and cousins were often absent due to the commitments they had to other gangs. For other participants, male family members were absent due to incarceration. Despite this absence, participants explained how their male relatives were influential role models for the gang lifestyle.

*Henare: When you live around, pretty much at like a pad<sup>1</sup>. Cos [the gang] were there every day, pretty much drinking yea...you just wanna be that. Yea, following [my father]... yea... role model. It makes you wanna be in a gang... to be his family I suppose, to be a gangsta... or else he wouldn't really count you as his family...even though you are his son...he would still show more love to the gang than yourself. It was more my older cousins that got me into it though. Yea...older family members. Of course you wanna be like your cousins, fuck knows why...but you fell into it somehow.*

*Toanga: Yea...[my cousins] made it look like there was just a phase that you go through...like when you grow up you get to a certain age and you just jump into a gang.*

*Rua: My dad was all good [with joining a gang] cos he used to be patched up for the Mongrel Mob<sup>2</sup>.*

The respect that these participants had for their family members meant that they were interested in pursuing the gang lifestyle. Participants had also been exposed to the family unit that the gang had provided for their older family members, and were searching for a similar sense of belonging. Participants

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<sup>1</sup> Slang term describing a gang house or headquarters whereby gang members congregate

<sup>2</sup> Well established adult gang in New Zealand

therefore described the gang as a proxy family unit, with older members taking on fatherly roles and younger members of a similar age taking the roles of brothers. The ability of the gang to imitate a family unit often meant that the friends in the gang became more significant to participants than their biological relatives. This is exemplified by the following statements made by participants:

*Hemi: Yea, like the top, the up there people were the oldest but yea... there were people around my age. Like when I first joined the gang I was like 11 and there were people that were around my age group, but then like the older people were way older than us... and they used to tell us what to do. And like yea, they were like our fathers. And all the people that were around our age group are like our brothers. Never disrespected our brothers, never stole from them or anything, they never stole from us. Just always there for us.*

*Toanga: It's kind of like a family basically, when you are in a gang. That's a lot of the reason why some people join. Like... some people don't really like their own family... and they see these gangs and they think these bros are mean and they treat them good and everything like that... better than their own family so they kind of adopt them as a new family.*

*Henare: Yea yup...yea like family. I thought of [the gang] more as my family than my own family.*

*Teine: I am the only boy, the youngest so I had to look after my family and um...ya know, you never find any comfort...from your family, the*

*comfort that you need cos they all... well back in those days everyone had their raruraru<sup>3</sup>...so you were just trying to find a brotherhood.*

For many of these participants, the lack of perceived support within their home environments meant that they left home at a young age. Henare described the friendships that he had established within the gang as being pivotal during this time, especially because he left home when he was 13 years of age.

*Henare: Oh I was put in family homes... and sort of youth prisons...and ran away from those. Until they put me on um...an island...went to that one...couldn't run away from there (laughs)...had to swim. Yea, but I got out of those... good behaviour and stuff... but then, fell straight back... that was only to get back into the community I suppose... just for the same reasons...mates!*

Henare agreed that his primary motivation was to do what was required of him in order to return to his friends as they could provide him with the drugs, money and support that he desired. Similarly, other participants found themselves leaving home during early adolescence to move closer to their friends in the gang. It would appear that this process strengthened the bond between friends as they moved further away from their biological family and closer to their brotherhood in the gang.

*Teina: Yea, oh in my place, I didn't really give a fuck, shit wasn't going good at home. Ya no, ran away from home ya know, the street was home. That was my family, I felt safe, I didn't really care.*

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<sup>3</sup> Māori term translated to mean problems or troubles.

*Hemi: I joined a gang cos I just...there was just heaps of negativity in my house and I just didn't like it. Just used to make me angry.*

It would appear from these statements that participants were disillusioned with their home environment. Despite participants saying that they respected their fathers, uncles and male cousins who were affiliated with different gangs, they felt it necessary to leave this environment and seek membership with a gang. For many of these participants, the gang was able to provide them with a choice between remaining at home and moving to a different gang environment which better satisfied their needs.

#### *Providers*

In conjunction with being 'cool' and finding comfort in the family that was created within the gang, participants would often acknowledge that their friends in the gang could provide them with access to their desired resources and possessions. The tangible possessions that were most frequently referred to were drugs or money. The gang was also described as providing individuals with increased status and power. Many participants explained that there were few other avenues whereby you could access these assets without being affiliated to the gang. Participants were therefore aware of the possessions and respect that friends in the gang could provide new members with. When asked why these participants were initially attracted to youth gang membership, they responded accordingly:

*Henare: Probably drugs, alcohol...they had it all... they had all the drugs.*

*Hemi: To me in my head it was just all free money, so I would just start going with that and I just stuck with them cos I just liked having*

*money in my pocket every day, liked having weed whenever I could get it, and um yea... just liked having everything, for free.*

*Maui: As we got older it changed from little things like that... to wanting more money, more power, more of everything. Just wanting more of it all. Yea.*

*Toanga: Chicks, money, weed, drugs, power... respect! That kind of stuff, just from their people.*

*Rua: Yea I was already like that when I was by myself, but when I joined the gang it made me feel more hearty...*

These quotes demonstrate that many participants had been pre-exposed to drugs, power and money before entering the gang, but not to the degree that they desired. In becoming familiar with the goals and values of their friends in the gang, they saw an opportunity to increase the availability of such possessions to a greater degree than could be achieved elsewhere.

Similarly, participants described their friends in the gang as providing the support network that they needed to survive in their schools and communities. This support was multifaceted, but was often described as being important in the instance of physical altercations. Many participants felt that fellow gang members could support them when they were at threat from bullies or other gangs that existed in their neighbourhoods.

*Hemi: Like yea, if you are walking around and you get a hiding, and then you know that your brothers are going to be there to help you. Yea I just stuck to the same people, never really affiliated with anyone else. Cos I felt safe with all the bros.*

*Teine: Yea, they would drop anything, anything they are doing. Even if they are looking after their baby, they will drop that... as soon as they get the call, they are gone, they leave their wife or their missus or whatever and just go, just come and help the bros ya no.*

*Rapata: Just they were there for me...they looked after me.  
Like...bullies and stuff, like sort them out...and asking for stuff, they used to give it...yea.*

Like many children and adolescents, participants identified their desire to have support from those around them. For these participants, the gang was described as being the best way to have these needs met. When asked whether there were other options to choose from, these participants said:

*Hemi: Oh there would have been...but I just didn't see it. All I saw was [the gang]. How they always had money and stuff and just wanted to be like them.*

*Toanga: There was definitely other options, but like joining a gang would just be easy, the easiest way to do it... and you would just get heaps more than any other strategies you would have to get money or whatever.*

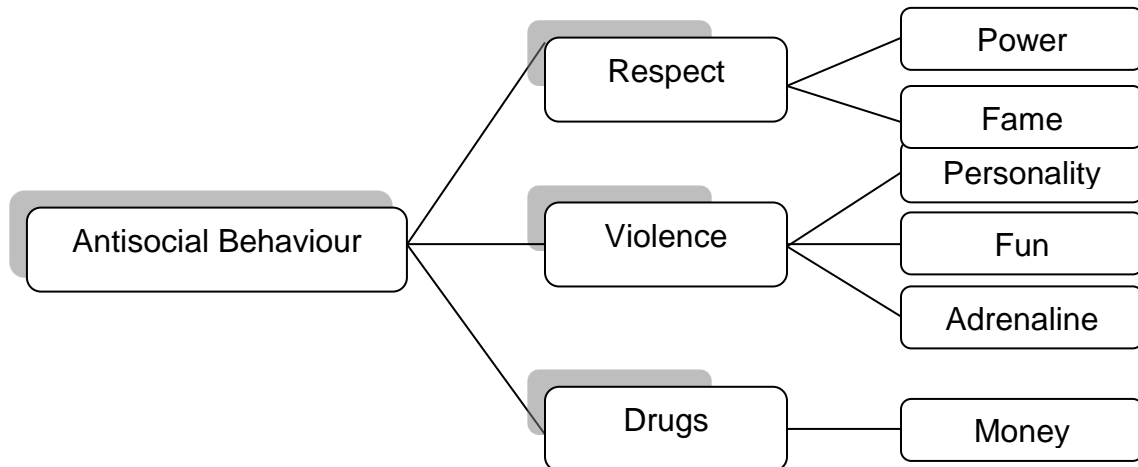
### *Summary*

It would appear that friendships within the gang served a number of functions for these participants. Firstly, participants experienced a greater degree of notoriety when accepted into the 'cool' group or gang. These participants also explained that upon being accepted into the gang, they became a part of a family unit that supported them to a greater degree than their biological

relatives. This support was multifaceted, but included the provision of financial, physical and emotional care in times of need.

## **Antisocial Behaviour**

The second theme that was identified from the data set involves the antisocial behaviour that participants frequently described when both joining the gang and once in the gang. This antisocial behaviour that was described by participants varied and served different functions for different individuals and their gang. The main subthemes or functions of antisocial behaviour that emerged are outlined in *Figure 4* and can be summarised as Respect, Violence and Drugs. For some participants and their gang, antisocial behaviour served to increase the respect gained from both the gang and others in their social environments. This respect was described as increasing ones power to make decisions, while also increasing ones notoriety and fame amongst like-minded peers. The second function of antisocial behaviour in the gang included violence and often was described as fighting both individually and as a gang. Participants in this group often felt that violence was either part of their personality, was fun, or that such activities provided an adrenaline rush. Finally, the third function of antisocial behaviour was drug related. For these participants, drug-related behaviours were often a means to source money. Evidence for each of these three subthemes will be provided below to illustrate the degree of influence antisocial behaviour had in both the facilitation and maintenance of youth gang membership for these participants.



**Figure 4: An outline of the subthemes relevant to 'Antisocial Behaviour'.**

### *Respect*

Being respected both within the gang and within the community was often acknowledged to be of significant importance to participants'. As discussed previously, respect protected individuals from bullies and ensured acceptance into a brotherhood or gang. When asked why participants joined gangs initially, they would frequently describe the availability of respect within the gang as being a key motivator for membership:

*Maui: Power! Yea...like other people being scared of the numbers...and yea...just power and respect.*

*Henare: umm...for family and for respect really. Drugs is a bonus.*

It is, however, important to understand how this respect developed for these participants. For many, they described a willingness to participate in antisocial behavior as being fundamental to the respect they received. This respect increased with every successful drug deal, fight or robbery that took place. Young youth gang members could therefore experience respect as it was not

just contingent on age, but on the variety of different criminal activities that they had orchestrated. As each of these participants had been influential in a variety of different antisocial behaviours, they expressed resentment towards those who merely spoke about their involvement in offending behaviours. It became apparent that these participants felt that respect could only be gained by following through with antisocial behaviours and not merely talking about them.

*Rapata: You have to make sure you know what you are doing. You can't just say you are going to do something and not do it... you just get yourself a bad name. It's not so much about saying big things...you know...it's all about doing it...business. You have to do it. Once you do it you are the man...it's not really like oh yea...I'm doing this... I'm selling drugs...when you are not doing that...not doing drugs and not selling drugs...ya know.*

*Hemi: Oh yea to young people who I thought were wannabes, I used to boss them around. Like people who used to brag about what they do...I hate braggers. People that I used to see that used to try and come kick it with us...bragging about doing this and doing that...I used to treat them like shit.*

*Henare: Yea you would have to be good at something for them to accept you to be there. If you are good for nothing then (laughs) you'd just...you were just cuppa tea boy. I used to make them heaps of money...just for knowing people on both sides even...selling [stolen goods] to people...like...ya know...straight people...all sorts of crowds.*

*Teine: I went to school cos every time I woke up, I was yea...not in a very good mood. But I actually went to school to um...try step out the big fullas. To become the top man. Ya no...at such a young age, I*

*wanted to be THE man. Ya no...cos you walk around and they go, chur, that fullas tough. Like I would have got a hiding like 300 times. Each time I stepped to the 12 year old, ya know, and I was only about 10...at primary school. And I would always try to step to them, and I always got a hiding, but I never stopped. I always stood back up and got another hiding. And just kept standing up, just to show them that I aint going to back down. Mmm. I would think, one day I am going to crack all of you's. And it ended up happening...at high school. I became top dog. And then I started making my name around town.*

These participants highlighted that once you were established within a gang it was expected that you were motivated to participate in antisocial behaviours that served a function for that gang. Once you showed this commitment, those in the gang and like-minded peers in the community respected you for this. Once respected within the gang, participants would speak of the different privileges that were available to them.

*Toanga: It's like you are having your time of being the low fulla and then like...the small fish, and after a while of doing all the stuff that they ask you it's like you will be up there...one of the big fish kind of thing...so it's just promising you.*

*Teine: Well when I was a young fulla I used to run older people. That was the respect that I gained from them. Respect gets you a long way in life.*

*Rapata: Ya no...he could be older than me, he could be an old man...he could be littler than me, he could be a dad...and I could sit there and tell him to go and do something for me.*

With this respect, participants spoke about the increased status and fame that was achieved. Being known within the community or neighbourhood was considered a privilege and further demonstrated the degree of influence that they had amongst like-minded people.

*Hemi: People just fear you straight away, as soon as they hear your name. And if you introduce yourself and they are like ohhh, blah blah blah. I still get that a lot, walking around town, and I introduce myself and people are like ohhh.*

*Teine: People know who you are and you don't even know them. They don't even have to look at you. They just know you.*

*Rapata: Oh...when you are in that state of mind...everybody knows everybody and if you don't know that person, then they are not that great. Mmm.*

### *Violence*

After explaining how criminally oriented behaviours could enhance ones' respect, some participants went on to further define their involvement with violence and the different impact that had on youth gang membership. Participants involvement in violence varied, but included fighting rival gangs, committing aggravated robberies, and other threatening behaviour. Participants explained that initially, these behaviours were sometimes necessary as part of an initiation into the gang:

*Maui: Yup, um there was kind of an initiation kind of thing...it was like...umm...you get given a week and you have got to rob so much stuff, you gotta win so many fights, and...make that much money before the end of the week.*

While a willingness to participate in violence was important on initiation, participants explained that the expectation to participate in violence was one reason they were initially attracted to join the gang. For some participants, an increased opportunity to participate in violence was desired as it allowed them to express the anger and resentment that they felt internally.

*Teine: I know that it might sound horrific, but the real words, the real reason that I wanted to jump into a gang is that I wanted to inflict pain...on people. Cos people, like I have been abused, and people inflicted pain on me so I wanted to give back. I was hurt inside so that cunts going to do it to me...I'm going to fuckin slice him up ya know...whatever...not saying that I have done anything like that but, those are things that I wanted to do. And when you are around that in a gang...all of you fullas are like that ya know...Like if it is a certain gang, that is what makes you go up another level. But that is the reason that I wanted to get it...I was hurt.*

For other participants, they described the gang's involvement in violence as something fun to be involved with. In reflecting on why these activities were perceived as 'fun', participants would often refer to themselves as an "angry person" and therefore enjoyed fighting others.

*Henare: Yea fighting. I like fighting...yea...just being a bully, used to pick on people...yea...take stuff off people, standovers.*

Due to the frequency of these violent encounters, participants explained that a degree of planning was necessary to ensure you were adequately equipped to fight at all times. In preparing for these violent encounters, participants described the objects that they would carry to feel safe both when with the gang and alone in their neighbourhood.

*Hemi: Sometimes when I walk around my neighbourhood I have to carry a knife. I have been crowbarred in the head, and I have been jumped heaps of times. That's when you know you can't physically take them, you gotta fuckin scare them. You gotta pull out the blade and scare them.*

*Teine: Yea like you sleep with a knife or a gun...cos you don't know what is going to happen. You just live that way, it's just stuck with you forever and it is hard to get out of.*

As well as being equipped with objects, some participants explained that once in the gang, they enhanced their skills to ensure they were better prepared to win any violent encounter. This included learning martial arts, kendo, and boxing with teachers who were often members or affiliates of the chosen gang.

*Hemi: Yea I did Kendo<sup>4</sup> cos I thought that it was um... useful when I was in...like if I saw a group of fullas and I knew they were going to do something I could just pick up a stick and use the Kendo moves.*

*Teine: Study a lot of martial arts, even when you are in the gang, they even have classes but it just depends on what gang...who is really running it. I did a bit of kickboxing. I was a professional kickboxer, boxer, and cage fighter. Cage fighter for a gang...yea.*

When participants were asked whether they found participating in these violent activities as frightening or scary, their responses differed. For one group of participants, they explained that it was frightening initially, but with

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<sup>4</sup> Japanese martial art focused primarily on sword fighting.

more experience, it became easier. For the other group of participants, they explained that it gave them an adrenaline rush.

*Teine: Yea G, adrenaline rush. It's an adrenaline rush when you do stupid things. It's, it's something that can't be taken away, it's like a drug, it's like an addiction.*

Further to this, when participants were explaining the adrenaline that results from violence they could see no other way in which that same feeling could be achieved.

*Teine: Nah only by smashing people's heads in. Doing all that stuff. Yea I was pretty violent, really violent. Just the splitting image of my old man.*

When asked more globally how the constant involvement in violence altered participants feeling about the world, many felt that their environments outside of the gang were unpredictable and untrustworthy. As a consequence of this, participants explained that they were constantly prepared to defend themselves against the unknown, whether that was members of other gangs or anything else that appeared in their environment

*Rua: Yea like the other gangs and that...like you get scared of other people...wanting to come and bash yous, you and your crew.*

*Hemi: Yea. Most of the time [the world was scary]. Didn't know what was coming around the corner.*

*Teine: Yea just unknown really [the world]. Yea just shadowed. Just yea...it's a pretty dark place.*

In recognising the world as a dangerous place, participants would acknowledge the importance of their friends in the gang to defend and support them. While these participants were prepared to be involved in violence, they were also conscious of the consequences of these activities. Many explained that they were frequently targeted by police, and some participants had served jail time for their behaviour.

*Henare: It was fun...and yea...up until I got caught (laughs) yea...up until we went to jail and then...got out of jail, but then went back to jail again.*

*Hemi: I actually got a lot of hidings from the police last year. That's what also made me change. Cos last time I went to court, they told me that I was going to go to jail next time I came back. So I thought about it, I don't want to go to jail.*

Some participants went on to explain that once in jail, they faced another set of problems related to violence. Despite not wanting to return to prison, participants explained that to survive their sentences, they felt obliged to affiliate with gang members in prison. These interactions would require an involvement in violence to gain respect and power amongst other inmates.

*Henare: Yea you have to find [a gang] in [prison]...otherwise, yea...you would probably get picked on. You gotta be with a gang or else...pretty much your fucked in there...like you would be a lone soldier anyway. You gotta have mates in there to keep you fucking...ya head screwed on I suppose...or else you would probably fucking lose it if you were by yourself...like having your support...but in a bad way (laughs)...they keep your head there. Yea.*

Participants with prison experience have described the ways in which this environment facilitated violence and gang affiliations. They highlighted that the very behaviours they were apprehended for in the community were behaviours that are enhanced and expected within prisons. In this sense, participants explained that any skills and knowledge that they had from the community would often be enhanced in jail by speaking to other inmates.

*Teine: For some people, jail is a school.. for gangs... every jail is a school for gangs. That's where they study...everything. So that's the gangs' school... basically for most of the gangs... that's the difference.*

*Henare: But also jail doesn't even help cos then you are just meeting up with even more criminals and then its teaching you...ya know...they are telling you their stories and you just get even worse...yea...you learn more things...more criminal things...makes you smarter...yea. If they had women in jail...that's the only thing that they take away from you. The rest of it is a holiday camp (laughs). If there were chicks in there, you would live in there. Cos they feed ya, drugs are still in there...but you still gotta pay for them...but somehow you get it done.*

### *Drugs*

In conjunction with the respect that is available from antisocial behaviour and the reinforcement available for violence, participants also spoke about the function that drugs served in the gang. For many participants, they explained that the gang provided easier access to the variety of different drugs that they desired. It was this greater availability of drugs that would also motivate many of these participants to join youth gangs.

*Henare: Probably drugs, alcohol...they had it all...they had all the drugs.*

This desirability for drugs highlights that prior to these participants becoming affiliated with a youth gang; they had already experimented with these illicit substances. A group of participants explained that their previous exposure to these substances had them chasing more. Becoming a member of a youth gang was the easiest way to get greater access to the drugs that they desired.

*Rua: I was already into drugs beforehand...I could just get more with them [the gang].*

*Toanga: I was already into drugs beforehand so it was just like a bonus...that would be a thing that would make you want to join a bit more.*

Once in the gang, participants explained that many of the members used drugs daily when socialising together. In order to do this, participants explained that they were often truant from school which enabled them to spend time with their crew. This was exemplified when participants were asked to describe what a normal day in the gang looked like.

*Rua: Could be fighting, smoking weed, doing more drugs like 'P<sup>5</sup>' and that.*

*Henare: Drinking, smoking, going out, looking for fights, while being drunk. That would be a good day, that would be a fun day (laughs). Yea, just that...stealing, breaking into houses...any place...looking for safes.*

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<sup>5</sup> This is used to describe the drug 'Methamphetamine', a designer drug that has a powerful stimulant effect on a person's central nervous system.

*Rapata: Oh when I was about 12...hanging around with all my mates...going out...staying out late at night...then we started smoking drugs and stuff.*

Participants spoke about a variety of different drugs that they had experimented with. All participants described frequent marijuana use, explaining that as children it was easier to access than alcohol. Participants also spoke about using A class drugs like 'P' or pure methamphetamine from as young as 14 years of age. Despite all participants describing frequent drug use, it was important to note that drug use served different functions. For one group of participants, drugs enabled individuals to feel more comfortable committing criminal activities. The goods that were stolen in the subsequent burglaries were then sold to purchase more drugs.

*Henare: Yea it's like, come have a puff [of methamphetamine] and then that would normally get you going, then you are back out there again...until you have got to sleep I suppose...do a couple of nights up...then the longer you do it...the more fucking...the more worse it gets...you seem to do all sorts of fucking things. I do anyway...when I'm on it...gets you more keen anyway...to find the bigger bag [of methamphetamine].*

Henare went on to explain that the gang would initially make it easy to get drugs by allowing him to pay at a later stage. After using these drugs, both Henare and Rua explained that they would have to go and steal goods to pay their drug debts. They further went on to explain that it was impossible to pay for their drug use by working a legitimate job, further reinforcing their antisocial behaviour.

*Henare: Yea you would be on tick<sup>6</sup>...or they would offer you tick...then you would have to make up for it... you would have to go and steal or how else are you going to pay for it. But you knew where to find it though.*

*Rua: Go and do some burglaries, rob some cars or something...houses.*

Finally, some participants explained that they used 'A' class drugs in particular not for their own satisfaction, but because other members in the gang were partaking in these activities. They explained that in order to fit in with the group, they felt it necessary to try the variety of drugs that were being used in the gang.

*Rua: It's just that we do it cos the rest of the crew do it. Got to feel cool with them.*

*Hemi: Nah...in my neighbourhood it wasn't something they forced you to do [smoke marijuana], they would just ask you and I would just see everyone else doing it so I just had a try.*

*Teine: the drugs, you know it's just like...the president is your conscious...so whatever the pressie says goes...or else you get a hiding, your dead or your out. Or I don't know...get an alias and move around the world.*

It would appear based on the explanations given by participants that their pre-existing interest in drug use prior to youth gang membership encouraged them to affiliate with like-minded peers. Once in the gang, participants felt

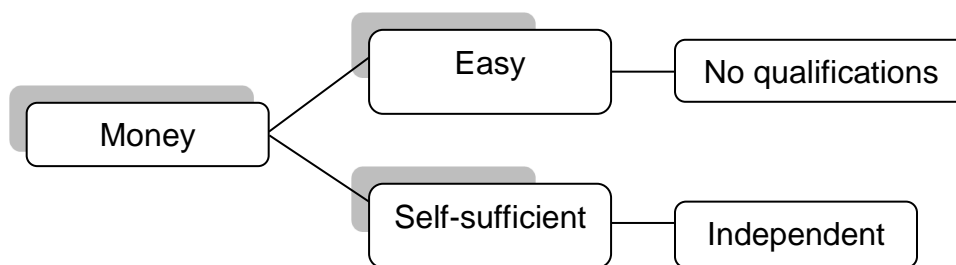
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<sup>6</sup> Slang used to describe a loan offered by the gang

pressured to experiment with other drugs that may not have been used if participants had not affiliated with the gang. This process of experimenting with drugs was described as further cementing the friendships amongst those in the gang.

## Access to Money

The third theme that was identified within this data set highlights the importance of money both in the gang and to individual members. While the concept of money has been introduced in previous themes, participants described the potential to earn an income in the gang as one of the fundamental reasons for joining. This section will focus on why participants felt so enticed by the prospect of making money (see figure 5). To begin, dialogue from participants has been selected to demonstrate the ease by which participants could earn money through pathways that were already well established by existing gang members. Secondly, participants explained that by having access to an income they felt they could be self-sufficient and independent.



**Figure 5: An outline of the subthemes relevant to 'Money'.**

### *Easy*

Many of the participants interviewed in this study explained that as children, their families seldom could afford to purchase items that were both needed

and desired. As a consequence of their family's financial situation, participants explained that from a young age, they felt obliged to obtain money in the easiest way to ensure they could purchase the goods they needed. For many, this included participating in criminal activities like selling drugs or stolen goods. It could also be achieved by joining a gang which had well established systems to make money quickly. This process is exemplified by the following statements:

*Teine: When you are a young age, you can't really do nothing, you can't go to work you can't do nothing. You can only get money off your mum and that might only be five bucks for a month cos they are tight on bills and everything, and you got no clothes and stuff so that was the easiest way to do it...it was the smartest way was to join a gang and get whatever the 'f' you want. Money, whatever...bitches.*

*Maui: The way it was going [within the gang] was more easier, and faster than making [money] honestly.*

One of the many ways participants could make money was through the sale of stolen goods. Not only did participants explain that it was unproblematic to acquire saleable products, but that customers had often been previously arranged to purchase these stolen products. This was important as participants had access to customers who were interested in the goods they were offering. Participants also had a way of earning an income that was not dependent on the qualifications they had acquired from school or other learning facilities. As many of the participants left school at a young age, they explained that they could still make a good income without acquiring any formal qualifications. After experiencing the ease at which money could be made, many participants felt that remaining in school would in fact be detrimental to the business opportunities within the gang.

*Rapata: That's not going to make you money [staying at school]...the way to make money is...ya no...faster. I get the money (clicks fingers) when I want the money...ya no...at school, you just sit around...don't really learn much.*

*Henare: Yea...easy money. Don't need no qualifications for big money...yea.*

In addition to stolen goods, drugs were also sold by participants as a means of income. Participants described this enterprise as a regular, reliable, and dissimilar to being employed in any other workplace.

*Rapata: That's just like...just like having a job...having a job making money for the family...putting bread and butter on the table. It's not a bad thing, you are just selling the drugs.*

*Toanga: Sometimes you get told to go and make the payments...oh not the payments but go and drop things off to other gangs or like places where they are dropping off the drugs and get the money or whatever.*

In this sense, participants often described themselves as evolving into businessmen. This professionalism associated with their enterprise was important to ensure longevity and ease in this business world. Participants further explained that if you were considered reliable and trustworthy, you would seldom have to deal with negative consequences from either fellow gang members or others in the community.

*Rapata: If you are a businessman...then business is business. You make sure business is done the right way...ya no...someone could*

*come and drop me a car off right, I go sell it...ring them straight away...then boom...gave them the money...its trust*

*Maui: It's more about the money...it's all about making the money now.*

If individuals selling these products were not reliable, then participants explained that the consequences of this gang affiliated business were far more detrimental. Not only were there consequences from other gang members, but there were also ramifications if caught by law enforcement agencies.

*Rapata: You don't have to be violent to make money. Cos you could be selling drugs for someone...they could come drop a package off...and then you have to sell it...and if that is not sold or the money is not there...then...ya know...you could be beaten up, killed. Ya know...it's all a game...you gotta pick your right moves...to win.*

In acknowledging the potential consequences for being involved in such ventures, all participants felt that they were responsible for their own actions. In the instances where they were caught, they were prepared to take the allocated punishment for their activities. Similarly, participants did not feel the gang was responsible for their actions or that the gang made them participate in something when they were not willing.

*Henare: Nah, if you get caught...it's pretty much over for you until you get out [of prison]. Yea...there won't be any contact or anything, you are on your own then. Yea.*

*Rapata: Yup, I worry about the consequences...but it's your own choices. What you want to do...mmm.*

It is therefore evident that there are many avenues in which individuals can make money easily within the gang. These opportunities were considered to be extremely valuable by participants as they often described their families' financial situation and their lack of formal qualifications as being barriers to acquiring money. While participants were aware of the risks associated with these criminal ventures, they had been successful in organising regular transactions for a number of years and were therefore motivated to continue into the future.

### *Self Sufficient*

Not only were participants enticed into the gang lifestyle to earn money easily, but also because they needed to be financially self-sufficient away from their families. As described earlier, many of these participants left both school and home at an early age in pursuit of their friends in the gang. Despite belonging to a brotherhood, they still needed to be financially self-sufficient to ensure they could afford to sustain their chosen lifestyle. This was important to many participants as staying on a government benefit was not something that they wanted to aspire to.

*Rapata: Surviving...Oh, nah not so much...rich, more keeping yourself in line...making sure you don't end up on the streets like them...make sure you don't end up in jail like them...yea.*

*Hemi: I don't want to live on the DOLE<sup>7</sup> for the rest of my life. Have nothing, nothing to look at, nothing to live for, nothing to show for.*

Being self-sufficient was not only a rationale for joining the gang, but also a goal for the future. Some participants had decided to enroll with alternative

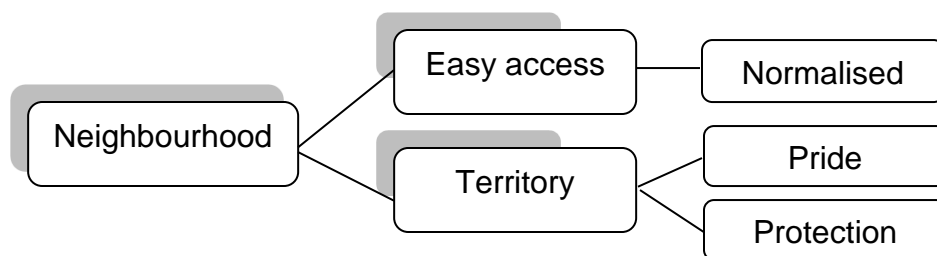
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<sup>7</sup> This term refers to the unemployment benefit paid by the state to individuals who are unemployed.

education providers to gain the necessary qualifications to seek further study or education. This was an attempt to have better employment prospects. For other participants, they had planned to pursue their business ventures in the gang to ensure they were financially stable in the future.

## Neighbourhood Surroundings

The fourth theme that was identified within this dataset highlights the perceived influence that neighbourhood surroundings have on youth gang membership. There were a variety of different ways in which participants felt their neighbourhood both influenced and maintained their youth gang membership initially (as shown in figure 6). These interpretations will be discussed in the following section. Firstly, dialogue has been selected to highlight how influential youth gangs were in these participants' neighbourhoods. Many considered youth gang membership to be both normal and expected within their respective communities. Once affiliated with a gang, participants then described the sense of ownership that members of the gang had towards their neighbourhood. This in turn would heighten their desire to protect their surroundings.



**Figure 6: An outline of the subthemes relevant to 'Neighbourhood Surroundings'.**

### *Easy Access*

Participants spoke about their neighbourhoods or communities as being influential in socializing them towards youth gang membership. Many participants explained that within their neighbourhoods, youth gang membership was perceived to be a normal developmental milestone; something that was expected during childhood. Children would affiliate with a certain gang colour or crew that existed in close proximity to their house or school. The following statements have been selected to emphasize this:

*Rua: It was a normal thing for me... gangs, cos that is what everyone is into anyways. From where I am from.*

*Teine: There was all the influence [in the neighbourhood], everywhere, streets, every house, whenever [youth] walk out...whatever...whatever they done [in their neighbourhood] was an influence for gangs, for joining them...whatever.*

*Rapata: Yip...that's where the gangsters were [in the neighbourhood]. It's the thing...it's good to have mates that look after you and are always there for you.*

*Toanga: Yea trying to fit in pretty much... fit into your hood, your place where you live...whatever.*

*Henare: Yea... it was the neighbourhood, just being home. Yea everyone was into it...everywhere I went anyway.*

Participants perceived the close proximity of their friends to be important as they were easily accessible in instances of threat or attack from others. This was exemplified in the following statements:

*Maui: Yea that was the best thing to do, was just to stay close together...and try and stay in the same block...and just...stay in like calling distance and just try and keep the ones that we didn't like out of there. Yea.*

*Toanga: I kind of felt safe cos of all the bros around you kind of thing... there is still the possibility of unsafeness and all that around, but you just don't really care if you got your bros back and your bros got your back. It's just I didn't really feel scared or anything.*

### *Territory*

These young people explained that within their neighbourhoods, youth gangs were highly visible and alluring. When discussing how the neighbourhood was influential in maintaining youth gang membership, participants explained that they experienced a sense of ownership over the area that their gang occupied. This invoked a desire to protect their territory from rival gangs or intruders. This was exemplified in the statements bellow:

*Henare: Yea you would [protect your neighbourhood] if [rival gangs] came over your way. Run out with a bat, yea, get them outta there, you wouldn't let them roam around your streets. It's a territory thing, you think that you own it.*

*Maui: Yea it is our turf...but to keep [rival gangs] out so that they wouldn't come in... start making money off our customers or something...or start robbing us...or bash up one of our members...without us knowing.*

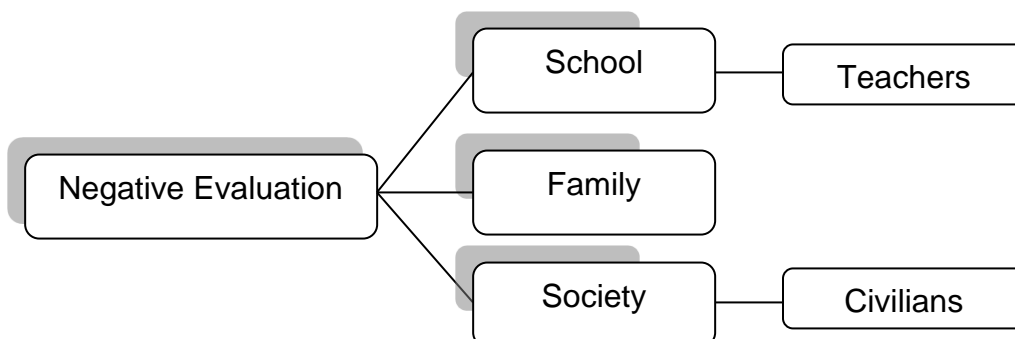
*Rapata: Yup...we have our streets that we take care of.*

*Neighbourhoods....towns...it's a pretty big affiliation. You have to be pretty dedicated to do it.*

As the gangs that these participants were affiliated with successfully protected their neighbourhoods from rival gangs, their reputation and notoriety would increase. Participants explained that they were proud of their neighbourhoods and where they had come from, particularly as they were known by others to be “staunch” or “tough”.

### **Negative Evaluation from Others**

The final theme that was identified within this data set encompasses the negative evaluation or judgement that these participants perceivably experienced from others. Participants identified a variety of different instances across their life course where they felt judged or stereotyped. As a consequence of these experiences, their desire to follow social norms and rules was impeded. These experiences will be highlighted within this section. Firstly, statements have been selected to demonstrate the degree of stigmatization these participants perceived they had experienced at school. Statements have then been selected to demonstrate participants' experiences of perceived judgement from their family members and society more generally. These subthemes are highlighted in figure 7.



**Figure 7: An outline of the subthemes relevant to ‘Negative Evaluation from Others’.**

## *School*

When participants were asked about their experiences at school, seldom did they describe their encounters as being enjoyable. Instead, many explained that they felt negatively judged by teaching staff due to their family backgrounds. Some participants explained that upon reflection, their behaviour at school was not desirable, but that they perceived teachers to do little to encourage them. This is exemplified by the following statements:

*Hemi: I just didn't like the teachers. The learning was all good... I was always like top for most things. Um like, I just never liked the teachers. They always used to judge me before they got to know me. Like always just used to think that I was dumb and stuff, and then when they would get my test results, they would find out that I was actually brainier than what they thought I was. But then they would still run me down. And that would just piss me off. Yea, like I thought that they thought that Māori boys couldn't make it nowhere. Still, even though they knew that I could do things, they never used to let me do those kind of things. Like um...even though I would get high math's scores and that in a test, they would put me in the lowest math's group where I would be doing pluses and all the higher maths groups would be doing area and all that kind of hard maths. But they just used to put me in the dumb group even though they knew that I could do the other stuff. And I just, I just hated being judged.*

*Teine: Yea... I thought that my teachers were racist...racist... yea.*

*Toanga: Nah! [the teachers] didn't care, we were not their star pupils, so they didn't really care cos we were already not really in to work so*

*they weren't really going to try and help us if they knew that we were not really into it.*

*Maui: Oh just detention...or...trying to split the groups up through different classes...yea...or just suspend you...getting suspended. Yea...that kind of stuff.*

Participants explained that while they often perceived their teachers to underestimate their potential, they also had difficulties adapting to the school environment. Participants extended on this by explaining that they perceived the education system to be dictatorial in nature. Within the gang, participants described the freedom they had to make their own choices. Within the school environment, this freedom was removed which many participants found difficult.

*Hemi: Oh I just don't like being told what to do!*

*Toanga: Like if we get told what to do...it just makes us not want to do it anymore. Like if you just let us do it in our own time we will get it done, but if you tell us what to do it's just not on kind of thing. Just don't like it.*

*Rapata: Oh...nah [I did not get on well with the teachers]... not really. I'm too used to hanging around people older than me...and it's like...they are trying to treat me...that's how I feel...treating me like I am a little baby. Like a kid...like I have to be looked after or something. I don't like people telling me what to do , I don't like being told what to do...ya know...yea...some people try and avoid saying that you don't like being told what to do...and stuff like that...well I am being straight up...don't tell me what to do.*

As discussed previously, many of these participants attended school to meet new friends who were like-minded and interested in the youth gang lifestyle. This section highlights that these participants perceived the school system to provide them with little other support or encouragement to refrain from their pursuits within the gang. As a result, participants became entrenched within the gang lifestyle, enabling them to have access to money and support that was not available from the mainstream education system.

### *Family*

Not only did participants perceive they were negatively judged within the school environment, but also within their family environment. As discussed previously, participants explained that one of the primary reasons they were enticed to join the gang was because they were not experiencing the desired love and support from their immediate families. Participants expanded on this theme by explaining that they were often negatively judged and their behavior was misinterpreted by close family members. This is exemplified in the following statements:

*Hemi: My mum never used to...like when I used to come home with certificates from school...she just used to run me down... say that I could have done better...it was never like 'oh congratulations boy, you got a certificate', she used to just run me down about it. And then I just, dunno, stopped going...if people are just going to pull me down about achieving things. And that is when I just turned to gangs.*

*Henare: It was more...umm..cos I was a thief...and things were going missing at her [my mother's] house...that's what it was...and I was to blame for it...cos I was a thief...yea...that was fucked up.*

*Teine: Judging...yea...judging. Just to prove a point. What really started me was my nana and poppa used to judge me a lot. Like money or just stupid things [would go missing]...like there would be a empty bottle outside, and they would say that I didn't put it in the rubbish bin but it wasn't even me.*

It would appear from these statements that participants perceived themselves as being scapegoats when things were amiss within the family home.

Similarly, when opportunities for praise arose because of good behaviour, participants felt that family members failed to recognise this. Participants explained that they were frustrated by the lack of trust that family members had for them, particularly as they often had unwritten rules within the gang that they would not steal or disrespect family property.

### *Society*

Not only did participants perceive that they were negatively judged both at school and within their families, but some participants spoke further about the way citizens within their communities would interact with them. For these participants, they described their awareness of the way people in society would disregard them. Some of the statements given by participants are as follows:

*Teine: And even walking around the neighbourhood and I would try and talk to like an older person, like an old white person sitting at the bus stop and they just would look down on me, like oh I would sit next to an old person and say oh 'hey sir, how was your day?' and he would just look away. Look down on me and that's just, that always just used to piss me off. Make me even more angry and make me just wanna go out there and get more money. Pisses me off straight away. They just judge me straight away.*

*Hemi: Yea, like I would get introduced to a lot of people and they would say oh...you are going to rip me off...and just because they said that I would rip them off cos I just wanted to prove the point. I'm not going to rip you off if you treat me as an equal, I will treat you as an equal.*

These experiences of negative evaluation were very salient to the participants. More importantly, each time they encountered situations where either mainstream society or their immediate families had negatively evaluated them, it reinforced their antisocial behaviours further. This is evident in the following statements:

*Hemi: If you think that I am going to be a bad arse, I am going to prove it. I am going to be the baddest cunt ever.*

*Teine: So yea... [my parents] started thinking that I was lazy so I just proved that point...I'll be lazy if you think that I am lazy.*

### *Summary*

Based on the way these participants have interpreted their experiences, it would appear that they felt judged and stereotyped in a variety of different life domains. This includes experiencing negative evaluation from teachers, family members and civilians more generally. Participants have responded to these social constructions of themselves by simply conforming to these. This includes behaving violently, being lazy, or being a thief and dishonest.

## Chapter Summary

Five primary themes have been selected from this dataset to best represent the experiences of these participants and their rationale for youth gang membership. While each theme was explored separately, they were not necessarily mutually exclusive. For many, the journey towards youth gang membership was dependent on a number of circumstances and experiences that subsequently made the youth gang lifestyle alluring and appealing.

The first theme titled 'Influence of Friends' explored the degree of support that was provided by friends in the gang and meaning that was attributed to that. For many participants, their friends in the gang became a substitute family, providing both the support and access to tangible goods that was desired. Participation in 'Antisocial Behaviour' as a group or gang was then explored. Antisocial behaviour most frequently included violence or drug taking. For these participants, a willingness to participate in such behaviours provided opportunities for greater respect, power and notoriety amongst like-minded peers. 'Money' as a motivating factor for youth gang membership was then explored. For many participants, they were unable to sustain their chosen lifestyle within the gang without participating in criminal ventures. The gang facilitated these ventures, making it easy to have a regular income without having to stay at school or acquire qualifications. Participants then described the influence of their 'neighbourhood surroundings' and how they facilitated youth gang membership. Many of these participants explained that the process of joining a gang was normalized and expected within their communities. As youth gang members were often in close proximity to one another, they would assume responsibility for protecting their neighbourhoods. Finally, participants spoke about the 'Negative Evaluation' they perceived to experience from others and the influence that had on maintaining antisocial behaviours and youth gang membership. Participants explained that despite their intentions, they often perceived others to

stereotype their behaviours as being ill-intentioned. This frustrated participants and motivated them to further behave in the manner others expected of them.

Overall, these themes highlight the variety of different functions youth gang memberships serve for individuals. Many of these participants explained that the gang was able to provide them with acceptance, support and tangible goods that were not available elsewhere. In response to this, the gang expects commitment and loyalty from each member. It is this cycle that appears to maintain youth gang membership.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Discussion**

The focus of this chapter is to discuss the research findings of this study with reference to the literature discussed in Chapter One. This will be followed by suggestions as to how communities and other organizations can better accommodate the needs of young people at risk of joining youth gangs. The limitations of this study will then be highlighted. Finally, suggestions will be made for future research to promote an on-going interest and understanding of young people who participate in youth gangs.

### **Key Findings**

The results presented in Chapter Three suggest that these participants experienced individual, familial and environmental difficulties which contributed to their desire for youth gang membership. In searching for a sense of belonging, the gang provided these young people with the emotional and financial support that they desired. Once accepted into a gang, individuals had access to the respect and notoriety that was otherwise unavailable to them. The gang also ensured members had access to a reliable income which could be used to purchase drugs, alcohol and other tangible goods. The reliability of the gang to fulfil the needs of these individuals meant they could withdraw from mainstream society. This included withdrawing from their education providers. As these young people began to withdraw from society, they perceived their teachers, family members and the general public to stereotype and judge them as being failures. This in turn reinforced their membership to a gang whose members supported and understood their needs.

## **Discussion of the findings**

A comparison between the findings of the current study and the existing literature suggests that there are seemingly consistent factors which influence and maintain youth gang membership both in New Zealand and internationally. By using the themes that were pertinent to this study, existing literature will be provided to either support or refute these findings. Initially, the literature on the 'Influence of peers' will be discussed in relation to the findings of this study. This will be followed by a discussion of the literature on 'Antisocial behaviour' and how it reflects the experiences of these young people. Following this will be a discussion on how 'Access to money', 'Neighbourhood surroundings' and 'Negative Evaluation from others' is discussed within the literature and whether it is consistent with the experiences of these participants.

### *Influence of Friends*

The literature has readily discussed the influence that friends or peers have in increasing the desire for youth gang membership (Thornberry *et al.*, 2003). In many instances, existing youth gang members are understood to promote substance abuse, sexual promiscuity and other delinquent behaviours (Dolcini *et al.*, 2005). Less frequently acknowledged is the role that existing youth gang members have in accepting and nurturing young people who have often been rejected by both main stream society and their families (Maclure & Sotelo, 2004).

Many participants explained that they were initially attracted to youth gangs as they were considered to be the "cool" group to affiliate with. In being accepted into this group, participants explained that they were respected and noticed by others in their community. Participants also explained that the gang served as a substitute family, providing each member with the support and protection that was desired. Researchers have previously theorised that

young people congregate together to strengthen their social identity and to achieve a greater sense of protection (Harper *et al.*, 2008; White & Mason, 2006). The strength of the friendships within a group are said to be enhanced when young people originate from similar class, ethnic and religious backgrounds (White & Mason, 2006). Participants in this study explained that their friends in the gang were situated in close proximity to their school and family home. They also explained that there was a commonality in many of their childhood experiences. Many of these young people perceived that their biological family members failed to provide them with the tangible goods and support that they desired. In becoming affiliated with a youth gang, participants explained that they had access to the support, protection and provision of tangible goods from a group of friends who had similar experiences. This finding was consistent with the New Zealand study on youth gang membership conducted by the Ministry of Social Development (2006). They found that friends in the gang provided young people with a proxy family unit, financial and material gain, the alleviation of boredom, protection and status. These protective mechanisms are less frequently reported in the international literature. It was, however, observed that the primary focus of many international studies was to identify how friend or peer groups influence delinquent behaviour (Farrington, 2005; Gatti *et al.*, 2005; Hill *et al.*, 1999).

When reflecting on the influence that friends have on youth gang membership and delinquency, several studies have been conducted with varying results. Lahey and Colleagues (1999) found that antisocial peers had the greatest influence on youth gang membership during early adolescence. Participants in this study explained that they began to seek acceptance from friends in a youth gang between the ages of nine and thirteen. This finding is significant when considering the development of early intervention programs to prevent youth gang membership. These young people explained that by early adolescence, they were enmeshed in the youth gang lifestyle and could see

few other alternatives to achieve the money, drugs, support and respect that they had available to them in the gang.

When considering the role those friends in the gang had in influencing delinquency, it would appear that the enhancement model (Thornberry *et al.*, 2003) best described the experiences of these young people. Participants explained that prior to joining a gang they had used illicit substances and had the opportunity to earn money illegally. As a result of these experiences, participants explained that they were seeking greater exposure to tangible goods like drugs and money. They were also searching for greater respect, status and power within the gang. These privileges within the gang meant there was an expectation that members partake in activities that would have previously been avoided. This included using substances like methamphetamine to fit in with their friends in the gang. Participants also alluded to the increase in violent and aggressive behaviours that were expected once in a gang. This finding that the gang facilitates an increase in antisocial behaviours has been reliably observed in other studies (Esbensen *et al.*, 2001; Thornberry *et al.*, 2003).

It is therefore expected that friends in the gang served two primary functions. Firstly, gangs provided participants with the support and protection that was not readily available in other domains of their life. Secondly, gang membership facilitated interactions with like-minded peers who had similar interests and needs. For many, this included participation in antisocial behaviours like drug use and violence. In seeking these experiences, participants also explained that they were encouraged to participate in antisocial behaviours that would have previously been avoided.

### *Antisocial Behaviour*

While the influence friends have in encouraging antisocial behaviours has previously been discussed, it is important to consider how these behaviours influenced and maintained youth gang membership more generally. The term 'antisocial behaviour' has been used to describe an individuals' involvement in violence, theft, robbery, and drug use. Participants in this study explained that they had actively participated in these activities from a young age. This desire to be involved in antisocial activities from such a young age may be explained developmentally (Browning & Loeber, 1999) or may be indicative of a biological predisposition (Capsi, 2000; Farrington, 2005). The pursuit of antisocial activities may also be influenced by the modeling of antisocial behaviour from relatives during childhood.

Research has shown that parental involvement in criminal offending, gang membership and substance use is predictive of youth gang membership (Farrington, 2005; Loeber *et al.*, 1995). The most influential antisocial relative is considered to be the child's father; however the arrest of extended family members has also predicted delinquency in boys (Farrington, 2005). When participants reflected on their childhood experiences, they explained that their fathers, uncles or cousins were often absent as they had prior commitments to a gang or because they were incarcerated. Seldom did these participants mention the role of their female relatives in nurturing and supporting them during their childhood. In searching for a sense of belonging within a primarily male group, these young people found the gangs to provide them the support and protection they were perceivably missing. It also facilitated an opportunity to earn the respect and power they desired.

Establishing this respect and notoriety was seemingly significant for these young people. One way this could be achieved was by demonstrating a willingness to participate in violence and other antisocial behaviours. Once in

the gang, the respect given by like-minded peers was contingent upon successful drug deals, fights, and other criminal behaviour. With the respect of others, participants could make the rules and no longer had to do the undesirable chores within the gang. White and Mason (2006) found that young people who joined gangs were motivated by the increase in status and reputation that was achieved by making money and acquiring drugs illegally. They also found that participating in physical altercations served to increase the status of individual members within the gang (White & Mason, 2006). The participants in this study elaborated on these previous findings. They explained that with respect being contingent on a willingness to participate in antisocial activities, they were able to gain notoriety from men of all ages. This made it difficult for these young people to engage at school and within other community groups. They explained that their experiences within the gang enabled them to choose the activities that they participated in and dictate the rules of those engagements. Furthermore, they explained that they seldom had other people telling them what to do once respect had been established.

For many of the participants in this study, the risk of partaking in antisocial activities was not significant enough to consider more pro-social alternatives. This was exemplified when two participants spoke about their experiences in prison. As opposed to perceiving prison as a deterrent, they explained that the skills and knowledge that they had in the community were merely enhanced in jail. They also considered having gang affiliations to be advantageous when imprisoned as it guaranteed protection and support in a volatile environment. This finding has been discussed in the international literature, suggesting that many young people who are processed through the criminal justice system are not discouraged from engaging in further antisocial activities (Browning & Huizinga, 1999).

When participants further reflected on the consequences of antisocial behaviours, some considered the world to be unpredictable and untrustworthy as a result of their involvement in antisocial activities. This realisation seemingly reinforced the importance of friends in the gang to support and defend one another. It may have also served to reinforce their beliefs and attitudes about antisocial behaviours. One of the primary beliefs that were frequently discussed was that violence was necessary to overcome conflict or threat from others. To ensure they were adequately prepared to defend both their territory and friends in the gang, these young people would engage in different training regimes to enhance their strength and combat skills. They would also equip themselves with weapons which they were prepared to use at all times.

An involvement in antisocial behaviour was therefore considered to be significant in both influencing and maintaining youth gang membership. For many of the participants in this study, they were initially attracted to the gang due to previous experiences with drugs, fighting and obtaining money illegally. Once accepted into the gang, involvement with these antisocial behaviours allowed for greater respect and notoriety amongst likeminded peers. This reinforced beliefs about the need to participate in such activities. Furthermore, the benefits of engaging in such behaviours seemingly outweighed any potential legal consequences.

### *Access to Money*

In addition to the importance of friends and an involvement in antisocial behaviours, it is also important to consider how the acquisition of money influenced youth gang membership for these young people. It has long been suggested that youth gang activity is more prevalent in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Bellamy, 2009; Dupéré *et al.*, 2007; Hill *et al.*, 1999). One hypothesis for this observation is that gangs provide young

people with the opportunity for financial and material gain (Bellamy, 2009). This hypothesis has however been critiqued by other authors. Andrews and Bonta (2006) suggest that personal, interpersonal, familial and cultural variables are significantly more reliable at predicting criminal involvement than economic disadvantage. The young people in this study perceived that their family's financial situation was a significant motivator for acquiring money illegally. Many explained that they came from families that could not financially provide for all the needs and wants of their children. In searching for alternative ways to acquire their desired possessions, these young people were prepared to sell drugs and stolen goods from a young age. This willingness to participate in antisocial behaviours was one way in which they were recognised by local gangs. Participants explained that by joining a gang they were provided with additional strategies to earn money.

The ease at which these young people could make money illegally impacted on other areas of their lives. Many explained that they had the means to purchase the clothes, food, drugs and alcohol that they desired. In having this independence, these young people often referred to the respect others would give them. Participants also explained that upon having money and respect within the gang, their desire to attend school diminished. Few participants recognised the advantages of having high school qualifications. Furthermore, they perceived that staying at school would have in fact been detrimental to the business opportunities within the gang. Previous researchers have identified that poor commitment to school and few educational goals are predictive of youth gang membership (Esbensen, Huizinga & Weiher, 1993; White & Mason, 2006). The ability of the gang to serve as an alternative to education is not as frequently discussed within the literature. It is difficult to decipher whether poor school performance precedes youth gang membership or whether a commitment to the gang discouraged school attendance. It is likely that both of these explanations are true, to varying degrees, in individual cases. The young people in this study did however explain that the availability

of money and respect from their friends in the gang gave them few good reasons to remain at school.

### *Neighbourhood Surroundings*

The influence of each young person's neighbourhood on youth gang membership will now be considered. Studies have found that youth gangs typically gather in the streets and parks within disadvantaged neighbourhoods (White & Mason, 2006). This observation has prompted researchers to identify the risk factors for youth people within these neighbourhoods. Subsequent studies have shown that risk factors include the availability of drugs, perception of safety by residents, high rates of arrest and neighbourhood disorganization (Howell & Egley, 2005). For many of the young people in this study, they explained that youth gang membership was normalized within their neighbourhood. Not only were gangs highly visible and considered to be cool, but there were few barriers to joining. Many of the young people explained that family members had previously exposed them to gang membership and antisocial behaviours. When opportunities to join a gang were presented, participants explained that there were few adverse consequences to consider.

Investigations into how youth gangs continue to exist within some neighbourhoods have been conducted internationally. Many authors have found that within disadvantaged neighbourhoods there is low collective efficacy due to high turnover of residents, less trust of neighbours and increased parental stressors (Ingoldsby *et al.*, 2006). As a consequence, it is hypothesised that community residents are less likely and able to monitor and respond to antisocial youth groupings or criminal activities (Sampson *et al.*, 2002). Young people residing in these neighbourhoods are then at risk of frequently observing antisocial behaviours. This increases the likelihood that violent and delinquent acts are modeled to young people as successful and

appropriate ways to socialize and solve problems (Hill *et al.* 1999). These findings were evident in this study. Many participants explained that they witnessed antisocial youth groupings participate in fights and commit crimes within their neighbourhood from a young age. This seemingly influenced youth gang membership in two ways. Firstly, youth grew up with antisocial activities modeled to them both by family members and by others in their community. Secondly, youth often felt unsafe existing as an individual both within their neighbourhood and at school. To avoid being bullied by other youth groupings, participants explained that they looked to a gang for support and protection.

Once the gang became established, participants explained that they experienced a sense of ownership over their streets and neighbourhood. As part of this ownership, they perceived that their role was to protect their streets from unwanted threat. This desire to assume ownership over their territory has been detailed in previous studies (Nakhid, 2009). Further investigation has, however, suggested that the willingness for a gang to protect their neighbourhood relates only to keeping rival gangs out of their assumed territory (Nakhid, 2009). These findings are consistent with the reports from the young people in this study. If rival gangs were allowed to enter into their neighbourhood, participants explained that they may make money off their customers. They also alluded to the possibility that rival gangs could steal from or fight their members. The ability of each gang to adequately protect their territory was also considered to be another way in which they could increase the notoriety and respect they had amongst like-minded peers.

#### *Negative Evaluation from Others*

The final theme to be considered when identifying some of the different variables that influence youth gang membership is the negative evaluation

that perceivably occurs from others. Many young people in this study explained that from a young age, they felt judged at school, by others in the community and by some family members. This finding is not frequently discussed within the literature. As discussed previously, many studies have found that the individual variables like antisocial attitudes are reliable predictors of both youth gang membership and criminal offending (Andrews & Bonta, 2006; Howell & Egley, 2005). While a discussion on the attitudes of these young people towards school has previously been covered, the origins of these antisocial attitudes have been less well articulated. For many of these young people, they explained that their attitudes and beliefs developed after being perceivably misunderstood by others.

For many of these young people, the most salient memories of being misunderstood were at primary and secondary school. Within this study, participants described two different experiences of negative evaluation from teachers. For one group, they explained that they enjoyed the learning experiences at school but perceived their teachers to have little faith in their abilities. This was distressing for these participants as they explained that they wanted to learn, but their potential was neither recognised nor developed by their teachers. Many participants perceived that their teacher's lack of enthusiasm to encourage and facilitate learning was because they were young Māori boys. For the other group of participants, they explained that they had difficulties with the academic work expected of them at school. For this group, participants explained that they seldom received the support that they needed from their teachers to pass. Furthermore, they explained that they often did not find the academic curriculum interesting or stimulating. Despite the different origins of these perceivable problems at school, both groups expressed resentment towards their teachers and had little motivation to return to their education providers. While there is little research on the origins of school refusal within the youth gang literature, there are significant findings to suggest that few educational goals and low attachment to school

predicts poor outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (Howell & Egley, 2005). For these participants, their attachment to an education provider may have been enhanced if they perceived themselves to be in a supportive and nurturing environment that better met their academic needs.

Further to these negative experiences at school, some participants also discussed the stereotypes that they perceived society to have of them. Despite many of these participants explaining that they were frequently involved in antisocial activities, they also wanted to be considered as valued members of society. When unknown individuals or groups made negative assumptions about some of the young people in this study, they explained that they became offended and angry. This invoked them to behave in the manner that others expected of them. This was exemplified when a young person in this study explained that an unknown individual had approached him in the past and assumed that he was a thief. In making that assumption, this young person said that he wanted to steal from that individual despite not having that intention originally. Other participants said that they had encountered similar situations from both people within their community and extended family members. Many participants said that within their families, they had often been incorrectly accused of behaving inappropriately. It was these accusations that inspired these young people to take on that persona to such an extreme level. While this finding is not frequently discussed within the youth gang literature, it is consistent with the self-fulfilling prophecy discussed frequently within the social psychology literature (Brezina & Aragonés, 2004). Central to this concept is that people internalise labels that are given by others (i.e. delinquent) and behave accordingly. The consequences of assuming that label include being excluded by family members, peer groups and education providers. This in turn increases the likelihood that individuals continue to behave in a manner consistent with their label and associate with likeminded peers (Brezina & Aragonés, 2004). While it is not recommended that the self-fulfilling prophecy be adapted to explain the origin of each

antisocial attitude and set of behaviours described by these young people, it would appear that these young people were very aware of the labels attributed to them. In perceiving that these labels were unfair on many occasions, these young people would ensure that they met people's expectations by being by best thief, liar, or violent person they could be.

### *Summary*

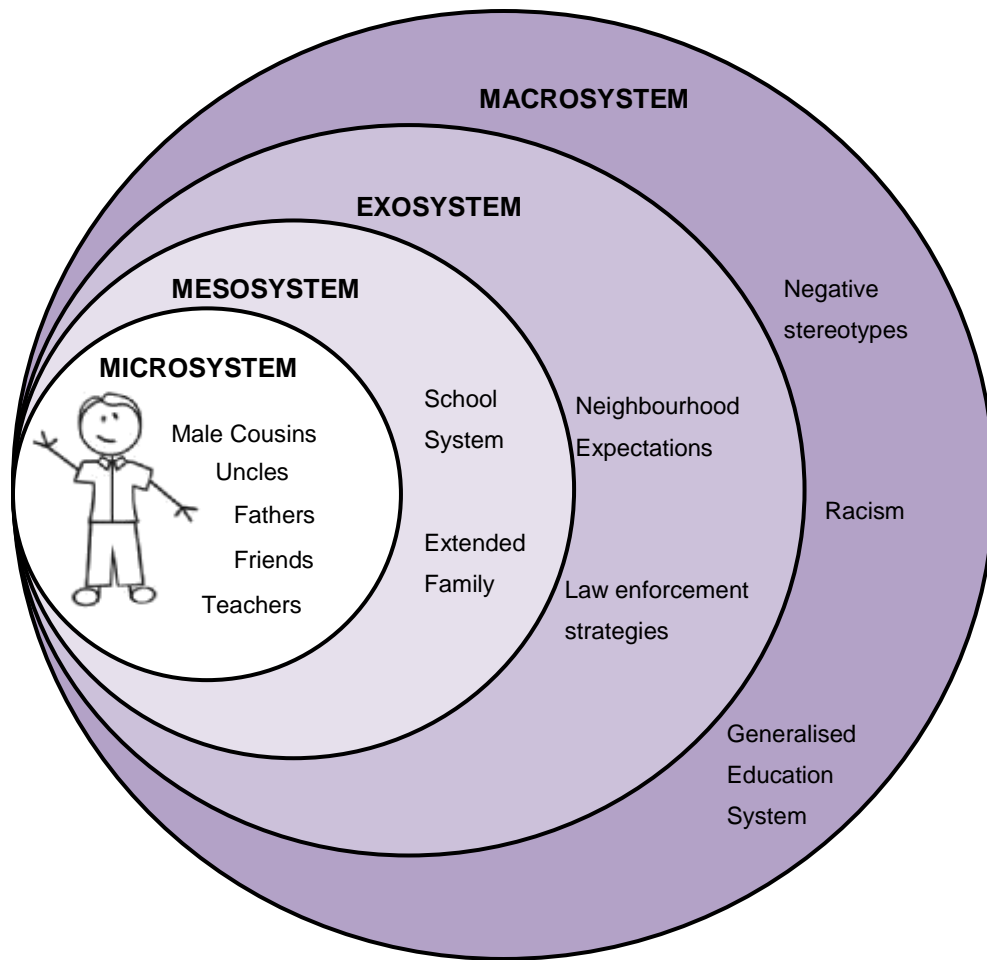
Based on both the findings of this study and the existing body of literature, it would appear that there are factors which consistently increase the risk for youth gang membership. These risk factors include the influence of friends, a willingness to participate in antisocial behaviours for greater respect, notoriety and material gain, and disadvantaged neighbourhood surroundings which expose young people to antisocial youth groupings. Factors pertinent to this study which are not so frequently discussed in other research include the influence of negative evaluation from others and the ability of the gang to provide the support and education necessary to withdraw from wider society. As previously mentioned, it is important to recognise that each of these risk factors did not individually predict youth gang membership for these young people. Instead it was the combination of these variables which made the gang alluring and encouraged on-going membership.

### **Review of the Ecological Theory of Development**

After discussing the different variables that can influence youth gang membership, it was considered necessary to reconsider Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development proposed in Chapter One. The purpose of this model was to consider how an individual develops within the different systems of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Based on the findings of this study, it would appear that the risk factors for youth gang membership

span across the four different systems described within the ecological model. This adapted model is visible in Figure 8.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the immediate setting which contains the developing individual as the microsystem. It was theorised that the factors most influential at this level include the direct interactions between the person and both people and objects within that environment. This could be at home or within the classroom. When considering the relationship between the young people in this study and those in their immediate environment, it would appear that the most influential people were their fathers, uncles, cousins and friendship groups. The perception that these young people had of these male role-models and confidants was seemingly twofold. For many, they noted their absence as they were frequently occupied with adult gangs or were incarcerated. In contrast to this, they also held their male relatives and friends in high esteem, respecting the lifestyle that they pursued. When these two opinions were considered together, it appeared that these young people were longing for the support and belonging within a group. For many, they had seen other male family members withdraw from their immediate family to succeed in a gang that provided them with the money, respect and power that they desired. Similarly, the strength of the relationships between these young people and their teachers was perceivably weak. Despite their academic ability, these young people did not feel their teachers were interested in tailoring the syllabus to facilitate better achievements at school. As a result they withdrew from the education system to pursue a life in the gang among likeminded peers. These experiences and the way these young people interpreted the relationships within their microsystem was a primary influence for youth gang membership.



**Figure 8:** Adapted Ecological Model of Development

The influences for gang membership were not limited to the experiences these young people had within the microsystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined the mesosystem as the interrelations in several different settings in which the individual frequently participates. The relations theorised to be most significant within this system include those between the individual's extended family, school and wider peer group (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). When considering how these relationships were perceived by the young people in this study, they explained that in each of these different settings, they were socialised to drug use, antisocial behaviours and a means to acquire money illegally. They were also socialised to resort to violence as a means to solve

conflict and gain respect and power. Not only did the gang recruit members based on their willingness to participate in these antisocial activities. The gang also facilitated further opportunities to engage in these behaviours. This resulted in these young people having provisions to earn greater money, respect and power within the gang. When these experiences were combined with the perceived relationships within these young people's microsystem, it made the youth gang more alluring.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) then described the exosystem as encompassing a variety of settings which are not directly occupied by the developing person, but that the events within this system impact on the individual. This could include a parent's workplace, wider neighbourhood circumstances, and law enforcement policies or strategies. When considering the experiences of the young people in this study, they often referred to the lack of financial support their parents had as impacting on their desire to make money within the gang. As many of these young people were still at school and unable to work, they began to search for other alternative money making ventures. They also explained that their families' low socio-economic status was a reality for many other young people living within their neighbourhood. It was therefore easy to find a group of youth who had similar goals to acquire money in the easiest possible manner. Furthermore, participants explained that the young people in the surrounding neighbourhood who chose to partake in youth gangs had similar experiences in the relationships within their micro and mesosystems. This seemingly strengthened the bond between friends within the gang.

In conjunction with these perceived experiences of financial hardship, many of the law-enforcement policies used to deter young people from partaking in antisocial behaviours were conversely perceived to strengthen the bond between members in the gang. Two of the participants in this study explained that they had served time in prison, and most other participants had been taken into police custody. For these young people, they explained that

serving time in jail allowed them to affiliate with likeminded peers who were prepared to protect them in a volatile environment. They also explained that it was an opportunity to share experiences and better develop skills to avoid being caught when released into the community.

The final system to consider when identifying all the different factors that potentially influence youth gang membership is the macrosystem. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explained that all previous systems are considered within the macrosystem, but that the subculture or cultures are considered more generally. More specifically, this system is said to influence how each home, street or office exist within one culture. The young people in this study identified a number of different cultural factors which both influenced and maintained their desire for youth gang membership. When considering their education providers, many perceived that they were subjected to racism within the classroom. While participants were able to recognise that their behaviour may not have been exemplary, they did not feel that their teachers encouraged them to strive for more because they were Māori. Furthermore, these young people perceived the curriculum to be boring. This combination of poor school attachment and perceived exclusion in the classroom gave these young people another reason to seek support from their friends in the gang. The opportunities provided within the gang then became increasingly hard to compete with as there was instant access to money, drugs and respect. This observation has been explored in prior research within New Zealand. Paki (2008) suggested that there is a poor fit between young Māori boys and the current mainstream education system throughout New Zealand. This is reported to have lasting implications for both their academic achievement and opportunities for future employment (Paki, 2008). Paki's contentions add weight to the findings of this thesis; participants' lack of interest in education contributed to their involvement in youth gangs.

Participants went on to explain that they perceived these negative stereotypes not only to exist within their schools, but within society more generally. Participants found this distressing as they felt society would make negative assumptions towards them continuously despite their intentions. In response to this, these young people often said that they started to internalise the negative assumptions others had of them. As a result, some participants explained that they behaved in a manner which would confirm people's stereotypes before they could even make that judgement.

It would therefore appear that the Ecological Model of Development can be adapted to encompass the specific variables that influenced and maintained youth gang membership for the young people in this study. The perceivable advantage of presenting the findings in this manner is twofold. Firstly, it highlights the complex interplay of factors that are occurring simultaneous to encourage youth gang membership. Secondly, it demonstrates the variety of different systems that need to be acknowledged and addressed when developing intervention plans to prevent youth gang membership.

### **Suggestions for community organisations**

Based on the findings of this study, it would appear that there are numerous factors which need to be considered when supporting young people who are engaged in gangs. The results discussed in this study suggest that there are consistencies in the rationale for youth gang membership which have been observed in New Zealand research over the past 10 years (Eggleston, 2000; Ministry of Social Development, 2006; Paki, 2008). This would suggest that while the needs of these young people have remained stable, the alternatives to youth gang membership are not substantial enough to convince these young people there is another viable option. While it was not the intention of this study to evaluate existing intervention strategies, it is important to consider when these young people are becoming engaged in gangs and

subsequently withdrawing from mainstream society. This will help inform when these intervention strategies are implemented.

Participants in this study explained that by the age of nine years, they had participated in a variety of different antisocial behaviours. They had also been exposed to youth gangs within their communities. Based on these findings, children need to be supported to find alternatives to gang membership when they first enter primary schools at the age of five years. This support is seemingly necessary throughout primary and secondary school. Caregivers and whānau also need to be included and supported to provide alternatives for their children. When encouraging these children and their families to make more pro-social choices, it is important that the resources and funding is available to support them in the long term. This includes consideration of the following points:

- Providing these young people and their whānau with an opportunity to earn a reliable income
- Supporting families to build a strong and cohesive family unit for young people to belong and feel a part of
- Increase access to positive male role models both within the young person's whānau and community
- Ensure that these young people and their families are valued and respected members of society
- Allow young people to make well informed choices about their futures
- Ensure that there are opportunities to experience adrenaline and risk through sport for example.

Furthermore, these intervention strategies need to be delivered from a cultural framework, focusing on the needs of Māori and Pacifica peoples. This is particularly necessary as studies (Ministry of Social Development, 2006;

Paki, 2008) have shown that there is an over representation of young people from ethnic minorities living in economically deprived neighbourhoods who participate in youth gangs.

When considering how education providers can encourage these young people to remain at school, the following suggestions have been made based on the findings of this study:

- Teachers adopt a non-judgemental approach to these young people and their families.
- Schools have the resources to support young people who are having difficulties meeting the national standards
- Schools provide young people with the opportunity to partake in subjects that they find interesting and intend to pursue in the future
- Schools facilitate opportunities for young people to learn and re-connect with their culture

Emphasis on developing early intervention programs to support young people at risk of engaging in youth gangs is both achievable and invaluable to the effected individuals and to society more generally. Many of the young people in this study demonstrated a variety of different strengths, including leadership abilities, entrepreneurial skills and a loyalty to a group of respected others. While the young people in this study used these attributes to be successful in the gang, they too could be used and valued in a workplace, sports team, or cultural group amongst others.

## **Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this study which need to be considered. Firstly, a small sample of young people who occupied a specific geographical space were used in this study. This small sample size partly reflected the

difficulty the researcher had in recruiting participants for this study. Many of the organisations that were approached explained that the young people who were participating in youth gangs were often absent. Many schools also explained that their students who were engaged in gangs were often truant or suspended, making this population difficult to access. When the police were approached to help with the recruitment process, they found it difficult to get young people to agree to an interview in fear that their peers would find out.

This small sample therefore had implications for the generalizability of the results. While there was a consistency in the experiences of these young people, they should not be interpreted to represent all individuals who are involved in youth gangs in New Zealand. Further research is needed in different rural and urban regions of New Zealand to confirm whether these experiences are typical of young people who partake in youth gangs. Furthermore, these young people all identified as Māori and perceived that they grew up in families that did not have access to adequate financial support. The demographic profile of these participants is not representative of all young people who partake in youth gangs. Further research is therefore necessary to consider the experiences of young people who come from a variety of different ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Other methodological limitations include the age restrictions used to exclude participants from this study. Participants were required to be between 16 and 23 years of age to be included in this study. As a result, these young people were asked to reflect retrospectively on why they were initially attracted to the youth gang lifestyle. While many of the participants could speak fluently about their initial attraction to the gang, getting them to reflect on their childhoods may have compromised the accuracy of the results. It may have therefore been appropriate to recruit participants between the ages of 8 and 15 years. This change in criteria does have ethical implications related to the consent process. To substantiate the data in this study, it would have been helpful to

interview the parents and whānau of these young people to get an understanding of how they perceived their child's upbringing and circumstances. Due to time and financial restraints, this was not possible. Further limitations to this study include the specific focus on male youth gang members. Recent research suggests that females are also seeking gang membership which needs to be acknowledged in future research.

Finally, it is important to recognise the background of the researcher and how that differed to the participants in this study. The researcher of this study was a young Pākehā female who had attended university for six years. This may have influenced the willingness of these young men to share information with her. While precautions were taken to ensure these young people felt comfortable in the interview process, they may have been suspicious of her with their personal information. This may have been compounded by the lack of time the researcher had to interact with these young people prior to conducting the interview.

### **Suggestions for future research**

The aim of this study was to identify different factors that both influenced and maintained youth gang membership for young people in the city of Hamilton. Future research in this area is necessary to both substantiate and extend on the findings of this study. Suggestions to achieve this include future research into the following areas:

- Identify participants from different ethnic and culture backgrounds and how they conceptualise their desire for youth gang membership
- Research the differences between young people who are engaged in youth gangs in economically deprived areas of urban New Zealand to those who exist in more affluent neighbourhoods.

- Explore the differences between young men and women who participate in youth gangs
- Identify the different community agencies in Hamilton and how they support youth to desist from youth gang membership.
- Further explore the perceived barriers that young people have to participating in community organisations and education facilities.
- Explore the cultural affiliations and understandings of young people who are engaging in gangs
- Research the attitudes that teachers have towards young people engaged in gangs and they cope with disruptive behaviours in the classroom.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to understand the experiences of young people who chose to participate in youth gangs within the city of Hamilton. The results of this study were largely consistent with prior research conducted both within New Zealand and internationally. It has been previously suggested that the factors influencing youth gang membership include the individual's immediate context, their social system and their environment (Browning & Loeber, 1999; Hill et al., 2001; Howell & Egley, 2005). This study highlighted that it was the young person's peer influences, their involvement in antisocial behaviours, and their desire for money that both influenced and maintained their affiliation to a youth gang. Furthermore, the participants in this study explained that their neighbourhood surroundings facilitated youth gang membership. Participants also perceived they were negatively judged by others which further reinforced their desire to belong within their chosen youth gang.

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations were made to ensure that young people who are enticed to participate in the youth gang lifestyle

are better supported. As many of the findings in this study are consistent with the previous literature, it would suggest that these individuals continue to face similar challenges and influences to those previously reported (Eggleston, 2000; Farrington, 2005). This may be indicative of the lack of resources and funding available to address longstanding social issues perpetuated by economic deprivation, racism, and inequality. If the appropriate resources are made available to support these young people and their families from a young age, they may choose a more socially acceptable lifestyle to pursue in the future.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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Appendix A – Poster advertising research project

A STUDY ON  
**YOUTH GANG MEMBERSHIP IN  
HAMILTON**  
ARE YOU ...

Receive a \$20

Westfield voucher

A male youth gang member?

Aged between 16 & 23?

Living in Hamilton?

Interested in telling your story?

This study aims to give you the opportunity to tell your story as you see it...  
**YOU ARE THE EXPERT. You will not be named** when the results of the  
study are written.

For a more detailed information sheet, please feel free to contact me  
Researcher e-mail: [sarah\\_cambo@hotmail.com](mailto:sarah_cambo@hotmail.com)

# **Appendix B – Information Sheet**

University of Waikato

Psychology Department

## **INFORMATION SHEET**

### **What are the experiences of youth gang members in Hamilton?**

Kia Ora,

Thank-you for your time and interest in this project. Below is some more information on what this study is about. Please feel free to contact Sarah if you have any questions.

#### **What is the study about?**

This study aims to understand what it means to be a youth gang member in Hamilton, Aotearoa/New Zealand. It will look at why youth gangs are so popular, what it takes to become a youth gang member, and why youth continue with their youth gang membership. An important part of this study is to allow you to tell your story and what your life in a youth gang means to you.

The information that is gathered will be made anonymous. All names will be removed from the data along with any information that could identify the participant.

#### **What is involved?**

In order to participate in this study, you will need to agree to an interview about your experiences in a youth gang. Before this interview will take place, I

will contact you to set up a time to meet and a location to do that. The interview may be for an hour or more, depending on how much information you have to share. You are welcome to bring along a support person if you wish. Prior to the interview, it would be appreciated if you told the researcher if you were to bring someone along, and the name of that support person. You will be given a **\$20** voucher to say thank-you for giving up your time to come and speak to me.

After the interview has been completed, I will type up the conversation that we have had. I can send you a copy of this conversation by post or e-mail. This will give you a chance to read over what we have talked about and make sure it is correct. If you wish to make any changes to what has been recorded, you can do this within two weeks of receiving the typed conversation. I will then start to compare our conversation with others that I have had, trying to find some trends or similarities in the answers that all the participants have given. These trends will then be discussed and compared to other research in New Zealand and throughout the world. All this information will presented as a master's thesis.

### **What are your rights?**

- ❖ All information that can identify you will be removed
- ❖ You can choose not to answer a question I may ask
- ❖ You can ask questions at any stage of the study
- ❖ You may stop the interview at any time
- ❖ Unless there is a danger to you or someone else this information will be kept confidential. If this danger exists, then I may be required to break confidentiality.
- ❖ You will have a chance to read over the full conversation that we had and make changes, add information, or remove information if you wish.
- ❖ You will be able to contact myself or my supervisors if you have any concerns or questions about the study, or require further information.

- ❖ If you decide that you do not wish to be a part of the study after your interview, you can withdraw up to 3 weeks after the interview date.
- ❖ You will be given the details of where you can access the full report once it is completed
- ❖ All original information that is collected will be destroyed after the study is published. Until the day that it is destroyed, it will be locked away in a secure place.

**Would you like to get involved?**

If this study sounds like something that you would like to participate in, or you would like more information about, please fill in the form below and post it in the prepaid envelope and I will get back to you.

Many Thanks,  
Sarah Campbell (Researcher)

---

**The experiences of youth gang members in Hamilton...**

*Please fill in this form and return it to me in the envelope provided*

I would like to be involved in the research project

I would like more information about the research project

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Postal Address: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C – Interview Guide

### Introduction

- Thank the participant for coming along and ensure they are comfortable
- Provide an explanation of who I am
- Re-address the information sheet and ask if the participant has any questions – pay particular attention to the rights of the participant as outlined on the information sheet.
- Ask for consent to record the interview and explain why it is important to have a record. Reiterate that I am going to be the only one that will hear the tape.
- Present the client with the consent form and get them to sign it.
  
- Introduce participants to the fact that I am now going to be asking a number of questions. Explain that there is no right or wrong answer, and that as a researcher I am interested in how the participant makes sense of their youth gang membership.
  - Explain that during the course of the interview it may be appropriate to talk about some criminal offending. Ask at this point that the participant leaves out any details of the offending, including names of those involved, any details that may identify the victim or perpetrators, and any specific details of the crime scene including dates, times and locations.
  - Explain that the purpose of this research is to gain insight into how a youth gang member makes sense of their world. Explain that during the course of the interview there may be instances where the participant feels they are victim of a wrong doing or social injustice. Further explain that the purpose of this research is not to correct those, but to merely make some recommendations about what the needs of the participants are. Inform the participants that there are services available which can help support them through any issues that arise.

## Questions that will guide the interview

### Demographic

- Specific questions that will gather information on the demographics of the participant
  - What is your age?
  - What is your ethnicity?
  - What part of Hamilton do you live in?
  - Were you born in New Zealand/Hamilton? If not, when did you move here?
  - Are you enrolled in any form of schooling?
  - What gang are you a member of? (If not established already)

### General

- When did you become aware that there were gangs you could join?
- Where did find out about these gangs?
- Was there more than one gang you could join?
- Why did you decide to join a youth gang?
- What did it take to become a youth gang member?
  - Did you have to partake in any criminal activity?
    - Do you still need to be actively involved in crime?
- What are the positives of youth gang membership?
- What are the negatives of youth gang membership?
  - Are you currently using drugs or alcohol?
  - How frequently do you use substances and at what locations?
- What part does gang membership play in your life?
  - Is the gang more important than your family?
- How long do you see yourself in your gang for?
- Do you think it was the gang that started getting you into trouble, or were you already doing crime before you got introduced to the gang?

### Neighbourhood

- How do you feel about your neighbourhood?
  - Do you know many people in your area?
  - Do you feel safe in your neighbourhood?
- Do you have many role-models in your neighbourhood?
- Are you proud to come from your neighbourhood?

## Family

- Do you think your family had a role to play in you becoming introduced to the gang lifestyle?
- Do you have any older or younger siblings that are part of a gang?
  - Did they introduce you to drinking, smoking, drugs?
  - What were/are they like at school?
  - Do they have anything to do with the police?
- Do you think that your parents gave you the best start in life?
  - Did they drink or take drugs often?
  - Did they take you away to do things when you were younger?
- Did your parents/caregivers know where you were and who you were with most of the time?
- Did you have many household rules? Did you ever follow them?
  - If you broke the rules, how were you disciplined?
  - How did that make you feel?
- Do you feel the relationship you had with your parents made you want to join a gang?

## School

- Do you think that the school/s you went to had a role in play in joining a gang?
  - Did you meet other gang members during school?
  - Did you get in trouble or suspended?
  - Was it during these times that you meet other gang members?
- Did the teachers notice any gang affiliations and provide you with support?

## Conclusion

- Ask the participant if they have any further questions or whether they would like to add anything else that is relevant
- Ask the method in which they would like to be sent the transcript
- Ask whether they would like to be personally sent a copy of the summary of results from the study
- Ask whether they would like to be given more information about the services that are available if they require any additional support