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Employed Desistance: Identifying Best Employment-Focused Interventions and Practices for Gang Desistance

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By

Jacob Fergen Albert

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

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DEDICATION

I humbly dedicate this work to the men, women, organizations, and communities involved in the work of gang desistance. This research is intended to give some level of platform and recognition to what you all do. It is hard, it is radical, it is transformative, and I am honored to be a small piece of it.

To my dad and brother, for having to sleep on couches and watch Eagles games alone (and so much more—everything, really) yet still being there for me.

And to my mom. I missed you very, very much during this.

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I would like to thank and acknowledge the individuals and organizations involved in this study. The honesty, passion, leadership, and commitment to the work of gang desistance was evident in your words and within your walls. The thousands upon thousands of people, families and communities you have served and continue to serve are a testament to your impact. I only hope I did justice to the work which has experienced so much of the opposite. You are lights upon doorways to kinship and inclusion. Thank you so much for participating. Thank you much more for your guidance and embrace.

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined those employment-focused interventions (services, programming, mentorship, other supports) most effective in supporting an individual's desistance from gang involvement. Utilizing a qualitative approach (interviews, document analysis and nonparticipant observation), this study engaged with individuals and organizations involved in the critical work of gang desistance to learn what makes their practices most effective. The criticality of gang desistance work lies in its efforts to address the thousands of lives continually lost each year as a result of gang-involvement and activity. Where gangs exist in cities, towns and communities across the country (and world, for that matter), the approaches of demonization, marginalization and suppression continue as the overwhelming response to gangs and gang activity. This study highlighted the individuals and organizations offering an alternative, employment-focused approach built on peer- and community-based efforts founded on inclusion and empowerment.

Through the data collection, this study intended to identify and detail the practices of the research participants and why they are effective. Beginning with a review of available research within the field of gang desistance, an understanding of the evolving theories of the phenomenon of one desisting from gang involvement were explored, followed by an exploration of why individuals join gangs, the impacts of gang involvement, what prompts gang members to desist, and those interventions most supportive of this desistance. With an emphasis on service

providers and leaders with the lived experience of gang desistance, as well as organizations dedicated to gang desistance work, the themes and evidence that emerged from the data collection provided deeper insights into how the process of desisting from gang involvement can be most effectively supported and realized.

The outcome of this research pointed to several components of the work of gang desistance that make it most effective. These components focused on the desisting individual and the internal and external elements that both prompted and help maintained their desistance; the types of interventions most conducive to supporting a desisting individual—especially those focused on the individual's identity desistance and self-efficacy; and, finally, those qualities of those service providers and organizations who provided these interventions and what made them impactful and effective.

The findings of this study revealed that there are models, practices and other elements to support individuals toward effectively desisting from gang involvement. The findings also revealed the challenging and dynamic nature of the phenomenon of gang desistance—both for those desisting and those supporting them. Resulting from this nature of the work and the still developing field of gang desistance studies, these findings also offered areas of focus for future research toward a stronger understanding of the process of gang desistance, and, more importantly, the development and implementation of effective gang desistance concepts and practices.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

[There is a] specific type of depression I had diagnosed in cases of young patients suffering from what I called "unemployment neurosis." And I could show that this neurosis really originated in a twofold erroneous identification: being jobless was equated with being useless, and being useless was equated with having a meaningless life. (Frankl, 1992 p. 140)

Holocaust survivor, psychiatrist, and author Viktor Frankl (1992) shared the concept of "unemployment neurosis" in the postscript to his book *Man's Search for Meaning* which described his and other prisoners' struggle for survival in the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II. Within the context of the concentration camp, Frankl's (1992) unemployment neurosis applied to the prisoners' lack of motivation to fight for their survival whilst "unemployed" and the ensuing sense of worthlessness. Frankl (1992) attributed one element of his ultimate survival (less than half of all those imprisoned at Auschwitz survived) to the role he was assigned in the camp's hospital (Frankl, 1984). While one of several elements, Frankl's (1992) "employment" added a valuable sense of meaningfulness to his existence and helped fuel his desire to stay alive.

Though worlds apart, Frankl (1992) and other prisoners' struggle for meaningfulness and the will to live shares parallels with the experience of gang-involved individuals. Like those fellow prisoners of Frankl's in Auschwitz, gang members' experiences include extreme levels of marginalization and oppression, stigmatization, trauma, meaninglessness, hopelessness, and significant barriers to seeking a better life. Yet, also similarly, when given the opportunity to leave their gang—or to *desist* from gang involvement—gang members have been shown to take

these opportunities (Hennigan & Sloane, 2013) and can be highly successful in not only desisting from their gang identity and involvement, but also creating a pathway forward toward a more meaningful and positive life for themselves and their families. This study examined the organizations and service providers who offer these opportunities to gang members, with a specific focus on the impact that employment can play in creating or supporting that pathway forward.

Father Greg Boyle is a Jesuit priest and founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles (LA), California. Ordained in 1984, Boyle was placed at Dolores Mission parish in the LA neighborhood of Boyle Heights. This dense, low-income, predominately Hispanic area just east of downtown LA has been among the most active gang areas in the city for decades, with Fr. Boyle burying 168 gang members between 1984 and 2009 (Boyle, 2011). Seeking a method to address the sense of hopelessness and immense loss of life for the gang members in Boyle Heights, Boyle began an alternative school out of the former convent attached to Dolores Mission. Soon, he and the school's staff realized they needed something for the "homies" (members of the same gang or gang members in general) to do after school had finished, else they return to the violence of their neighborhoods.

Following the community-led efforts facilitated by parishioners (many of whose children were gang-involved) to obtain jobs for the gang members at nearby businesses, an organization focused on obtaining employment for gang members was born: Jobs for a Future (Boyle, 2011) (a complete history of Homeboy Industries and its programs can be found at https://homeboyindustries.org/our-story/about-homeboy/). Finding that most businesses were reluctant or downright dismissive of hiring gang members, Jobs for a Future received a sizable

donation to purchase a small, abandoned tortilla factory just a few streets down from Dolores Mission. Here, at the newly christened Homeboy Bakery, Boyle could offer work to those gang-desisting individuals that others refused to employ. Working at Homeboy Bakery—often side-by-side with former rival gang members, or "enemies"—gang members from Boyle Heights began to experience that *meaningfulness* that Frankl (1992) believed results from steady employment. This transformative setting's immense value was perhaps most poignantly described by Father Boyle in his book *Tattoos on the Heart* (2011). After several years of operation, the bakery burned down one night due to an electrical malfunction. The next morning, a young gang member and employee of Homeboy Bakery stepped off the bus, ready for his shift, when he saw the smoldering ruins of the bakery. Fr. Boyle described the moment:

> He stands there frozen, puts his head in his hands, and begins to sob. This was his reason to get up in the morning. Just as important, it was his reason not to gangbang the night before. The union he shared with his coworkers, former enemies, was deeper than anything he had ever known in his family and certainly stronger than the bond he knew in his gang. (Boyle, 2011, p. 12–13)

Starting from an alternative school, then to a single bakery, and ultimately to an organization that offers complete wraparound services alongside an innovative social-enterprise approach to professional development for its program participants, Homeboy Industries now serves nearly 500 program participants and thousands of other gang members and community members every year (Homeboy Industries, 2021). I had the great privilege of working at Homeboy Industries from 2010 to 2016. My role as Employment Counselor involved developing

the efficacy and motivation of gang members seeking desistance ("desistance" from criminality was described by conceptual godfathers Laub and Sampson (2001) as simply "ceasing to do [criminality]" [p. 5]) from their gang-involvement through educational programming and employment and I can attest to the transformative effect that employment can have on these individuals' efforts at desistance (which translates aptly to the prisoners' survival Frankl [1992] details in his book.) Yet Homeboy Industries is not alone in this work. Through my years of work in the fields of desistance, gang intervention, and prison reentry, I have had the privilege of partnering with and learning of the many national and international organizations and programs dedicated to employing marginalized individuals—especially those who are gang-involved.

In addition to my personal experiences, employment has been identified in research and literature as having an impact on an individual's successful gang desistance (Albert, 2007; Bain, 2019; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Rosen & Cruz, 2018; Uggen, 2000). This study built upon that literature base and explored the best practices and components of such programs and organizations to identify the most effective educational-based programming and services to facilitate gang members' desistance from their gang-involved lifestyle. While many factors and obstacles are involved in this work, this study focused on addressing the "unemployment neurosis" that so many gang members experience, and how overcoming this depressed state can have a profound effect on their ability to leave the gang life behind and become contributing members of their families and communities.

Background of Study

Research on gangs and gang activity has been notoriously difficult to perform (Bain, 2019; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Melde et al., 2011; Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001; Willman &

Snortum, 1982) and the admission of this appeared to be a required section on any research related to gangs. This difficulty primarily arose from the inconsistent participation of gang members (Klein, 1971; Vigil, 1988), sustainability of organizations who work directly with gang-involved individuals (Bond et al., 2012; Decker, 2002), and the perceived threat of danger to the researchers themselves (Berdychevsky et al., 2022; Fox, 1985; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

Especially absent was research regarding the effects of employment on gang involvement and in support of successful desistance from gang involvement. The importance of understanding the effect of employment on a gang member's desistance and life trajectory was attested to by Bain (2019) who noted "the importance of good, long-term, and stable employment to the success of desistance" (p. 647). Of the small amount of data related to employment for gang-involved individuals, evidence showed that gang members exhibited lower rates of employment (62%) versus the non-gang involved control group (80%) in a study by Levitt and Venkatesh (2001). Another study by Hagedorn (1998) found that only about one third of the gang-involved participants were employed at the time of the research (this employment included temporary, part-time, and full-time employment).

Seeking to better understand the relationship between gang desistance and employment, we are required to look at related research through which we can infer the effects of employment on desistance. The closest approximations include: the effect of low employment on rates of violence; the effect of employment upon rates of recidivism; and the effect of youth gang involvement upon future employment.

Much research has shown that when unemployment rises, rates of crime tend to increase as well (the reverse trend of increased employment and decreased rates of crime also applies)

(Hagan, 1993; Lageson & Uggen, 2012; Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001; Seals, 2009; Willman & Snortum, 1982). While the crime was not always gang-related, clear connections with gang activity and crime did exist (Weerman et al., 2015), especially regarding violent crime and property crime for which gang-related activity has accounted for nearly 47.9% and 42.9% respectively (National Gang Center, n.d.).

The relevance of findings on prison recidivism was validated by the fact that "the link between incarceration and gang membership is beyond dispute as gang members are considerably overrepresented in correctional institutions" (Pyrooz et al., 2017, p. 274). Research has found that up to 30.2% of prisoners are street gang members (Knox, 2005) (though in the same study, it was found that 38.2% of incoming prisoners had street gang-affiliated tattoos, meaning the rate of actual incarcerated gang members could be higher). Additionally, evidence has shown that gang members are more likely to recidivate after release compared to non-gang members (Saunders et al., 2009; Tamatea, 2015; Trulson et al., 2012). The high rates of incarceration for gang members, when coupled with research on rates of recidivism that has shown 66% of released inmates return to prison within 3 years (Brown, 2011), mean that gang membership is a likely pathway to incarceration, and that incarceration has a profound effect on desisting from criminality (and thereby avoiding recidivism) following release (Bahn, 2011; Bahr et al., 2010; Chartrand & Rose, 1996; Salaam, 2013).

Further challenges to avoiding recidivism and desisting from gang-involvement include the ongoing stigmatization and enhanced penalties incurred through law enforcement's use of civil gang injunctions (CGI) and gang enhancements.

Bloch and Phillips (2022) offered the following description of Civil Gang Injunctions:

> Legal protective orders levied against named gang-affiliated defendants within a geographically bounded "safety zone." Those named in an injunction are forbidden from associating with other named defendants or engaging in otherwise legal activities including "standing, sitting, walking, driving, gathering, or appearing anywhere in public view, in a public place, or any place accessible to the public." (p. 758)

CGIs can create a similarly subjective and stigmatizing effect on communities in which gang activity is prevalent through "overly broad discretion in bringing youth under the order, expand[ing] enforcement beyond active gang members, and contain no or very limited provisions for removing oneself from the injunction when leaving gang life" (Hennigan & Sloane, 2013, p. 9). While some research has shown a limited impact on violence reduction in the short-term (Caudill et al., 2017), other research has shown that CGIs actually increase gang activity in the communities where they are implemented (Hennigan & Sloane, 2013).

Gang enhancements are based on the identification and labeling of individuals as confirmed gang members and are utilized to "enhance" (i.e., lengthen) prison sentences (Bloch & Phillips, 2022). This identification—and subsequent inclusion in law enforcement-managed gang databases which present additional issues in regard to validity and effectiveness (Caudill et al., 2017; Decker, 2002)—has traditionally been left to the discretion of law enforcement personnel who utilize arbitrary markers such as clothing, tattoos, possession of graffiti-related materials, and location at the time of contact to indicate gang membership (Caudill et al., 2017). This has been proven to be a flawed and subjective practice that has received much criticism within gang research (Howell et al., 2017; Rosen & Cruz, 2018) as it frequently labels individuals as gang members despite their having no gang affiliation (Durán, 2006; Hennigan & Sloane, 2013;

Howell et al., 2017) and disproportionately labels African-American and Latinx males (Bloch & Phillips, 2022; Howell et al., 2017). Gang enhancements carry increased sentencing measures and penalties for violations of one's parole (Caudill et al., 2017; Decker, 2002). Besides showing little evidence of effectiveness in reducing gang membership and activity (Decker, 2002)—as well as evidence showing that it can actually increase proclivity toward gang involvement (Shteynberg & Redlich, 2015)—this labelling is difficult to have removed (Hennigan & Sloane, 2013; Lopez-Aguado, 2013) and can continue stigmatizing and inhibiting formerly gang-involved individuals (if they were even gang-involved) from desisting, avoiding recidivism, and gaining employment (Rosen & Cruz, 2018) (including engaging in the redemptive work of helping others desisting from gangs [Lopez-Aguado, 2013]—a form of employment which Frankl [1992] noted had a positive impact on patients in his research on "employment neurosis").

Finally, much of the literature related to youth gang involvement and employment spoke to the negative effect that crime and incarceration as a youth can have on future aspects of life such as education, substance use, recidivating (Connolly & Jackson, 2019; Gilman et al., 2014; Dong & Krohn, 2016; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2001; Thornberry et al., 2003), and, most importantly for this study, employment. This was made clear by Hagan (1993) who wrote: "Several long-term panel studies show that juvenile delinquency is nonspuriously correlated with adult employment" (p. 467). The evidence clearly indicated that gang involvement negatively impacts employment opportunities and sustainability later in life—both key factors in successful desistance (Bain, 2019; Cramer, 2011; Willman & Snortum, 1982).

Through looking at the connection between violence and (un)employment, the rates of recidivism for offenders, and the impact of gang involvement on future employment, we can see

how important the obtaining and maintaining of employment is for desisting gang members. This value is not only for economic stability, but also for the "reinforcement of . . . cognitive transformations" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 320) toward a new identity and values system incurred through a Durkheimian effect of the informal controls of prosocial networks and expectations available within employment (Fox, 2013). But we can also identify this in the words of gang members themselves and those who have substantial experience in working with gang members. A gang member shared this in Hagedorn's (1994) study on gangs in Milwaukee:

> I got out of high school and I didn't have a diploma, wasn't no jobs, wasn't no source of income, no nothing. That's basically the easy way for a black young man to be—selling some dope—you can get yourself some money real quick. (p. 390)

In the same study, another gang member said simply "give 'em all jobs" (Hagedorn, 1994, p. 408). In a separate study, a police officer who spent his career working amongst gangs shared his thoughts on the types of informal controls that can prompt desistance: "Fall in love, need a car, *get a job*, get married" (Willman & Snortum, 1982, p. 213). And finally, the words of Fr. Greg Boyle, who stated that, for a gang member, a job "was his reason to get up in the morning. Just as important, it was his reason not to gangbang the night before" (Boyle, 2011, p. 12).

From the research on employment for offenders and gang-involved youth, as well as the words of gang members and those who have worked intimately with them, employment can act as a deterrent to joining, or, having already joined, desisting from further gang involvement. This study delved deeper into this phenomenon, but it is important to understand why the need for desistance is critical—certainly for the individuals who are gang involved, but also for their families, communities, and society at large.

The actions of gang members have deep and profound effects on the individual, their families, communities, and society. But the consequences for non-gang involved individuals and groups should not be the only arousal of concern and urgency. For that reason, this study's primary focus was the gang members themselves.

A common trope amongst critics of peer- and social justice-based work connected to gangs (youth prevention, youth diversion, gang intervention, and prison reentry) is *once a gangster, always a gangster* (Bubolz, 2014). This is not true. Truer would be: *Gang members were not always gang members*. In order to build an understanding of what leads to gang involvement and, ultimately, what helps to desist from gang involvement, this study focused on the gang member, the individual—the *person*. The study identified common factors in gang-involvement and characteristics in gang-involved individuals. Additionally, the study examined the culture of gangs, including incentives for an individual to join, as well as the immediate and long-term effects of gang involvement on the gang member. With this foundational knowledge, the study then explored best practices of services and programs, service providers and organizations, advocacy and policies, and other efforts to increase an individual's (and even community's) efficacy for desistance from gang involvement.

Research Questions

Through a review of the literature related to gang desistance and buttressed by research employing the voices of practitioners, academics, and advocates leading the work of desistance, this study sought answers to the following three research questions:

- What are the common elements and stages of the gang desistance process?

- What types of employment-related interventions (services, programs, supports) are most effective for facilitating an individual's desistance from gang involvement?
- What service provider and organizational characteristics are best suited to support the facilitation of employment-focused gang desistance?

As the well-known expert on urban violence Thomas Abt (2019) stated in the opening pages of his book *Bleeding Out*: "Murder on the streets of our cities is a deadly serious problem, but it is a solvable one" (p. 3). Many groups, organizations, policy makers, and even remarkable individuals (whose lived experience and street-level knowledge of the problem are often marginalized in gang-related research) are doing impactful work to support the successful desistance from a life of hopelessness and loss for the roughly 30,700 gangs and 850,000 gang members currently active in communities across America (Egley et al., 2014; National Gang Center, n.d.) (while international estimates vary, it is established that gangs exist on every continent—save Antarctica, of course—and nearly every country in the world [Decker & Pyrooz, 2010; United Nations Office on Drugs & Crime, 2019].)

There are solutions to the problem of desistance, and through the programs, actions and voices leading the critical work of gang desistance, this study attempted to identify the effective employment-focused programming, services, entities, and policies that can facilitate this transition from gang involvement to a more stable and hopeful life.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was the identification of the most effective interventions and practices that can support the desistance of individuals from gang involvement and facilitate their

transition toward a more stable life through employment-focused programming, services, policies, and other supports.

To achieve this objective, the research adopted a qualitative approach involving interviews with practitioners and advocates in work related to gang involvement and desistance. Research into the gang phenomenon has been conducted since the "classical period of gang studies" in the1920s (Decker & Pyrooz, 2010). This research has focused primarily on two elements: the reason individuals join gangs and the culture and criminology of gangs themselves. Auxiliary research related to youth prevention and diversion, gang intervention (also called "violence interruption" or "gang outreach"), and prison reentry (which inevitably involves elements of gangs and gang culture) has also been conducted in a fairly robust fashion. The study and research into the work of gang *desistance*, though, is a burgeoning field. First proposed in 1971 by eminent gang researcher Malcolm Klein in his book *The American Street Gang: Its Nature, Prevalence, and Control* (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), the field of gang desistance would not exist for another 30 years until a study conducted by Laub and Sampson (2003) titled "Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70" essentially formalized the concept.

Since Laub and Sampson's (2003) landmark study, the academic work on gang desistance has grown slowly but steadily. Yet, while the field is expanding, within the research there is little discussion of the impact employment has upon an individual's process of disengagement from gang activity. We can draw a degree of relevant information from research on the effects of employment on gang and/or criminal activity found in literature on youth diversion and prison reentry. These two fields—within which the presence of gangs is

intrinsically intertwined—represent more of the beginning and concluding phases of many individuals' involvement with gangs. The field of gang intervention occupies the active—or middle—stage of gang involvement, and while services to support gang desistance are certainly included, gang intervention is primarily concerned with reducing violence resulting from gang activity. Operationally, gang desistance comes into play when a successful intervention has caused a gang member to leave their gang, but who then asks the inevitable question: *so now what?*

Just as critical as that courageous moment of setting down a gun, desistance's criticality lies in its motivation for that gang member to choose not to pick the gun back up. Defined simplistically as the "factors that may contribute to an individual's decision to leave a gang" (Young & Gonzalez, 2013, p. 1), gang desistance involves many factors such as self-efficacy, programming and service provision, accountability, and reintegration into community. It is a process—a challenging, precarious process that can seem impossible with the number of personal, cultural and institutional barriers that exist for one to successfully desist.

Fearmongered and dehumanized, more readily locked up (or, frankly, killed) and forgotten than engaged, gang members frequently lack the necessary skills, assets, knowledge and resources to navigate these barriers and successfully disengage from their gangs (Weaver, 2016). This is the work of desistance. It is a thoroughly social justice-minded approach to reducing violence, saving lives, and improving the overall health of predominately individuals and communities of color who have dealt with decades (if not centuries) of oppression, stigmatization and marginalization (Dichiara & Chabot, 2022; Vigil, 1988). This study treated gang members as individual men, women and youth—i.e., *people*—who research has shown

become involved with gangs as a response to experiences including fear, trauma, and loss. Centered on the transformative impact of employment, this humanized understanding of gang members offers a more compassionate and competent understanding of their needed options and supports toward a successful process of desistance.

Significance of the Study

Surprisingly little research has been conducted on gang desistance and the process of leaving gang. (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 154)

As noted earlier, a majority of gang-related research has focused on the reasons young people join gangs (Rocque, 2017) and the ensuing (and mostly negative) effects on their lives, families, and communities resulting from this gang membership (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). So, not only has the phenomenon of desistance been little addressed, but within the small amount of desistance literature, the role of employment in facilitating this desistance has been essentially unexplored.

The marginalization and victimization of gang members is certainly a factor in the lack of research around the work of desistance that can offer positive outcomes not only for the gang-involved individuals, but the more palatable entities of family, community, and society (Abt, 2019). Fortunately, that does not mean that individuals, programs, and advocates around the country are not deeply engaged in the work of desistance. From Homeboy Industries (Whitney-Snel et al., 2020) and 2nd Call (Chance at living life) in LA to Chicago CRED (Creating Real Economic Destiny) (Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative, 2021) in the South and West Sides of Chicago to RiseUp Industries in San Diego, these and other organizations have developed wrap-around, desistance-focused practices and programming involving outreach,

supportive services, and ultimately, employment. Several studies involving these and other organizations' work have been conducted, with outcomes exhibiting generally positive results of these and other organizations' intervention and desistance efforts (Cahill et al., 2015; Leap et al, 2015; Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative, 2021).

Based upon my firsthand experience with Homeboy Industries and other organizations involved in services for active and desisting gang members, I can attest to the transformative effect employment can have on a person's transition from a life of trauma and violence to one of health and stability. While my thinking and experience provided the structure and approach for this study, I believed it was essential to raise the voices of those also engaged in the work of desistance and employment—especially those peer-based practitioners and leaders who have the lived experience of gang involvement and (successful) desistance. In an academic field in which so little is currently understood, these often-discounted perspectives from the "boots on the ground" offer a unique and profound insight into what facilitates effective gang desistance for the individuals they serve.

Finally, the economic and public health impacts of gang activity have been frequently researched and disseminated (Mallion & Wood, 2020). This is important to the actions of advocates and policy makers, but what is often lost is the individual cost of gang involvement. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a dramatic increase in gang-related violence in cities and communities across the United States (Reese, 2021; Rosenfeld & Lopez, 2021; Valasik & Reid, 2021). In LA, for example, shootings in 2021 increased nearly 56% over shootings in 2019 (Cain & Percy, 2022) with up to 58% of those shootings being gang-involved (Salamy,

2021). These shootings led to 397 homicides, meaning in 2021 alone, as many as 230 men, women and youth were killed in Los Angeles as the result of gang violence.

COVID-19 has created an additional urgency to the issue of gang violence and the frequent loss of life (Rosenfeld & Lopez, 2021), but as Klein (1995), Rice (2012), Abt (2019), and others have made clear in their calls to address this violence, the deadly consequences of gang activity have been a critical issue for decades. This study is significant in its objective of identifying effective, employment-focused desistance practices with the ultimate purpose of offering hope and pathways to those seeking a way out. Gang members are sons and daughters, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers—they are *people*, and the chance for them to overcome the trauma and marginalization they have experienced both before and during their gang membership should be a critical concern for all of us.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study focused on the effects of employment-focused educational programming for desisting gang members. While programs and services are essential elements in facilitating this desistance, the onus ultimately lies in the individual's belief in and efficacy toward successful and lasting disengagement from their gang. Placing the crucial responsibility on their shoulders, this study utilized frameworks that focused on the needed identity shift and efficacy of a person embarking on a transformational process. For that reason, two theories were selected as frameworks: Identity Desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) and Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Identity Desistance Theory

> *According to (Paternoster and Bushway's [2009]) view, desistance begins when offenders' views of the negative, unsatisfying, and disappointing aspects of their criminal lifestyle crystallize to the point where they realize that the future is bleak without change.* (Polaschek, 2019, p. 323)

Identify Desistance shares elements of Self-Efficacy in its centering of the individual upon their transformation while still acknowledging the influence of external factors. The theory of Identity Desistance Theory was introduced by Paternoster and Bushway in their 2009 article "Desistance and the feared self: Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance." Defined in simple terms as "a structural break in an individual-level time series of offending" (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1103), the theory is presented much as a counter argument to ideas put forth by other criminologists, specifically Laub and Sampson (1993)—authors of the landmark 1993 (which addressed desistance from criminality in general) and 2003 (which specifically discussed desistance from gangs) studies that set the foundations for the formal/empirical study of gang desistance and focused heavily on external factors in facilitating or undermining an individual's desistance from gang involvement. Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) study also addressed Giordano et al.'s (2002) research which concluded that social processes (external) were most influential in developing the motivation and capacity for desistance. While Paternoster and Bushway (2009) did acknowledge the importance of cognitive transformation, they also believed the social environment and its processes ultimately played a more impactful role.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) differentiated their theory from those of Laub and Sampson (1993) and Giordano et al.'s (2002) in the following passage:

> We have argued that a change in identity from a criminal offender to a non-offender is a process that everyone who successfully desists from crime must undergo. Unless there is a change in identity, an understanding of a possible self as a non-offender, then the kinds of structural supports for a change (a conventional job and a new social network) are unlikely to be created and ultimately desistance from crime will not occur. (p. 1153)

The elements described here also provided their relevance to this study, specifically the internal transformation of identity and efficacy that must occur for those external services and support (employment, for this study's purpose) to be of value (though, it should be noted that research has shown the availability of these external supports can be the impetus for the internal transformation and desire to desist [Hennigan & Sloane, 2013; Melde, 2013] and that those services should be individually-tailored to the desisting individual to be most effective [Harris, 2011; Pacheco, 2019]). Much like the approach of addiction and recovery work in which the core mantra is *change begins with me*, a gang member's desire to successfully desist from the grip of gang life begins with a choice (Boyle, 2011; Harris, 2011; Kelly & Ward, 2020). That choice to desist being made, the process of opening up to and utilizing those structural supports for identity transformation can then begin.

Self-Efficacy

> *One's sense of self-efficacy . . . may be [a] key facilitator of behavioral change*. (Bersani & Doherty, 2018, p. 320)

Self-Efficacy theory shares elements with that of Identity Desistance with its centering on the individual while still acknowledging the influence of external factors. The concept of self-efficacy was introduced by psychologist Albert Bandura in his 1977 paper titled "Self-Efficacy:

Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change." The concept was developed through Bandura's (1977) research on an individual's ability to overcome fears and his dissatisfaction with prevailing theories at the time on behavior and cognition which focused more on external than internal factors. Bandura (1977) identified self-efficacy as the final stage in the process of goal realization within his Social Cognitive Theory, itself emphasizing "how cognitive, behavioral, personal, and environmental factors interact to determine motivation and behavior" (Redmond & Slaugenhoup, 2016, para. 5). Following the preceding stages of self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reflection, the final stage of self-efficacy "refers to people's judgments about their capability to perform particular tasks. Task-related self-efficacy increases the effort and persistence toward challenging tasks; therefore, increasing the likelihood that they will be completed" (Redmond & Slaugenhoup, 2016, para. 4).

The concept of Self-Efficacy appeared not infrequently within literature on gangs (Alleyne et al., 2014; Ang et al., 2018; Bellair & McNulty, 2009; Wood, 2014). It offers a valuable approach to the work of gang desistance with its focus on self-management, commitment, and perseverance—each necessary for the process of gang desistance as well as reintegration into family, community and society. Bahr et al. (2010) offered the most succinct definition of self-efficacy as it relates directly to desistance: "In the context of criminal desistance, self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability to . . . remain crime free" (p.670).

A Self-Efficacy framework for this study provided a lens through which the individual's ability to facilitate their own transition is paramount, while still acknowledging the effects of environmental factors on the person's motivation and behavior.

Research Design and Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative approach to the intended research. This approach was selected as "qualitative research espouses that the researcher will attempt to understand the participant's lived experience through the participant's view" (Rice, 2015, p. 54). Additionally, as Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted, a qualitative inquiry "seeks to examine an issue related to oppression of individuals" (p. 17) and is "intended to elicit views and opinions from the participants" (p. 187). The experiences, views, and opinions of current and former gang members are often oppressed and marginalized both in society and academia (Durán, 2006). A majority of participants for this study were selected based on their possession of lived experience of the gang desistance process. The selection of a qualitative approach offered the centering of their voices within the research.

Collection of data involved the conduction of interviews with peer-based practitioners, programmatic and agency leaders, and advocates involved in the work of gang desistance. As little of the work being done on the ground is defined as "gang desistance," the interview subjects were drawn from relevant fields such as gang intervention and prison reentry—both of which involve the provision of services and supports that frequently support clients' and program participants' desistance from gang involvement. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the employment-focused services and programs that they and/or their organization provided or for which they advocated.

Along with semi-structured interviews, additional data collection tools involved nonparticipant observation of employment-focused programming. Due to logistical constraints, only two organizations were observed: Homeboy Industries and 2nd Call. At Homeboy

Industries, I was able to observe the Homegirl Café and Homeboy Merchandise social enterprises, as well as take a tour of the entire organization including the Case Management, Workforce Development, Education, and Mental Health departments. 2nd Call provided me the opportunity to attend their weekly "Employment Life Skills" group in the basement of a church in South Central Los Angeles. This weekly meeting was attended by individuals seeking work as well as former 2nd Call clients who have transitioned into employment.

Finally, as there is little data on employment outcomes for desisting gang members, available organizational and programmatic literature and documents were collected for a third instrument of data collection toward identification of effective desistance services and programming.

Limitations, Delimitations and Assumptions

A constant limitation to the study (and work) of gang desistance is the challenge of working with active gang members. Eidson et al. (2017) provided a helpful description of this challenge in their article titled "Successes and Challenges in Recruiting and Retaining Gang Members in Longitudinal Research": "Although researchers have been studying gangs for decades. . . . Published studies have often employed qualitative methods such as ethnography or use data from a few well-known longitudinal studies" (p. 397). Melde et al. (2011) provided a similar description of the challenge of studying active and desisting gang members, writing that "while targeted programs appear promising at the conceptual level, data limitations have made systematic evaluations of the efficacy of such projects difficult to achieve" (p. 279).

Often in my own work with gang members, the sentiment of *live for today since tomorrow's never promised* was expressed in words or, even, tattoos (such as the *laugh now cry*

later message expressed by dual smiling and frowning masks). This obviously speaks to the chaos and anxiety so frequently present in the day-to-day experience of gang members, but also explains the limitations to longitudinal studies of gang desistance, which require a prolonged period to capture meaningful data. Put simply, gang members are a challenging population to research. Acknowledging this limitation, the practitioners interviewed were also selected based on their lived experience of previous gang involvement and successful desistance. These elements provided an intimate understanding of those motivations, services, and supports that facilitated their successful disengagement from gangs and obtainment and maintenance of long-term employment.

A second limitation was the lack of clarity around terminology and definition for many of the fields involved in gang-related research (Gebo, 2018; Howell & Griffiths, 2019). Examples included the varying usage of either gang desistance or gang disengagement, as well as, as described earlier, the different names for gang intervention including gang or community outreach, violence interruption, and, following expanded efforts during COVID-19, community health work. Even the definition of a "gang" has not been formalized and has continued to be debated within gang research (Bond et al., 2012; Gebo, 2018). The lack of clarity within the nomenclature of gang-related research acts to limit the sharing of information and cohesion of the field of gang desistance.

Finally, based upon my own work in the fields of gang desistance, gang intervention, and prison reentry, I acknowledged the dangers of seeking answers to my own assumptions regarding best practices for gang desistance programs and services based upon my professional experience. The design of the research, development of research questions, and selection of research

participants were intentionally selected to provide as much objectivity and critique as possible to bolster the validity of the research and findings. Additionally, the process of desisting from gang involvement was frequently described as "multifaceted" (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Pacheco, 2019; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Rocque, 2017; Tonks & Stephenson, 2019) and incorporative of elements such as "social controls, routine activities, and identity change" (Bersani & Doherty, 2018, p. 316). This study acknowledged these range of factors important to the desistance process, and the need for change within structural, racial, and societal contexts. The delimitation of this study was intentional with its focus on the individual change that can occur through employment-focused programming. Future research that explores the many contexts and factors necessary for successful desistance would help to fill these critical gaps in the study of gang desistance.

Definition of Key Terms

Following is a short list of key terms and concepts that were utilized in this study of best practices for desistance from gang involvement. Some were common in academic literature but defined here in relation to the gang desistance context of this study; others I have learned and utilized in my work in the fields of gang desistance, gang intervention, and prison reentry and felt required a clearer description.

1. Differentiation of Self (*or* Self-Differentiation):

    > The capacity to maintain emotional objectivity amidst high levels of anxiety in a system while concurrently relating to key people in systems (e.g., partner, children, siblings, friends). . . . Individuals with higher levels of (Differentiation

of Self) are better able to modulate emotional arousal experienced during challenging interpersonal situations. (Calatrava et al., 2022, p. 2)

2. Narrative Theory: "Seek[s] to explain events in terms of *human actors striving to do things over time*." (McAdams, 1993, p. 30)
3. Prison Reentry:

   The transition of people from state or federal prisons or jails back to the community. However, the term can include all of the activities and programs that prepare prisoners to return to society, including programs inside prison, programs focused on the immediate release period, and long-term programs that provide former prisoners with different types of support and/or supervision as they reintegrate. (Middlemass & Smiley, 2021, pp. 4-5)

4. Resilience: "A universal capability which allows a person, group, or community, to prevent, minimize, or overcome damaging effects of adversity." (Greene, 2002, pp. 3-4).
5. Social Control Theory:

   The ways in which a close marital bond or stable job gradually exert a constraining influence on behavior as—over a period of time—actors build up higher levels of commitment (capital) via the traditional institutional frameworks of family and work. (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 991)

6. Prosocial: "Opportunities and experiences with new or strengthened social relations that offer opportunities and provide support for or reinforcement of a new non-gang or non-offender identity." (Roman et al., 2021, p. 5)

Organization of Study

This study was organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 provided introductory information related to the background, purpose, and significance of the study. It then presented the theories that were utilized as frameworks, a description of the research design and methodology, and the limitations, delimitations, and assumptions involved in the research. The chapter closed with a listing of definitions of key terms related to the field of gang desistance and this study specifically.

Chapter 2 discusses the relevant research related to the study of gang desistance with an emphasis on the impact of employment on the desistance process. The chapter includes a history of the field gang desistance research, highlighting key concepts and researchers who have helped to build this relatively new field. The chapter then provides an overview of gang involvement and desistance from that involvement, with a closing discussion on the impact of employment and interventions (services, programming, other supports) upon the desistance process. Chapter 3 provides a thorough description of the development, components and implementation of the research process utilized for this study. Chapter 4 presents the findings gathered from the study instruments selected for the research (interviews, document review, and nonparticipatory observation) with comparisons to the findings from the literature review in Chapter 2. Finally, Chapter 5 discusses the significance of the findings and their applicability to the work of gang desistance and closes with suggestions for future research within the field of gang desistance.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following chapter explores the available literature related to the process of gang desistance as well as the practices of individuals and organizations offering supportive services, programming, and other desistance-focused interventions (with a focus on employment) to help facilitate this process. Understanding that some readers may be unfamiliar with the history of gangs and gang-related research and would benefit from a more robust description, a section detailing these topics was included as an appendix for informational and reference purposes (see Appendix A for "A Brief History of Gangs and Gang Research").

The following literature review began with an exploration of the field of gang desistance––i.e., "the process of leaving the gang" (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 419)—and discussed why it was an urgent and critical issue for both gang-involved individuals and society in general. Next, the stages of desistance were explored, namely the reasons why individuals join gangs, the effects of gang involvement on themselves and society, and the process of effective desistance from gangs. Finally, evidence exhibiting how employment was ideally suited to support the desistance process—including a review of the best practices related to implementing employment-focused interventions for individuals desisting from gang involvement—was presented to close out the chapter.

Gang Desistance: Theory and Research

Desistance from gang involvement was the focus of this study. A relatively new field of research, desistance has been thought of by some as a "state of nonoffending rather than the process of desistance leading up to that point" (Weaver, 2019, p. 9). Yet, desistance is most

certainly a process (Stone, 2016) that involves a multifaceted set of factors (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Pacheco, 2019; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Rocque, 2017; Tonks & Stephenson, 2019). These factors may result from policy actions, programmatic services and interventions (with, for this study, a focus on employment), and interventions of a social network (namely: peers, family, and community.) Essential to the process of effective desistance, though, is the individual. For that reason, the conceptual frameworks chosen for this study—Identity Desistance Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory—were applicable in their concern with the individual's agency in facilitating their process of desistance.

The following review of literature connected to desistance from gang involvement will explore the factors that lead to both joining and desisting from a gang; the impacts of desistance on the individual, their families and communities, and society at large; how increased agency through the lenses of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy support an individual's desistance; and, finally, why employment is a key—and often overlooked—element in the process and maintenance of an effective, sustained desistance process. However, before we explore the available literature on these elements, we will define desistance and, specifically, desistance from gangs.

Defining Gang Desistance

Desistance is not well understood. Criminology has been far more interested in the question, Why do individuals start? . . . As a consequence, relatively little is known about desistance and, for that matter, the process of persistent criminal behavior throughout the life course. Indeed, the characteristics that distinguish persistence in a life of crime from desistance within any group of high-risk offenders are generally unknown. (Laub & Sampson, 2001, p. 1–2)

Operational definitions of desistance have varied widely due to differing perspectives on what prompts and constitutes true desistance from gangs and criminality (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Maruna & Farrall, 2004). Additionally, this study was focused on desisting specifically from *gangs*, as opposed to the more general desistance from criminality. Differences between the two do exist: "The key difference between the two is that desistance from crime concerns the stopping of a pattern of criminal behavior or lifestyle, while disengaging from gangs concerns ceasing group criminal activities and leaving a criminal peer group" (Kelly & Ward, 2020, p. 1510). But research found the process of desistance to apply aptly to both gang desistance and criminal desistance when looking at the life course and needed supports of desisting individuals (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Pyrooz et al., 2014), described here by Rice (2015): "In order to desist from a career of gang involvement, an individual needs support just as a person leaving a career of crime would" (p. 31).

Bain (2019) defined desistance as "the process, support, and opportunities needed to prompt a change in behavior, which leads to a sustained period of nonoffending" (p. 645). This definition of the concept and course of desistance was descriptive but incurred additional definitional questions. For one, what is the level of criminality that requires desistance? In their study on the social factors involved in desistance, Farrall et al. (2010) excluded those individuals who had only been convicted "once" or of low-level crimes (as well as youth whose offences ended with their adolescence) and focused instead on "serious" offenders who exhibited frequent offending (also referred to as "persistent" or "chronic" offenders [Laub & Sampson, 2003; Whitten et al., 2019].)

A second definitional question arose when defining what constitutes successful desistance. Maruna and Farrall (2004) described this issue: "All of the persons we describe as 'offenders' often go days, months, even years between offences. As such, it is impossible to know when offending has finally ended until the person is dead" (p. 3). Further complicating this issue of completed desistance was the fact that—for theoretical research—much of the data for knowing when desistance begins and ends was based on the self-reporting of the individual (Carson et al., 2013; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hill et al., 1999; Pacheco, 2019). This self-reported information often varied widely from the conviction and custodial release information managed by the state (Farrington et al., 2014).

Consideration for the importance of identifying the point at which someone has fully desisted was offered Bushway et al. (2011) who conducted a life course-based longitudinal study on desistance as it related to criminal background checks conducted by potential employers. They found "that the actual time it takes to be 'redeemed' [their word for complete desistance] depends heavily on the age of the individual at the time of the incident conviction as well as on the number of prior convictions" (p. 52). Identifying what constitutes successful desistance was important—not only for this study, but also for desistance research and policy makers as the point at which desistance is achieved can dictate the termination of post-sentence custody such as probation or parole (Polaschek, 2019) (and even, as was shown by Bushway et al. (2011), for employment and other factors helpful in the desistance process).

Addressing this challenge (and/or danger) of arbitrarily assigning a number or end point to desistance, Maruna and Farrall (2004) offered a definition describing different types of desistance. Polaschek (2019) aptly summarized this theory:

> A definition that distinguishes between potentially incidental career pauses and more enduring cessation is [the] distinction between primary desistance—any respite from criminal activity without any self-awareness or intent—and secondary desistance—a (probably) longer period of non-offending that is accompanied by self-awareness, and even identity change in the offender. (p. 316)

This definition, while not particularly helpful to policy makers with its lack of quantifiable starting and end points, spoke to the dynamic nature of desistance and the locus for successful desistance being upon the individual (versus being dictated by a policy maker or a judicial entity). That being said, policy makers by nature are required to approach the question of when desistance is realized in a more defined nature in order to set guidelines regarding custodial sentencing and release. Theoretical research, on the other hand, has focused more heavily on the process of desistance (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Paternoster et al., 2016).

A final definitional issue arose when speaking specifically of gang desistance. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) provided a description of this particular challenge in differentiating desistance from gangs and gang criminality versus general criminality:

> Withdrawal from gang crime would be expected to occur over a more protracted period [compared to non-gang criminality] owing to the higher levels of involvement produced by gang membership . . . "actions speak louder than words" in this process, so leaving the gang is more difficult than just saying "I left the gang." To be sure, cessation of gang membership involves both cognitive or identity shifts and restructured routine activities. (p. 423)

In one frequently cited study on desistance from gangs, Decker and Lauritsen (2002) sought an answer to this problem of identifying when individuals have fully desisted from gang membership and activity (Pyrooz et al., 2014). The following description compiled from the participant responses in Decker and Lauritsen's (2002) study acknowledged the challenges offered by Decker and Pyrooz (2010), but went further in explaining the many ties involved in gang membership that make desistance a true and challengingly dynamic process:

> Although each of the "ex-gang members" reported that he or she was no longer a member of a gang, a considerable proportion claimed that they continued to participate in both criminal and noncriminal activities with members of the gang, and others reported emotional ties to gang members. (p. 64)

Pyrooz and Decker's (2011) study led the authors to create four categories of "ex-gang membership status" based on the participants' emotional ties and engagement in activities with active gang members to gauge their level of desistance. Despite this attempt at creating a quantifiable depiction of desistance, it was telling that they chose to place *ex-gang member* in quotations. In the world of gang and gang desistance research, this indicator of ambiguity can create challenges for concrete findings and identification of progress and key factors in the desistance process (Bubolz, 2014; Carson et al., 2013; Roman et al., 2021).

We saw—from the academic, policy, and vocational arenas whose work involves desisting gang members—that the definition of desistance and of successful desistance has been a challenge to identify. This study employed a definition of gang desistance offered by Carson and Vecchio (2015) who defined it "as the process of disengagement or 'declining probability of gang membership'" (p. 4). Conceptually, we proceeded with the view of desistance as a process

over a life course with its focus on the desisting individual and their own agency in driving the process (while not negating the communal, service-based, institutional, and other supports that help facilitate it [Bersani & Doherty, 2018]), with the indicator of successful desistance based primarily upon employment outcomes. This factor was a point of emphasis for this study on gang desistance and one that, based on the limited emergence of employment within the literature review, has been little explored, or, having been explored, has tended to produce inconsistent evidence (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2012).

Gang Desistance Research

Much like the defining of desistance, research into the phenomenon of gang desistance has been equally challenging. It is also relatively new field of study (and confined predominately to western countries [Rosen & Cruz, 2018]). Well-known gang researcher Malcolm Klein has been credited with the first discussion of desistance from gangs in his 1971 book *Street Gangs and Street Workers* (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), though it was more a call for exploration of the concept than a definition. The study that was most often cited as the foundational work on desistance was that of Laub and Sampson (1993) (Farrall et al., 2010; Paternoster et al., 2016; Rocque, 2017) and, specifically, their 1993 article titled "Turning Points in the Life Course: Why Change Matters to the Study of Crime." Not only did this study take up that exploration of desistance proposed by Klein (1971), it also emphasized the "Life Course" concept within the study of criminal desistance, described by the authors here: "We set out to examine crime and deviance in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood in a way that recognized the significance of both continuity and change over the life course" (Laub & Sampson, 1993, p. 302). Their study also set the stage for the life course theory's application to future gang

desistance research and policy (Weerman et al., 2015). Chalas and Grekul (2017) stated that "researchers and policymakers alike draw on life course approaches to understanding gang involvement and desistance from gangs" (p. 369). Following Laub and Sampson's (1993) study, the life course approach to desistance research would come to dominate ensuing studies and literature.

Laub and Sampson's (1993) was also the first true longitudinal study of criminality and desistance. While research on gangs and youth delinquency has been conducted as far back as 1830 (Rocque, 2017), empirical research increased dramatically in the mid-20th century beginning with Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck's landmark study titled *Unraveling Juvenile Delinquency* (Glueck & Glueck, 1953, as cited in Rocque, 2017). Glueck and Glueck's (1953) research focused on the entrance into and effects of youth delinquency and criminality in a study that included 500 juvenile participants (Glueck & Glueck, 1953). While the word "desistance" did not appear in the book, their study inadvertently offered the resources for Laub and Sampson (1993) nearly 40 years later to lay the foundations for the theoretical study of desistance from gangs.

Stumbling upon boxes filled with Glueck and Glueck's (1953) research documents in the basement of the Harvard Law Library (Laub & Sampson, 1993), Laub and Sampson designed a study that required identifying and contacting the participants from the 1953 study, including individuals from both the delinquent and nondelinquent control groups. Having engaged with all but 37 of the original participants, their study was the first to chart delinquency and desistance (or non-desistance) from criminality over the life course.

Through their efforts, Laub and Sampson (1993) were able to conduct this first longitudinal study looking at criminality and desistance over the life course. Laub and Sampson (1993) framed their research into the development of delinquency with the "similar[ly] orient[ed]" (p. 3) theories of Informal Social Control and Interactionalism. Informal Social Control proposed "that crime and deviance and are more likely when an individual's bond to society is weak or broken" (p. 303) "Informal" controls are those that "emerge as by-products of role relationships established for other purposes and are components of role reciprocities" as opposed to "Formal sanctions that originate in purposeful efforts to control crime" (Laub & Sampson, 1993, p. 303). Interactionalism "argues that delinquency may contribute to the weakening of social bonds over time" (Laub & Sampson, 1993, p. 303).

Part of Laub and Sampson's (1993) conclusion from the completed study was the concept of "Turning Points," defined by Roman et al. (2021) as "significant life events or socialization experiences in adulthood . . . these turning points are external—the result of macro-level institutional processes and the resultant roles" (p. 3). The concept of turning points was important to this study as it complemented the variations within the length and process of desistance as described in the previous section. Much like the application of life course theory, the concept of "turning points" would figure prominently in future gang desistance research. Laub and Sampson (1993) provided a description of this concept:

> A major concept in our framework is the dynamic process whereby the interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions generates *turning points* or a change in life course. . . . That is, despite the connection between childhood events and experiences in adulthood, turning points can modify life trajectories—they can "redirect paths." For

> some individuals, turning points are abrupt—radical "turnarounds" or changes in life history that separate the past from the future. . . . For most individuals, however, we conceptualize turning points as part of a process over time and not as a dramatic lasting change that takes place at any one time. (p. 305)

It was a lengthy quote but was included due to its harkening to the similarities between the concept of turning points and the life course-based/processional definition settled upon in the previous section. It was also relevant to this study as employment can be an example of a "turning point" in the life of an individual desisting from their gang. Employment could be a "radical turnaround" at the moment of hire, yet one that also required an ongoing commitment to desistance and reintegration toward the goal of being a "mainstream member of civil society" (Farrall et al., 2010, p. 548).

Prior to Laub and Sampson's (1993) study, research into gangs had primarily focused on the reasons individuals engaged in criminality with very little research into how or why they stop (Laub & Sampson, 2001; Pyrooz et al., 2014). Laub and Sampson (2001) stressed the value of an increased focus on desistance on reducing crime, violence and recidivism: "The conditions of desistance are much more amenable to manipulation compared with the conditions of offending" (p. 3). The main factor in this concentration of previous research upon the onset of delinquency was the challenge of studying gang members and delinquents over an extended period of time (Pyrooz et al., 2014; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991). Though the discovery of Glueck and Glueck's (1953) research was serendipitous, Laub and Sampson's (1993) longitudinal research and inclusion of both the entrance into and exit out of gangs opened the proverbial door to a new depth and breadth of desistance research and helped establish the field of gang desistance.

The Field of Gang Desistance

The field of Gang Desistance theory, research and practice has evolved immensely over the past 30 years. As noted, many point to Laub and Sampson's (1993) study "Turning Points in the Life Course and Why Change Matters to the Study of Crime" as the foundational study for gang desistance theory and research (Farrall et al., 2010; Paternoster et al., 2016; Rocque, 2017). The following sections explored three often-cited studies in gang desistance literature followed by briefer explanations of additional studies and areas of exploration that exhibited the evolution of theory within desistance research and were particularly relevant to this study with their focus on the dynamic processes and interventions involved in effective desistance from gangs.

Laub and Sampson (1993)

Laub and Sampson's (1993) longitudinal study following up on Glueck and Glueck's (1953) study conducted 40 years earlier offered a new approach to studying desistance and was the major catalyst in the creation of the new field of gang desistance research. Laub and Sampson (1993) also provided a foundation for an evolution of existing criminal desistance theories and concepts. Central to this evolution was their focus upon the life course of the individual and the interplay of processional, structural, communal, and individual factors involved in successful desistance (Bevan, 2015; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Weaver 2019; Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Previously, many criminologists, sociologists and others who studied desistance came to believe that individuals predominately "aged out" of criminal activity (Glueck & Glueck, 1953; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Maruna, 2017; Whitney-Snel et al., 2020)—usually by their early to mid-twenties (Whitney-Snel et al., 2020)—a view that changed little over the next 50 years of

research into cessation from criminality. Not only did this view minimize the many different forms of support and services that facilitated desistance, but it also saw disengagement from crime as an isolated moment or action (as opposed to the contemporary view of desistance as a process [Weaver, 2019]).

Despite these limitations, "aging out" has continued to be noted as a prevalent factor in desistance (Rosen & Cruz, 2018). Laub and Sampson (1993) referred to this phenomenon as "Maturational Reform" while Pyrooz and Decker (2011) called it the "age crime curve." In my own professional work providing services to desisting gang members, I came to be very familiar with this idea, expressed most commonly by clients as "I'm tired of the [gang] life." Much evidence has been presented to support the factor of aging out, with studies on criminality and desistance having showed a peak period of criminal activity occurring in late teens/early twenties and tapering off significantly by the age of 35 (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Shover & Thompson, 1992; Vigil, 1988; Weaver, 2019). There was some variation in this concept, with research that also showed how "a nontrivial number of individuals deviate from this trend" (Bersani & Doherty, 2018, p. 313). Studies have found that female criminality tends to decline earlier than males (Esbensen et al., 1999; Giordano et al., 2002) and white-collar crime beginning and declining at a later stage in life (Weaver, 2019). Additionally, reliance on the age-crime curve has also failed to consider the different life and social factors that may have occurred for different populations of offenders (Bersani & Doherty, 2018). For the most part, though, "maturational reform" applied to criminality in general (including gang membership). This was clearly stated by Sweeten et al. (2013) who, following their study utilizing over 40 variables related to age and criminality—and twenty years since Laub and Sampson's (1993) study—

found that "age continues to have a statistically and substantively significant direct effect on crime when these [variables] are considered" (p. 934).

A few studies previous to Laub and Sampson's showed a break from this age-centered focus on desistance. One example was Vigil (1988), who, approaching his research with gangs in East LA, adopted a narrative-centered approach and saw gang disengagement as dependent upon a number of variables beyond simply age. Another example was Sánchez-Jankowski (1991), who identified six different factors related to gang disengagement, including non-maturational factors such as employment and the disbanding of the gang itself. These earlier studies foretold the growing movement within gang desistance research beyond maturational reform (while still acknowledging its impact and general primacy) toward a more dynamic understanding of the factors involved in effectively desisting from gang involvement.

Giordano et al. (2002)

Giordano et al.'s 2002 article titled "Gender, Crime and Desistance: Toward a Theory of Cognitive Transformation" opened with a discussion of Laub and Sampson's 1993 study. Acknowledging the influence upon desistance of formal and informal social control theories as proposed by Laub and Sampson (1993)— "[social control theory] provides an important but incomplete accounting of the change process" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 992)—Giordano et al. (2002) then explained how their theory both challenged and added to these concepts:

> [Laub and Sampson's (1993)] perspective tends to bracket off the 'up front' work accomplished by the actors themselves—as they make the initial moves toward, help to craft, and work to sustain a difference way of life. We wish to emphasize the actor's own role in creatively and selectively appropriating elements in the environment (we will refer

> to these elements as "hooks for change"). . . . We argue that these elements will serve as catalysts for lasting change when they energize rather fundamental shifts in identity and changes in meaning and desirability of deviant/criminal behavior itself. (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 992)

Whereas Laub and Sampson (1993) expanded the theory of desistance beyond just the concept of maturational reform with their emphasis on the (mostly) external factors of social control mechanisms ("[Laub and Sampson (1993)] argue that . . . [desistance] comes about more often than not without the person either planning or actively participating in it [desistance by default]" [Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1108]), Giordano et al.'s (2002) longitudinal study of gang desistance expanded this thinking further with their inclusion of the "actor's" agency involved in the desistance process (Farrall et al., 2010) alongside the structural factors. Farrall et al. (2010) described this symbiotic interplay: "The relationship(s) between potential desisters' own actions (their agency, beliefs and identity) and those structural properties of any social system that are important to desistance" (p. 550).

The essential inclusion of agency, defined by Humphrey and Cordella (2014) in relation to gang desistance as "the conscious decision to engage or desist from an action" (p. vii), was a profound expansion of desistance theory as it then addressed the individual as an actor within the desistance process, not just—though they were still important elements of the process—aging out and reacting to external factors such as relationships and employment. Giordano et al. (2002) wrote: "We wish to emphasize the actor's own role in latching onto opportunities presented by the broader environment" (p. 1000).

Giordano et al. (2002) would refer to this concept as a theory of cognitive transformation couched within a symbolic-interactionism perspective. This theory was developed through a longitudinal study of delinquent girls (their focus on females and delinquency was itself an important broadening of desistance and gang research) and boys from the greater Toledo, Ohio area. Giordano et al. (2002) offered a helpful breakdown of their theory, identifying four interconnected types of cognitive transformation for desistance:

1. "First, and arguably most important, is a shift in the actor's openness to change" (p. 1000).
2. "The second . . . relates more directly to one's exposure to a particular hook or set of hooks for change" (p. 1000).
3. "A third . . . occurs when actors are able to envision and begin to fashion an appealing and conventional 'replacement self' that can supplant the marginal one that must be left behind" (p. 1001).
4. "The fourth . . . (the capstone) involves a transformation in the way the actor views the deviant behavior or lifestyle itself" (p. 1002).

Giordano et al.'s (2002) theory of cognitive transformation was laid out here in detail due to its relevance to this study's focus on the individual, as well as the utilized theoretical frameworks of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy. Further, this emphasis on the individual empowers their sense of self and self-efficacy in desisting and offers a personal accountability mechanism for maintaining commitment to the process of disengaging from their gang.

Ensuing theoretical developments in the field of gang desistance would build off Giordano et al.'s (2002) inclusion of self to deepen the understanding of desistance. Next, we will look at the 2009 study of Paternoster and Bushway and their furtherance of this growth.

Paternoster and Bushway (2009)

> *Individuals may . . . reconstruct their current self [Giordano et al., 2002], or fear their future self [Paternoster & Bushway, 2009] to initiate the process that underlies desistance.* (Bersani & Doherty, 2018, p. 315)

Just as Giordano et al. (2002) framed their work in the introduction as a reaction to Laub and Sampson's (1993) theories, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) similarly acknowledged ("our theory both builds upon and extends [Giordano et al.'s (2002)] theor[y] in important ways" [p. 1106]) and countered Giordano et al.'s [2002]:

> Giordano et al.'s [2002] most recent symbolic interactionist approach heavily stresses the influence of *social* processes . . . in developing both the motive to change through self-improvement and self-modification and the means to do so. . . . While we think that the kinds of conventional social relationships and role-taking described Giordano et al. are important and necessary parts of the desistance process, we think that these are not accessed until after offenders *first decide to change* and then actually begin to change their sense of who they are. (p. 1106)

Through their longitudinal study of delinquent South London males, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) developed their concept of the "Possible Self" within identity theories, described here:

> The importance of identity theories from [a desistance] perspective is that they provide an explanation for how fundamental individual characteristics, such as self-control, can

> change. . . . Giordano and her colleagues [2002] offer social psychological theories of desistance that revolve around exogenous structural breaks in the process that generate crime. While building on their work, we outlined a slightly different explanation focused on the idea of the possible self. This idea corresponds most closely to the idea of an endogenous break because it implies that the break occurs when a person reaches a certain level of propensity and decides that she wants to change. (p. 1146)

Paternoster and Bushway (2009) further differentiated their and Giordano et al.'s (2002) theories on identity theory as it applied to desistance. They pointed out that in Giordano et al.'s (2002) theory "cognitive transformations only play an important role in criminal desistance in the mid-range of structural opportunities for change" (p. 1153) which can vary depending on a person's environment (Barnes et al., 2010; Weerman et al., 2015 [who included the impact on social bonds as part of the environmental effect]). This was described by Bubolz (2014), who wrote that "environmental opportunities for economic and social advancement may not be available in certain communities" (p. 4). On the other hand, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) offered the following argument:

> Unless there is a change in identity, an understanding of a possible self as a non-offender, then the kinds of structural supports for change (a conventional job and a new social network) are unlikely to be created, and ultimately desistance from crime will not occur. (p. 1153)

Through the introduction of longitudinal study and life course theory, Laub and Sampson (1993) evolved the view of desistance from simple maturational reform to an emphasis on the social structures impacting the desistance process. Giordano et al. (2002) acknowledged the

impact of structural systems but evolved the idea through their inclusion of personal agency in the process. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) then further evolved that thinking to place the individual at the forefront of the desistance process. This study has detailed this progression as it arrives at the individual-focused approach of this study, emphasized by the utilization of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy theories.

Though additional and frequently cited studies important to the field of gang desistance had been conducted (notably: Vigil, 1988; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Esbensen & Huizinga, 1993; Hagedorn, 1994; Maruna, 2017, original study conducted in 1997; Hill et al., 1999; Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Thornberry et al., 2003; Moloney et al., 2009; Decker & Pyrooz, 2010; Carson et al., 2013; Muñoz, 2014), references to the work of Laub and Sampson (1993), Giordano et al. (2002) and Paternoster and Bushway (2009) appeared most frequently in the literature reviewed for this study.

Additional Gang Desistance Theory and Research

Ensuing studies and theoretical work since Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) have similarly tended to place the individual and individual agency at the forefront of the work, while still acknowledging the role of structural support systems and maturational reform in the desistance process (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Roman et al., 2021). Additionally, the field of *gang* desistance research has further broadened out to address specific groups, locations, theory, and research methodologies. Following is a brief listing of several studies and topical areas of research that exhibited this further evolution and broadening of gang desistance-focused theory and practice.

Pushes and Pulls

Simply put, the concept of "Push and Pull" detailed those factors that either *push* a gang member away from their gang or *pull* them toward a non-gang involved life. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) offered a more detailed description of this concept:

> *Motives* for leaving the gang were organized into push and pull factors. . . . *Pull* motives were characterized by changing social controls or turning point factors that fracture "the grip of the group." Responses that included girlfriends, jobs, or children as the motivation for leaving the gang were recorded as pulls because they are external to the gang. . . . *Push* motives were characterized by cognitive shifts or transformations about gang life. Responses that included "I got tired of the gang lifestyle" or "I wanted to avoid trouble and violence" were recorded as pushes because they are internal to the gang. (p. 420)

Additional research on "push and pull" theory was available in studies conducted by Kelly and Ward (2020) and Roman et al. (2021).

Prosocial Advocacy

Whitney-Snel et al. (2020) wrote that "prosocial ties (or positive social influences) must be increased for the individual to develop a new role and identity, separate from the gang, and thus fully disengage from the gang lifestyle" (p. 1931). Prosocial ties and the development and/or fostering of positive individual characteristics (e.g., hope [Gålnander, 2020; Harris, 2011], resilience [Albert, 2007], self-efficacy [Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009], and self-esteem [Humphrey & Cordella, 2014]) were found in a reconnection with family (Moloney et al., 2009; Weaver, 2016); an intimate partner and/or relationship (Bersani & van Schellen, 2014; Warr, 1998); within educational and employment settings (Bevan, 2015; Vigil,

1988; Whitney-Snel et al., 2020); programmatic and service providers (Decker et al., 2014; Moffitt, 1993; Whitney-Snel et al., 2020); and engagement with spirituality and religion (DiPietro & Dickinson, 2021; Humphrey & Cordella, 2014).

Primary and Secondary Desistance

Bubolz (2014) wrote: "Primary desistance refers to temporary lulls in offending whereas secondary desistance is a permanent shift in identity that includes a challenge in self-concept" (p. 9). This description suggested that desistance is a process, not a one-time event. Maruna and Roy (2007) further expanded on this concept writing that "when conceived as 'going straight', desistance is a distinctly subjective and on-going process" (p. 5). Maruna and Roy (2007) described primary desistance as involving "the initial flirtation and experimentation with [desistant] behaviours. Secondary [desistance], on the other hand, is [desistance] that becomes 'incorporated as part of the 'me' of the individual" (pp. 3–4).

Gender and Gangs

A relatively healthy amount of gang desistance research has been conducted on the similarities and differences between male and female gang-involved and desisting individuals. This gender-focused line of research has explored differences in reasons for joining gangs (Bell, 2009); differences in the level of gang-related activities (Esbensen et al., 1999; Petersen & Howell, 2013); differences in length of gang membership and involvement (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Novich, 2019); experience(s) of sexual and emotional trauma from co-gang members (Medina et al., 2012; Vigil, 2008); differences in reasons and processes for desisting from gangs (Giordano et al., 2002; O'Neal et al., 2016; Vigil, 2008); and the long-term consequences of female gang involvement (Bell, 2009; Petersen & Howell, 2013).

International Context

In the introduction to their book *Routledge International Handbook of Critical Gang Studies,* Brotherton and Gude (2022) defined the international context of critical gang studies as "a view of gangs that takes into consideration the global context and appearance of the 'gang' in its various forms and stages of development" (Introduction section). Studies and research focused on individuals and populations in countries outside of the United States have suggested that the phenomenon of gangs and gang desistance is not unique to the United States. For example, the following studies were performed on gang desistance in various countries: Australia (Morgan et al., 2010); Bangladesh (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022); El Salvador (Rosen & Cruz, 2018); Canada (Chalas & Grekul, 2017); England (Wood, 2019); Netherlands (Weerman et al., 2015); Singapore (Ang et al., 2018); South Africa (Kelly & Ward, 2020); and Sweden (Rostami et al., 2015).

Narrative-Based

Maruna and Liem (2021) stated that "narrative is the way that human beings make sense out of human (or human-like) lives and make them meaningful and understandable" (p. 127). Within narrative-centered gang research "stories are preserved and treated as units, allowing the participants' agency and ways of constructing meaning to emerge" (Kelly & Ward, 2020, p. 1514) and to "share much of themselves" (Muñoz, 2014, p. 76). The inclusion and research of the voices of the gang members themselves should be a social justice concern as much of what has been understood about gangs and the reasons individuals join and leave gangs has been expressed through the theoretical lens of academia. Narrative research with gang members has allowed discussion about "the system, telling the truth about race and class discrimination in a

way that helps people see how the reality of criminal justice does not matchup to their ideas about either justice or fairness" (Maruna & Liem, 2021, p. 132). Further, narrative research has offered a point of view beyond the traditional foci within gang research (why people join and what they do while in the gang). Instead of focusing on the stigmatizing stage of gang involvement (Dichiara & Chabot, 2022; Vigil, 1988), narrative has been a valuable area of study within the field of desistance "not because of what truths it can tell us about a person's past but rather what it might say about the person's future" (Maruna & Liem, 2021, p. 128). "The person's future," after all, is the objective of gang desistance work, and the inclusion of "the direct perspective[s] of former gang members with the lived experience, may aid in developing gang prevention and intervention programs that more readily resonate with those . . . currently involved in gangs" (Whitney-Snel et al., 2020, p. 1931).

Policy

Policies related to gangs and gang members have maintained a focus on suppression tactics from law enforcement and the justice system, an approach acknowledged by researchers as having both increased the cohesion and activity of gangs (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007; Klein, 1995) and incurred life-long consequences for the gang members subjected to this "tough on crime" approach (Durán, 2006; Pyrooz & Decker, 2013). Pyrooz and Decker (2013) acknowledged the value of a certain level of suppression when needed, but also noted the shortcomings of a suppression-only approach:

> The role of both social opportunities as a means to *pull* gang members from their gang as well as the role of suppression activities to *push* them out of the gang. . . . Both can play a role, but it must be noted that suppression rarely woks in a vacuum. (p. 93)

Laub and Sampson (2001) also acknowledged this fallacy of common policy:

> Desistance research has yielded some sturdy findings that offer sobering implication for many taken-for-granted assumptions that pervade the policy arena. Perhaps the most salient finding concerns the possible counterproductive effects of punitive sanctions when considered in the long run of individual lives. (p. 57)

The danger within policy's focus on the "individual" and their crimes was best described by Bersani & Doherty (2018): "Policies and practices that focus solely on the individual, ignoring social context, and vice versa, are unlikely to produce long-term meaningful change" (p. 328). A growing understanding and addressing of the environmental and structural factors involved in gangs and criminality within policy has offered the potential of better facilitating that *long-term meaningful change* needed to truly address the issues and consequences of gangs and gang involvement.

Ethnicity

Klein (1995) stated: "Not well studied have been the differences among principal ethnic categories of gangs" (p. 107). Gang and gang desistance studies and research in the United States based on desisting individual's race and ethnicity has increased since Klein's (1995) quote from the mid-1990s. Bersani and Doherty (2018) wrote: "Researchers have begun to explore demographic diversity in the desistance process" (p. 313) and extolled the value of research that "details the importance of cultural milieu for supporting and curtailing the desistance process. Findings from a [desistance study] revealed that socio-structure and cultural orientations differentially shape desistance across ethnic communities" (p. 319). Esbensen and Carson (2012) pointed out that a growing focus on race/ethnicity in gang research was a result of the

diminishing of white gangs and research upon them which was concerned more with nationality and ethnicity (Durán, 2006; Esbensen & Carson, 2012). Another factor in this growing attention to race and ethnicity within gang research was traced to the increased association of gangs with race and violence, and the ensuing demonization of gang members within politics and media. Durán (2006) described this "moral panic" in more detail, writing that "the images conjured by police gang data and the media presented a sensational and distorted picture of overall gang activity" (p. 3).

A broadening inclusion and recognition of the ethnic and cultural differences between gangs has helped move gang and gang desistance research and practice away from a "monolithic" approach (Decker, 2002; Greenberg, 2007) toward a more nuanced and dynamic understanding of gangs and the process of desisting from them. The following list included select examples of previous research and exhibits the breadth of ethnically-focused research and studies that has grown within the fields of gangs and gang desistance: African-American (Alonso, 2004; Fox, 1985; Krohn et al., 2011; Marzo, 2020); American-Indian and Canadian Aboriginal (Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Freng et al., 2012); Asian-American (Chin, 1996; Lee, 2016; Pih et al., 2008; Zhang, 2003); Latina/o (Albert, 2007, Pih et al., 2008; Muñoz, 2014; Vigil, 1988); diversity among and heterogeneity within gangs (Esbensen & Carson, 2012; Howell & Griffiths, 2019; Klein, 1995).

The preceding sections were by no means an exhaustive inventory of the continually broadening field of gang desistance research and diversity of the researchers involved. But they did exhibit how the field had grown and provided indicators toward burgeoning topics and areas of focus for future gang research.

One area that was noticeably absent from this list—and the impetus for this study—involved the impact that employment can have on a gang member's process of desistance. This was a gap in the research and literature that this study hoped to address in a manner that would further expand our understanding of gang desistance toward identifying effective support mechanisms and interventions to improve the impact and success of gang desistance work.

With an understanding of the purpose, meaning, and history of gangs and gang desistance-related theory, research and literature, the next section explored why desistance from gangs is critically needed through an exploration of why individuals join gangs, the impacts of gang involvement on individuals and communities, the process of gang desistance, and how gang desistance research can address these critical issues.

Gang Involvement

The following section presented the reasons individuals join gangs, involvement in the gang and its impacts over the life course, and the process of desistance from the gang. Having explored the conceptual and historical perspectives of gang desistance, the following sections examined the life in a gang for the gang members themselves: why they join; the impacts this involvement has on their and their family and community's lives; and, finally, the effective interventions and other supports involved in the desistance stage of this gang life arc as offered within the research and literature on gangs and gang desistance.

Why Join?

No kid is seeking anything when he joins a gang; he's always fleeing something.

(Boyle, 2017, p. 132)

Just as gang desistance theory and research on gangs has grown to focus on a spectrum of factors and issues related to both internal and external forces, identification of the reasons individuals join gangs has also grown multifaceted. A common concept found throughout the literature on joining gangs was that of *multiple risk factors* (Martinez et al., 2014) (Vigil [1988] developed a similar concept called "multiple marginality" which "encompasses the consequences of barrio life, low socioeconomic status, street socialization and enculturation, and problematic development of self-identity" [p. 9]). A risk factor was defined by Bishop et al. (2017) as "individual or environmental hazards that increase an individual's vulnerability to negative developmental outcomes" (p. 2). The advent of multiple risk factors can "have an additive effect; that is, the more risk factors a youth is exposed to, the more likely he or she is to join a gang" (Bishop et al., 2017, p. 3). As reflected in the review of literature related to gangs and gang theory (see Appendix A), the next section looked at both the structural elements of a child's environment (family, neighborhood, school) and internal processes (fear, learning, sociability) to develop a picture of what lead to engaging with and eventually joining a gang.

Factors for Joining

It has been shown that the impact of a person's environment can indicate possible future delinquency as early as the age of three (Liberman, 2008). This stage of development was most dependent on the child's family and social environment. Different types of family stressors have been shown to play a role in eventual gang membership (Vigil, 1988). These may have arisen in a number of different forms: economic insecurity (Taylor, 2013); food insecurity (Sonterblaum, 2022); exposure to conflict and violence in the home and local environment (Thornberry et al., 2003); sexual, mental, and physical abuse of the child (Coid et al., 2020; Marzo, 2020);

substance abuse occurring in the home (Quinn et al., 2019; Taylor, 2013); family members (parents, siblings, extended family) engaged in gangs and/or criminality (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hashimi et al., 2021; Thornberry et al., 2003), which can often lead to the absence of one or more parents due to incarceration or death (Vigil, 1988); emotional and physical neglect of the child due to poor family management practices (Hill et al., 1999; Thornberry et al., 2003); the absence of a parent; experience in the foster system (Lauger, 2012; Wolff et al., 2020); immigration status (Freng & Taylor, 2013); housing insecurity and frequent relocation (Lauger, 2012; Sonterblaum, 2022); and finally, the most common across the literature, the physical absence of one or more of the parents (Hill et al., 1999; Taylor, 2013; Whitten et al., 2019; Wolff et al., 2020).

This final factor (absence of a parent) was the most prevalent and consistent across the literature. Both in research and qualitative—mostly narrative-based—data, the theme of an absent parent (most commonly the father [Dellinger, 2019; Marzo, 2020]) through divorce, abandonment, incarceration, or death (Vigil, 1988) was pointed to again and again as an early risk factor for later gang involvement. The following quote reflected this thinking from both researchers and gang-involved participants:

> Mom and dad fought constantly; it was like hand-to-hand combat. . . . So Mom and Dad ended their marriage of nineteen years. It was mainly due to Dad's nasty habits. He even got busted for selling marijuana and spent six years in jail. She tried her best to make it with the rest of us [11 children], but lost the battle. (Vigil, 1988, p. 45)

Overall, a child growing up in an environment abundant with "risk" factors was more likely to eventually engage in delinquent behavior and join a gang (Thornberry et al., 2003). But these

risk factors were not necessarily the reason someone joins a gang. Risk factors can be traumatic and impact the child's psychosocial and psychoemotional well-being, frequently engendering or increasing effects such as anxiety (Martinez et al., 2014), depression (Watkins & Melde, 2016), fear (Fox, 2013) and antisocial behaviors (Gordon et al., 2004; Van Eck et al., 2017). These effects can push children and youth outside of the home and into the "streets" as a result of their seeking sources of safety and belonging (Esbensen et al., 1999). If a child lived in a community with prevalent gang presence—and especially if siblings or nearby extended family were gang-involved—the pull of gangs and its promise of answers to many of the risk factors can be dangerously strong (Gagnon, 2018).

Before looking at what involvement in a gang promises to prospective individuals and why this is such a *pull* for youth emerging from risky home environments, it was important to note that an unstable home environment is not always the reason youth are pulled toward gang involvement. Many gang members acknowledge that their home life was relatively stable with both parents present (even a consistent partner for their remaining natural parent—such as a stepparent—has been shown to have a positive effect on future gang involvement [Hill et al., 1999]); absence of traumatic physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; relative economic and food security; and lack of criminal and/or gang involvement in immediate and extended family members. In these instances, it can often be the external environments of the neighborhood (Lopez-Aguado & Walker, 2019) and school (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996)—especially when these settings and institutions do "not fill socialization needs" (Durán, 2006, p. 10)—that foster a pull toward gang involvement.

Despite a stable home life, if there is heavy gang presence in the local neighborhood and/or school setting, youth can become exposed and familiarized to the gang lifestyle and through a peer-driven/pressured social engagement process and eventually find their way into a gang (Lauger, 2012). Additionally, in rare cases, youth can be actively recruited or even forced into a gang, especially in environments with high levels of gang activity (Rice, 2012). A second frequently cited reason was more of a *push* than a *pull*. This reason was fear. Time and again in qualitative studies, prospective, current and former gang members pointed to a fear for their safety as a main motivator to joining a gang (Boyle, 2011; Fox, 2013; Gagnon, 2018). Finally, though often stated by gang-involved study participants, research findings have shown that the desire to earn money—while still a proven factor—is less of a pull toward gang involvement than the preceding two reasons (Howell & Egley, 2005).

The Consequences of Gang Involvement

Despite the fact that only a small number of gang members are actively involved in serious violence and criminality (Berger et al., 2017; Howell, 2006; Klein, 1971), or that the average length of gang membership is usually no more than one to two years (Bovenkerk, 2011; Esbensen & Huizanga, 1993; Krohn et al., 2011; Ouellet et al., 2019)—despite these reasons, any level of gang involvement still has lasting impacts on the individual, their family, and the community (Gebo, 2018; Medina et al., 2012; Pyrooz, 2012).

Viewed most commonly today in gang scholarship from a life course perspective, the long-term effects of gang membership can be wide and impact a substantial range of areas in a gang member's current and future life (for both active and former gang members). During gang involvement, often regardless of the level of gang activity and criminality, it was very likely that

a gang member will experience some or all of the following long-term traumatic effects: stigmatization (Dichiara & Chabot, 2022); criminal justice involvement, incarceration, and recidivism (Krohn et al., 2011; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2001); reduced educational attainment (Berger et al., 2017); reduced spirituality (Deuchar, 2020; DiPietro & Dickinson, 2021) (increased spirituality has been shown to be an effective deterrent to gang involvement [Berger et al., 2017; Johnson, 2014]); unstable family relationships (Mallion & Wood, 2020; Vigil, 1988); physical health (Bain, 2019; Mallion & Wood, 2020; Polaschek, 2019); and antisocial development (Gordon et al., 2004; Van Eck et al., 2017).

Generally speaking, even one of these effects can alter the trajectory of a person's life considerably. For gang members (with the likelihood of experiencing several if not all of these effects), the actions of their involvement in gangs as youths can have permanent consequences for adulthood. Of these different effects, two stand out: a youth's family environment and academic performance. Schooling and education—valuable interventions for desistance and therefore are especially noted here—appeared in much of the reviewed literature and were noted as being particularly impactful (Craig et al., 2002; Connolly & Jackson, 2019). Many gang members' narratives included some form of disillusionment with school (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Martinez et al., 2014; Vigil, 1988). The causes may have been the effects of emotional and economic stability at home (Pih et al., 2008); the presence of gang activity within the school (Hill et al., 1999); and stigmatization of gang membership (especially for Black and Latino boys who are stigmatized "through coded language and policing of school behaviors that is then used to justify pushing and punishing minoritized students toward the school-to-prison pipeline" [Huerta et al., 2020, p. 2]) by teachers, staff, and other students (Howell et al., 2017).

Krohn et al. (2011) pointed out that different life course "trajectories" ("age-graded patterns of development with respect to social institutions such as family, school and work" [p. 993]) are often intertwined. Regardless of the reason for disengagement from school, a reduced level of educational attainment can affect a person's sense of self (Connolly & Jackson, 2019) (with self-efficacy being one very relevant example for this study); ongoing opportunities for learning and development (Connolly & Jackson, 2019; Young & Gonzalez, 2013); and employment in adulthood (Thornberry et al., 2003). Also important, though, was that just as a lack of educational attainment can have a detrimental effect on a person's various life trajectories, when it came to the desistance process, access to and engagement in education-focused programming and services have been shown to be effective interventions in desisting from gang involvement (Bushway & Uggen, 2021).

The gang member was not the only party affected by their gang involvement. Literature pointed frequently to the impact that an individual's gang involvement can have on those around them, namely: other siblings and immediate and extended family (Hashimi et al., 2021; Young et al., 2014); their own children and partners (Krohn et al., 2011); and their social networks such as peers and students (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Howell & Griffiths, 2019). Regarding immediate family, these impacts included disruption of family structure, norms, and rituals (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996); primary and secondary stress and trauma (Young et al., 2014); and financial and economic disruption (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Pacheco, 2019). Also included in the family-based consequences were the impacts on a gang member's own children and spouse or partner which could include poor parenting, abuse and violence, and economic and housing instability (Krohn et al., 2011).

As it related to broader social networks, gang members had similarly disruptive effects. Just as they were pulled to the gang through a combination of home instability and family and peer circles, they in turn could become a pull for others who were once in their position (Thornberry et al., 2003; Krohn et al., 2011)—and so the cycle continued (Augustyn et al., 2019). When gang members were engaged with school, some studies pointed to the disruption within learning and social contexts for other students (Estrada et al., 2013) with many students describing a sense of "fear" when gang activity was present at their schools (Carson & Esbensen, 2019). For teachers and school staff, fear of gang members and violence was one factor (Huerta et al., 2020; Pyrooz, 2014)— "They was scared of us. They wouldn't never say nothing to me but they had the police right there" (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 193)—along with disruption to the classroom environment and ability to convey educational content (Esbensen & Carson, 2012; Larson & Busse, 1998).

Beyond the immediate family and social group disruption, gang activity had broader impacts that affected many different parts of society (Pyrooz, 2012). These impacts included: stress and trauma for residents in active gang areas (Dalmas, 2014; Howell & Griffiths, 2019); costs of gang-related criminal justice actions such as court cases and incarceration (Bain, 2019; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2013) (not surprisingly, this was often the motivating factor for government and policy makers to address the issue of gangs [Rice, 2012]); and a reduction in home and property values and lack of structural and economic investment in areas with high gang activity (Abt, 2019; Sharkey, 2018) (some literature did include the benefits for communities and stakeholders who engaged with local gang members [Akerlof & Yellen, 1993; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996]).

Finally, the frequent loss of life was the ultimate effect of gang violence. In 2012 alone, it was estimated that 2,363 individuals lost their life as a result of gang involvement and violence (National Gang Center, n.d.). But homicide was not the only manner of death for gang members. Other forms of death for gang members included shootings by law enforcement (no available literature could be found showing the number of gang members killed by police); suicide, for which gang members are more than three times more likely to attempt than non-gang involved individuals (Watkins & Melde, 2016) (one form of suicide called "street suicide" or "suicide-by-cop"– where a gang member knowingly puts themselves in a situation to be killed by a rival gang or law enforcement [Mohandie et al., 2009]—is a little-known phenomenon amongst gangs [and one to which I lost a gang-involved client]); and drug overdoses (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991).

This issue of death was a critical one (Abt, 2019), yet it frequently failed to elicit the desperately needed attention due to the marginality and stigmatization of gang members in our society (Dichiara & Chabot, 2022; Vigil, 1988). It also spoke to the continued oppression and marginalization of people (especially young men) of color. It was estimated that more than 80% of gang members nationally were Latina/o and African-American (National Gang Center, n.d.), potentially meaning that 1,890 (of the 2,363 annual gang homicide victims) were African-American and Latina/o. Again, while this immense loss of life should have been a motivator to more effectively address the issue of gang-related homicide and death, it was often utilized more as a strategic talking point than a source of action (Rice, 2012).

The purpose in laying out the pushes, pulls and impacts of gang involvement on the gang member, their families, communities, and society was two-fold. For one, it provided a richer

understanding of the many factors involved in drifting toward and finally engaging in gang involvement. Instead of just reacting to the local structural environment or societal norms and expectations, the myriad of factors involved in a person's willingness (and desire) to join a life so rife with poor outcomes could be seen. But it also offered a blueprint for working with gang members seeking to desist. An understanding of these "root conditions" (a frequent term within public health work [Rice et al., 2007]) of gang involvement can inversely provide a more detailed and prescriptive approach to addressing these issues.

Gang Desistance

With an understanding of why individuals join gangs and the impacts of that gang involvement on themselves and others, along with an overview of the history, definition and concepts of gang desistance, this study next explored what the literature conveyed regarding most effective practices for facilitating a gang member's successful desistance process. The reasons for joining a gang can also offer a roadmap for reasons to leave it. That reflective relationship provided the structure for the following section.

Leaving the Gang

Contrary to the popular myth of "blood in, blood out"—wherein gang members could only leave the gang through death—the actual process of disengaging and ultimately desisting from membership in a gang was often much more mundane (Carson & Vecchio, 2015) (though there are examples of desisting gang members having to be "beaten out" of their gang [Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Vigil, 1988]). Two of the most frequently cited methods were "knifing off" and "drifting away." Beginning with the latter of the two, *drifting away* was defined as a slow process of disengaging from the gang (Berger et al., 2017; Bovenkerk, 2011) by reducing the

amount of time spent with gang members, choosing not to engage in social and criminal activities with the gang, residential relocation, or choosing other trajectories that school or employment can offer (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil, 1988).

Knifing off was described as a more deliberate disengagement (Moffitt, 1993), involving the intentional separation from one's past social groups and activities, or more technically, "the explicit removal of past options" (Maruna & Roy, 2007, p. 114). Applied more frequently in addiction (an interesting point as gang members often describe the addiction-like quality of gangs and violence, a fact that led to the implementation of a "Gang Members Anonymous" group at Homeboy Industries for individuals desisting from their gangs [see Appendix C for a schedule of classes offered at Homeboy Industries]), the process of "knifing off" for gang members involved severing one's ties with former friends (i.e., "homies") and even family members in instances where they were gang-involved (Maruna & Roy, 2007; Moffitt, 1993).

Whether it was a slow drifting away, or a "dramatic" (Maruna & Roy, 2007) knifing off from the gang, the departure from the gang was prompted by *something.* Described earlier in this chapter, maturational reform—or "aging out"—continued to be integral to the study of desistance (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Carson & Vecchio, 2015), though not the prevailing factor as was believed in early gang and delinquency research (Glueck & Glueck, 1953). Expressions such as "I'm tired" and similarly worded thoughts provided by ex-gang member study participants reflected this element in leaving gangs and criminality (Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Chalas & Grekul, 2017). But current research has tended to place great emphasis on external factors and influences—variously described as "turning points" (Laub & Sampson, 1993), "hooks" (Giordano et al., 2002), or "pushes and pulls" (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996)—as well

as the intentionality of the desister, often viewed within terms of individual "agency" and identify transformation (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009).

With this study's emphasis on effective structural interventions and supports—as well as the individual-driven frameworks of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy—the following section detailed three primary elements within the desistance process: external factors; the individual agency of the desister; and effective supports to facilitate the desistance process. The two frameworks of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy applied mostly to the second and third stages.

Disengagement

Some researchers have seen desistance as a distinct stage of the process of individuals leaving gangs (Berger et al., 2017). Within this view, the stage of breaking from the gang was labeled as disengagement (defined as "the process of the declining probability of gang membership" [Sweeten et al., 2013, p. 473]), whereas desistance "constitutes the final and permanent cessation of all offenses and gang-related criminal activities" (Berger et al., 2017, p. 488). Berger et al. (2017) saw desistance as a five-stage process: 1) triggering; 2) contemplation; 3) exploration; 4) exiting; and 5) maintenance. In their description of the "exiting stage," Berger et al. (2017) explained that desisting gang members "either announced it publicly and left, or simply went 'underground' without informing their peers" (p. 495). In conjunction with the earlier stated definition of desistance as "the process of disengagement or 'declining probability of gang membership'" (Carson & Vecchio, 2015, p. 4), this study came to see disengagement as one stage of the overall desistance process.

It was also important to note that "leaving the gang….is a complex process replete with pushes and pulls to conformity and back to the gang" (Pyrooz et al., 2014, p. 508). Similar again to addiction and recovery, there can be setbacks and then recommitment to desisting. But that, too, can be an important part of the desistance process (Gålnander, 2020; Rocque, 2017). It was also worth noting that, with the individual as the driver of their desistance, the desistance process can be multifaceted wherein no one definition or approach will work for everyone (Sweeten et al., 2013). But there were identified generalities into which most desisting individuals fell and those broader descriptions will be explored next.

What prompted the "triggering" or disengagement stage? Researchers believed it was often a combination of pushes and pulls (Sweeten et al., 2013). Push factors were those external factors that could prompt a gang member to reconsider their involvement in the gang. The most frequently cited reason in desistance research was the impact of a violent incident on the person or someone close to them that provoked considerations of leaving the gang life (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Tonks & Stephenson, 2019). Vigil (1988) offered the words of a former gang member to illustrate this "push" of violence:

> I never wanted to kill anyone. All my friends had guns like it was nothing, but guns kill people, and I didn't want to do that. . . . I was with a group and they started stabbing a guy. They even kept chasing him after they stabbed him. It turned me off. . . . I never wanted to do anything that would hurt anyone but me. (p. 80)

Additional reasons for desistance included involvement with the justice system (primarily incarceration) (Carson et al., 2013) and/or growing tired of gang involvement (including "aging out" [Willman & Snortum, 1982]): "I'm leaving this whole lifestyle behind me. I've had enough.

Too old for this shit" (Chalas & Grekul, 2017, p. 376). The most frequently cited pull factors were familial responsibilities ("I wanted to change for myself and for my children. I wanted to break the cycle [gangs to prison] for my kids" [Decker et al., 2014, p. 17]); the influence of an intimate partner and/or marriage (Bersani & Schellen, 2014; Laub & Sampson, 1993); as well as employment (Hagedorn, 1998; Kelly & Ward, 2020), education (Craig et al., 2002; Connolly & Jackson, 2019), and spirituality (DiPietro & Dickinson, 2021; Johnson, 2014). Clearly, several of these factors were ambiguously situated and arguably fell into either push or pull categories. For the purposes of clarity, they were grouped in this research according to their more frequent categorization.

In many ways, this "disengagement" stage of desistance was the most critical. It could have been that cognitive shift described by Giordano et al. (2002), the "turning point" moment offered by Laub and Sampson (1993), or a combination of the triggering and contemplation stages of Berger et al. (2017). This stage also fit nicely within Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) Identity Desistance Theory through its centering of the individual while still acknowledging the influence of external factors. However it has been defined, this initial and critical stage of disengagement from the gang can involve a profound shift in perception of self (or, at least, the beginning of the individual's shifting view of themselves away from that of a gang member.)

Now What?

Following this important first step of beginning to disengage from one's gang, the obvious question is *now what*? Within Berger et al.'s (2017) five stages, this phase could be seen as a combination of both contemplation and exploration. Gålnander (2020) wrote that "within the early stages of desistance, aspirations in the form of *goals* have not yet been fully identified, let

alone accomplished" (p. 257). Oftentimes, this lack of identification can resulted from the desisting gang member being unaware of non-gang involved trajectories and the available supportive resources to commence those trajectories (Harris, 2011; Martinez et al., 2014), or, in some instances, avoidance of resources due to previous negative experiences when engaging with resource providers (Medina et al., 2012; Melde et al., 2011). In cases where the individual secured employment while still gang-involved, a growing commitment to their job may have been the first step on their particular pathway toward desistance (Weaver, 2016). For most gang members, though, external interventions and support mechanisms could be critical to maintaining their desistance.

The Individual

Desistance research has—from the start—identified the importance of the individual within the desistance process. The three major studies identified in Chapter 2—Laub and Sampson (1993), Giordano et al. (2002), and Paternoster and Bushway (2009)—all noted the importance of internal mechanisms and individual characteristics as key components of successful desistance. This was evident in Laub and Sampson's (1993) implementation of Life Course Theory to the study of desistance; Giordano et al.'s (2002) emphasis on "the actor's own role in latching onto opportunities presented by the broader environment" (p. 1000); and Paternoster and Bushway's (2009) belief that "desistance occurs when a person reaches a certain level of propensity and decides that she wants to change" (p. 1146).

It was important that the development of the individual's agency in committing to and maintaining their desistance was fostered. The desisting individual must believe that they could accomplish it. Gålnander (2020) described this as "the role of emotions in desistance" (p. 257)

and specifically noted the role of "hope" in this internal stage of the desistance process. Similar concepts related to the ability of an individual to desist included "resilience" (Albert, 2007) and self-efficacy (Paternoster et al., 2015). These emotions and personal characteristics offered a combination of personal agency with the structural supports, not only providing a vision of a pathway forward (if not the pathway itself), but also the personal and structural means to achieve that vision. They could also be fundamental in overcoming the self-stigmatization, and eventually, external stigmatization of the gang member that could act to restrict one's movement away from their gang. Stigmatization can be a formidable barrier and, as part of the cognitive shift in self and public perception, overcoming this barrier was often described as an important—if not essential—element of the desistance process (Bushway et al., 2011; Maruna, 2014; Rosen & Cruz, 2018).

A final component of this individual element of desistance included both personal and external factors. This was the development and establishment of prosocial bonds for the desisting gang member. Mentioned briefly, a number of narrative desistance accounts described the influence of prosocial networks (family members, intimate partners, friends, coworkers, mentors) as the impetus to disengage from their gang (Roman et al., 2017). One example involved a former gang member talking about the influence of his wife: "My wife, little by little, would say, 'Your friends are not doing anything for you and just make you do more time [in prison]'" (Decker et al., 2014, p. 17). The Gang Reduction and Youth Development (GRYD) Department of the LA Mayor's Office, which worked with youth and young adults seeking to desist from their gangs, utilized a "strength-based genogram" tool to help clients map out their social network (with a focus on immediate and extended family members) in order to identify prosocial

figures to engage in the desistance process (Cahill et al., 2015). Whatever the method, the establishment of a prosocial group or network to encourage and maintain an individual on their desistance path has been shown to be an incredibly effective form of support.

Programs and Services

Programs and services designed to support gang members' desistance can be critical to a desisting individual's success. 2nd Call and Homeboy Industries in LA, Chicago CRED in Chicago, and RiseUp Industries in San Diego were organizations who participated in this study based on their provision of the needed supports to help gang members along the desistance path. Additionally, their mission statements utilized language that emphasized the "individual" as opposed to a more monolithic and stigmatizing description such as *gang member* (see Chapter 3 for organizational mission statements and a listing of programs and services offered by each of the organizations). McNeill et al. (2012) spoke to the focus on the individual within programming and services, writing that desistance programs and policies need "to make it more 'holistic' and 'humanised,' more focused on the service user's strengths and needs" (para. 12).

Keeping in line with the dynamic nature of desistance and its emphasis on the individual within the desistance process, no single form or method of programmatic support applied to all desisting individuals—"a unique approach is necessary" (Pyrooz & Decker, 2013, p. 93). Just as looking at the "individual" necessitated a more spectral approach, the importance of offering a range of available programming and services that could be individually tailored to increase the "responsivity of the clients" (Di Placido et al., 2006, p. 111) was frequently mentioned throughout the literature. This tailored, diverse approach was often referred to as "wraparound services" in the literature (Flores, 2016). Desistance programs that employed wraparound

services (including case management, social services, food, housing, education, substance abuse treatment, mental and physical healthcare) were generally shown to be effective (La Vigne et al., 2008; Decker, 2002), though some research warned against the negative impacts that wraparound services can have on individuals (especially young females), such as when "the sudden removal of wraparound [services] leaves girls feeling lost" (Flores, 2016, p. 137.)

At Homeboy Industries, wraparound services included mental health, case management, employment, education, training, and workshops (Whitney-Snel et al., 2020). Within each of these types of services, there were further refinements. Educational services, for example, included self-help groups (Anger Management, Narcotics Anonymous, Gang Members Anonymous); life skills (Parenting, Personal Finances, Technology); lower and higher education attainment (high school diploma, general equivalence degree [GED], and the Pathways to College program); and vocational training (welding, food-handling, solar panel installation). Wraparound services at Chicago CRED included life coaching, individual therapy, workshops, housing support, education, and employment (Northwestern Neighborhood & Network Initiative, 2021). 2nd Call and RiseUp Industries provided a similar—though less expansive—range of services.

Most of these services were provided by successfully desisted peer-based staff who shared the experience of desisting from gangs and offered a sympathetic and prosocial form of support with the understanding of the challenges the person was experiencing. This can be a critical element of the service provision as peer-led interventions and services—despite residual stigma of their former gang involvement (Varano & Wolff, 2012; Klein, 1995)—have been

shown to be effective in working with gang members (Basheer & Hoag, 2014; Bevan, 2015; Howell, 2010; Pacheco, 2019; Roman et al., 2021).

The reviewed literature echoed the effectiveness of the types of programs and services for desistance and the methods of their provision. The most consistent examples for effective programs and services included the following: (re)engagement with spirituality and/or religion (DiPietro & Dickinson, 2021; Humphrey & Cordella, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Young & Gonzalez, 2013); employment (Berger et al., 2017; Bevan, 2015; Bushway & Uggen, 2011; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Cook et al., 2015; Hagedorn, 1998; Kelly & Ward, 2020; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Pyrooz & Decker, 2013; Weaver, 2016); education and training (Berger et al., 2017; Bevan, 2015; Bushway & Uggen, 2011; Chalas & Grekul, 2017; Craig et al., 2002; Connolly & Jackson, 2019; Flatt, 2017; Greenberg, 2007; Pacheco, 2019; Whitney-Snel et al., 2020); counseling and therapeutic services addressing mental health, trauma, substance abuse, and anger management (Berger et al., 2017; Cook et al., 2014; Di Placido et al., 2006; Johnson, 2007; Pacheco, 2019) alternative activities such as arts and outdoor recreational opportunities (Berger et al., 2017; Bevan, 2015; Howell, 2011; Young & Gonzalez, 2013); and housing (Flatt, 2017; Greenberg, 2007; Pacheco, 2019; Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

Employment

> *Of all the factors contributing to gangs and their epidemic of violence in Los Angeles, none is more significant than the staggering rates of unemployment in their communities.* (Krikorian, 1997, para. 1)

Throughout the gang desistance (and more generally criminal desistance) literature, the procurement of employment—though often mentioned only briefly with little explanation—was

shown to be a factor in desisting from gang involvement (Bevan, 2015; Krohn & Dong, 2016; Seals, 2009; Uggen, 2000). Employment was described as either a motivating factor for leaving a gang, or as one element in the overall desistance process with interplay between the different elements supporting the procurement and maintaining of employment (Weaver, 2016).

Other studies have found little impact of employment on gang and criminal desistance (Rice, 2015; Willman & Snortum, 1982). These studies found that employment, though a positive, showed little statistical proof of fostering desistance (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2012). Similarly, even if a person was employed, the type of employment—especially low-paying or menial task-oriented work—could be a deterrent to maintaining desistance and, in some cases, acted as the impetus for a return to gang activity and criminality (Cramer, 2011).

Having acknowledged the arguments diminishing the importance of employment, review of the literature found a more substantive argument *for* the impact of employment on the process of gang desistance (Bevan, 2015; Weaver, 2016). This study opened with a quote from Holocaust survivor and psychologist Victor Frankl (1992) about the "neurosis of unemployment" and the effects of this purposelessness upon his patients and fellow concertation camp prisoners. In my own work, I have been privy to the transformative power of employment on a person desisting from their gang. But, again, there was plenty of evidence to also support these perceptions. Along with studies and testimonies of individuals who had successfully desisted largely as a result of employment, the relationship between high rates of unemployment (both locally and nationally) and increased rates of crime has been strongly proven (Hagan 1993; Lageson & Uggen, 2012; Raphael & Winter-Ebmer, 2001; Seals, 2009; Willman & Snortum, 1982).

The type of work and laying out a path to obtain that work were also noted as important factors. As Cramer (2011) made clear, the wrong type of work can either hinder or completely upend the desistance process. Due to the long-term consequences of gang involvement, many desisting and former gang members lacked the necessary skills, experience, and knowledge of the job market to obtain—and *maintain*—living-wage employment (Hagan, 1993; Na et al., 2015; Pyrooz, 2012). Additionally, full time work (40 hours per week) was identified as important as it can limit the amount of available time to associate with former gang peers (Bahr et al., 2010; Laub & Sampson, 2003). Desisting gang members also dealt with the stigmatizing practice of "criminal background checks" which could instantly disqualify them from a position (Brown, 2011). Finally, the current trends in employment were shown to be especially detrimental to overcoming these barriers as jobs have moved away from manual labor-style work (more conducive to unskilled and inexperienced job seekers) toward "knowledge economy" jobs (tech, finance, insurance) (Brown, 2011; Farrall et al., 2010). Simply put, there were fewer and fewer jobs for which individuals who had been gang involved (and likely incarcerated) were qualified.

Employment programs and services should be deliberately managed, developing hard and soft skills to gain and maintain employment (Bahn, 2011), creating a map of the desisting person's path toward living wage, sustainable employment and constructed to best fit the uniqueness of that individual (Taliaferro & Pham, 2017). Creating this pathway concretized that vision for the person, making it tangible and possible. Some programs incentivized the employment desistance trajectory with stipends for better engagement with program participants (Chicago CRED, 2023). Others engaged the individual with prosocial supports (friends and

family, peers, additional service providers, and others desisting) to further facilitate their commitment to seeing the process through (Bahn, 2011; Dong & Krohn, 2016; Na et al., 2015; Roman et al., 2017). These methods of engagement also spoke to the value of employment beyond just a paycheck. Referring to the "seminal" research of Marie Johada's regarding employment, Brown (2011) wrote:

> Johada maintained that work provides opportunity to develop a social identity and to validate one's membership in society, which is critically important to the establishment and maintenance of optimal psychological health. She further considered that no other forum could offer the social connection that work provides and the employment provides far more than income. (p. 337)

Employment can certainly a means to an economic end. But it can also be a pathway toward a stronger sense of self, prosocial relationships, and more positive long-term outcomes for the desisting individuals, their families, and communities (Bahn, 2011). Weaver (2016) best described this relationship between employment and desistance:

> Employment in and of itself does not produce or trigger desistance; rather it is the meaning and outcomes of either the nature and/or quality of the work or participation in employment and how these influence an individual's self-concept and social identity and how these interact with a person's priorities, goals and relational concerns that can explain this relationship. (p. 19)

Preparing for Employment

Skardhamar and Savolainen (2012) wrote that "objective changes in life circumstances may contribute to desistance as long as they are preceded by a personal commitment to change"

(p. 21). The "objective change" they referred to could be that of obtaining employment. Further, Weaver (2016) explained that "rather than triggering desistance, Skardhamar and Savolainen [2012] suggested that participation in employment emerges as a consequence of desistance" (p. 19).

This study agreed with much of the research that desistance is a *process* (Berger et al., 2017; Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Employment, then, could be looked at as a closing stage of the desistance process. The primary focus of this study was the most effective interventions and supports needed to procure employment. Development of the desisting individual's capacity to both obtain and maintain employment, then, should be an area of emphasis within the process. Frequently mentioned in the limited amount of literature regarding employment were elements such as vocational training and soft skills development (Bahn, 2011; Cook et al., 2014; Greenberg, 2007; Newton et al., 2018; Pyrooz, 2012; Sweeten et al., 2013). Essentially, these employment preparation services and programs could build that individual's "self-concept and social identity" (Weaver, 2016, p. 19).

The most effective setting noted for this building of the individual was within the non-traditional educational context of training (Bahn, 2011; Cook et al., 2014). Flatt (2017) described the impact of pre-employment vocational training programs for formerly incarcerated individuals (the application of findings from prison-related studies to gang desistance was acceptable as "the link between incarceration and gang membership is beyond dispute as gang members are considerably overrepresented in correctional institutions" [Pyrooz et al., 2017, p. 274]) through a study that found "a reduction rate of recidivism of 36% for participants in vocational education"

(p. 64). Pyrooz (2012) also wrote that "education and other training programs are pathways to better wages and stable employment" (p. 98).

The value of a training approach to pre-employment preparation can be its conduciveness to adult learning (Albert, 1993). In Malcolm Knowles' (1980) seminal work on adult education titled "Andragogy, not pedagogy," he developed the concept of "Andragogy" ("the art and science of helping adults" [Knowles, 1980, p. 43]) to contrast with "Pedagogy" ("the art and science of teaching children" [Knowles, 1980, p. 39]). The replacement of "teaching" in the pedagogical definition with "helping" in the andragogical was significant and highlighted the difference between the two educational approaches. Albert (1993) wrote "that adults learn differently from children; and, consequently, a different approach and set of strategies appropriate for adults is required for learning to take place" (p. 46), a belief further expanded on by who Abeni (2020) who wrote "that adults are self-motivated and tend to assume responsibility for their role in the learning process" (p. 55).

With this study's centering of the individual within the desistance process, andragogical approaches to vocational training and education were particularly applicable, as McGregor (2020) described: "The link between vocationally related curriculum with a view to transforming the learner are forged within Adult Education" (pp. 49-50). Further, as gang desisting individuals often experienced significant levels of stigmatization and oppression (Dichiara & Chabot, 2022; Howell et al., 2017; Maruna, 2014; Rosen & Cruz, 2018; Vigil, 1988), adult education was also described as being "latent with potential to be used as a tool for societal betterment—even if only as a tool for supporting the emancipation of individuals from the captivity of limiting and harmful self-concepts" (Eldaly, 2021, p. 246).

While the development of applicable skills ("hard skills") was an important objective of vocational training and education, a positive, efficacious concept of self for a gang desisting individual could be more impactful toward completing the desistance process. For that reason, a training-based educational context with an andragogical approach could be most conducive to supporting an individual's effective desistance from a gang.

Desisted

There has been steady debate regarding what constitutes the achieving of true desistance (Maruna & Farrall, 2004). As described earlier, policy and government entities were frequently required to define it quantitatively—either through an arbitrary number such as seven years or the length since the last offence or evidence of gang activity (Bersani & Doherty, 2018). This was understandable to a degree, as institutional laws and policies required unambiguous and unequivocal measurements. But, as so much of gang desistance research has been marked by the desisting individual through self-reported narration and perception, this study sought a more qualitative understanding of when desistance can be said to have been completed.

Berger et al. (2017) described the achieved desistance process as the point where "[criminals] completely disengaged from their previous associates, desisted criminal activities and built a more normative lifestyle" (p. 493). Bersani and Doherty (2018) described successful desistance as "relative to one's own natural progression toward a zero rate of offending" (p. 325) and, later in the same article, stated that "attention should be levied at appreciating with-individual differences in offending and the commission of fewer crimes, a reduction in seriousness of behavior, or both" (p. 327). Yet, this combination of reduced criminality and self-reporting could be problematic. Pyrooz et al. (2014) addressed this issue, describing how

"individuals in our sample who had been out of their gang for long periods of time still reported having social and emotional ties with members of their former gang" (p. 508).

Pyrooz et al.'s (2014) study participants were self-declared "former" gang members, many of whom openly acknowledged their continued social and emotional ties to the gang despite their claim of having successfully desisted. This was a frequently described dynamic within the literature (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). In the same article, Pyrooz et al. (2014) also stated that "leaving the gang, as well as desisting from crime, is a complex process replete with pushes and pulls to conformity and back to the gang" (p. 508). It most certainly was, and, in the end, what constituted total desistance from gangs inherently involved a combination of defined measurements, self and others' perceptions, and trust on the part of the researcher. This was not the most satisfying answer to the question of what constitutes effective desistance, but, like the field and gang members themselves, it reflected the multidimensional quality of the life and realities of gangs and the efforts to address them.

Conclusion

This review of gang desistance research and literature found the field to be exceptionally diverse and dynamic and one that has taken into consideration a range of definitions, theories, concepts, and approaches. The review has explored both the internal and external attributes, mechanisms, interventions, and processes required to engage with and achieve desistance from gang involvement. While it seems that no article on gang desistance was complete without some calling out of the gaps in the research and areas for future inquiry, the field was oriented in the right direction. The progression of thinking on desistance as deriving simply from getting older, to looking at the environmental and structural factors, and in the current period, exploring the

individual, ethnic, and social factors involved in one's desistance journey all indicated a rich and positive outlook for future research.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The preceding literature review made clear that, while still a relatively new field, the field of gang desistance has continually grown and worked to address an ever-expanding range of issues and concepts. One area that has been nearly absent, though, is the intervention of employment within the desistance process. A number of studies made mention of the positive impact of employment for desisting individuals (Bevan, 2015; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2012; Weaver, 2016), but these mentions were most frequently brief with little in-depth exploration. This study aimed to help fill that void.

The following chapter presented the chosen methodology employed in this study; the purpose of the study; the method of the research; as well as an overview of the applied qualitative approach. The research design—with attention to the selection of the participants, data collection, and data analysis—was addressed, along with issues pertaining to the limitations of the study, potential biases, and ethical concerns—particularly in the areas of confidentiality, consent, and efforts to do no harm.

Research Questions

Research questions were defined by Leavy (2017) as the "central questions that guide a research project" (p. 267). To better understand how to develop and implement the most effective practices for employment-focused interventions and programming for gang-desisting individuals, the following research questions provided the focus of the study:

- What are the common elements and stages of the gang desistance process?

- What types of employment-related interventions (services, programs, supports) are most effective for facilitating an individual's desistance from gang involvement?
- What service provider and organizational characteristics are best suited to support the facilitation of employment-focused gang desistance?

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

An evaluation aimed at assessing whether an intervention is effective might call for a qualitative study. (Yin, 2016, p. 302)

This study was conducted through a qualitative approach. The reasons for this choice of research methodology were several. First, in choosing to conduct a qualitative study, Creswell and Creswell (2018) provided the following description:

> Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning of individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. . . . [Researchers] who engage in this form of inquiry support a way of looking at research that honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of reporting the complexity of a situation. (p. 4)

Yin (2016) provided five characteristics of qualitative research, all of them relevant to this particular study: "studies the meaning of people's lives" (p. 9); "gives priority to the views and perspectives of the study's participants" (p. 9); "utilizes the contextual conditions within which people's lives take place" (p. 9); "attempts to explain social behavior and thinking, through existing or emerging concepts [and practices]" (p. 10); and, "offers an opportunity to develop and share new concepts [and practices]" (p. 10). Gang desistance was a dynamic, complex process (Pyrooz et al., 2014)—not to mention a relatively emergent focus of academic

study. This study utilized the voices of men and women who had desisted from gang involvement (most of whom could be described as formerly "hardcore" gang members [Hagedorn, 1994]) and were then employed as service providers, program managers, and general leaders in the work of addressing gang violence. Through their voices, we learned their views and perspectives, gained a firsthand perspective on the needs and methods of gang desistance, and developed an enhanced conceptual understanding of an effective desistance process with a focus on employment-focused interventions, programs and services.

Second, this study adopted a pragmatic viewpoint in its approach and selection of study participants and settings. Creswell and Creswell (2018) offered the following description of this viewpoint: "Pragmatists agree that research always occurs in social, historical, political, and other contexts . . . a theoretical lens that is reflective of social justice and political aims" (p. 11). Further, they wrote that pragmatism holds "a concern with applications—what works—and solutions to problems" (p. 10). Similarly, Leavy (2017) wrote that pragmatic "researchers value utility and what works in the context of a particular research question" (p. 14). The driving motivation for this study was the identification of best practices regarding programs, services, and interventions to support an individual's desistance from gang involvement. The study participant characteristics described earlier spoke to this—all were engaged in some form in the work of addressing gang violence and its toll on individuals, families, communities, and society. While theoretical and conceptual elements and development were important to understanding the desistance process, ultimately this study was concerned with application and praxis.

Third, much of gang desistance-related work (this author is unaware of any organization or program who specifically referred to their work as "gang desistance"—most commonly it was

an undefined element of the mission or services provided within the contexts of gang diversion, prevention, or intervention) has been conducted within a programmatic context. Though often housed within quantitative or mixed-methods research designs, qualitative research offered an effective approach to "program evaluation," defined by Patten and Newhart (2018) as "a research project in which much of the purpose of the study is already defined by the program to be evaluated . . . [and] is almost always applied research" (p. 29). Patten and Newhart (2018) further elaborated on program evaluation by describing the activity of "summative evaluation" as the collection of "information about participants' attainment of the ultimate goals at the end of the program" (p. 30). Denzin (2018) offered similar thinking in arguing that, through qualitative research, "strategic points of intervention into social situations can be identified. Thus, the services of an agency and a program can be improved and evaluated" (p. 24). Again, while most often applied to quantitative and mixed methods designs, program evaluation with a summative evaluation based on available programmatic outcomes and information gleaned from participant interviews matched well with this qualitative framing and the intended, applicable purposes of this study.

Finally, qualitative research allowed for the inclusion of voices often marginalized or excluded from academic research. Sonia Lanehart (2018), a female, African-American professor and researcher, described one purpose in utilizing a qualitative approach as "pushing boundaries and opening new spaces for people like [her]" (p. 34). Leavy (2017) wrote that "voice" in research is "the ability to speak and be heard and is implicitly political. . . . It is important to seek out the perspectives of those who historically have been marginalized for active inclusion in the knowledge-building process" (p. 49). The traumatic effects of gang activity have been

experienced overwhelmingly by people and communities of color (Abt, 2019; Aspholm, 2021; Durán, 2006; National Gang Center, n.d.). Outside of interviews with former and current gang members, few studies on gangs—much less gang desistance—have incorporated the voices of former gang members who, after desisting, became leaders in the work of addressing gangs and gang violence. Like the few publications that did include these voices (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Lopez-Aguado, 2013; Maruna, 2017), the inclusion of their voices in this study was an intentional effort to highlight the profound personal and professional experience these men and women (predominately of color) possessed and which have been so rarely utilized in advancing knowledge on this critical issue. Qualitative research offered that platform.

Methodology

The research for this study employed qualitative methods, utilizing the theories of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy as frameworks. The selection of a qualitative approach was chosen due to its allowance for the representation of the views and perspectives of participants; a look at real-world contextual conditions; insights that could help to explain social behavior; and multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2016, p. 9). A mixed-methods approach was considered, but ultimately the purely qualitative was chosen due to the challenge of gathering data and measurements that would satisfy the necessary quantitative component. The gathering of programmatic data on enrollment, participation, and completion within the field of gang work has been notoriously difficult to conduct (Eidson et al., 2017). According to a number of studies, this has been due largely to the undependability of active gang members engaged with programming, as well as the quality and validity of the data captured by the agencies facilitating the program—many of whom worked with limited funding and capacity that acted to undermine

robust record keeping (Decker, 2002). Additionally, gang-related data was often drawn from law enforcement records, which presented validity concerns due to the methods and intentions of capturing that data (Huff & Barrows, 2015; Klein, 2011a; Pyrooz & Decker, 2013; Sanchez et al., 2022).

Within the qualitative approach, research was performed through three methods with the aim of triangulation to increase the findings' validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leavy, 2017; Patten & Newhart, 2018; Yin, 2016). These three methods were semi-structured interviews, nonparticipant observation, and document analysis (a common data collection approach for qualitative studies [Bowen, 2009]). Through the triangulation of three separate sources of data, followed by coding and theming, the research attempted to establish this study as a creditable one "that provide[d] assurance that you have properly collected and interpreted the data, so that the findings and conclusions accurately reflect the and represent the world that was studied" (Yin, 2016, p. 85).

Research Participants

The purpose of in-depth interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to "evaluate." . . . At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. (Seidman, 2006, p. 9)

For his article exploring the "street liminality" of gang intervention workers in Los Angeles who must operate effectively (and accountably) in both institutional and community-based settings, Lopez-Aguado (2013) utilized the voices of intervention workers who had been former gang members. This offered a uniquely situated perspective of having been involved in

gangs before working to address the issues related with gang activity. Emphasis on the possession of this same lived experience was a primary criterion in recruiting participants for this study.

The selection of participants, then, was a purposive sampling technique that allowed for a more nuanced and experiential understanding of the needs and issues related to gang desistance. Yin (2016) described purposive sampling as an approach whose objective is the identification of "th[ose] specific instances [i.e., samples] . . . that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data––in essence, *content rich*—given your topic of study" (p. 93). Leavy (2017) also highlighted the value of purposive sampling when she wrote that "the better the participants are positioned in relation to the topic, the richer the data will be" (p. 79).

Additionally, elements of the interviewing methodologies of inclusivity and emic perspectives were also employed in the selection of study participants. In their discussion of the usage of "street" in gang literature, Lopez-Aguado and Walker (2019) spoke of "marginalized populations whose public visibility is already viewed as suspicious or problematic" and how the usage of "street" and other similar descriptors can act as "coded euphemisms for referencing Black and Latina/o communities" (p. 5). In Lopez-Aguado and Walker's (2019) study, their selection of predominately African-American and Latina/o study participants was an effort toward addressing this academic and societal marginalization of their voices. The inclusion of "underrepresented groups" and "marginalized perspectives" allowed for "entirely new research questions based on varying perspectives and experiences" (Leavy, 2017, p. 28). The inclusive selection of commonly marginalized voices also lent itself to the emic methodology in study participant selection. Bolden (2013) wrote that emic methodology provided "an understanding

[of] the social world from the respondent's viewpoint" (Bolden, 2013, p. 476). Yin (2016) elaborated on the value of emic methodology as being intentional "attempts to capture participants' indigenous meanings of real-world events" (Yin, 2016, p. 16).

The initial selection of study participants was identified through my existing network within the fields of gang intervention, youth prevention and diversion, and prison reentry. Emphasis was placed on those participants with the lived experience of both gang involvement and desistance. For the smaller number of participants who had not experienced gang involvement (and therefore neither desistance), simple "inclusion selection criteria" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) was based on the possession of direct experience in working with active and desisting gang members. This helped to validate their perspectives and insights. Included in this group were service providers, program managers, law enforcement personnel, and advocates involved in the work of gang desistance. While not a formal component of the criteria, inclusivity of often-marginalized voices led to a range of ethnicities (African-American, Asian-American, European-American, and Latina/o) and genders represented by the interview participants.

To ameliorate the potential selection bias of participants (Patten & Newhart, 2018), additional participants were recruited through snowball sampling, wherein participants identified in the first stage of collection suggested potential participants who met the criteria of former gang involvement and/or direct experience working with desisting gang members (though, there may still have been an element of bias in snowballing due to its non-random characteristic [Patten & Newhart, 2018]).

Fourteen study participants and four organizations were ultimately involved in this study. The four organizations were: 2nd Call (Los Angeles, CA); Chicago CRED (Chicago, IL); Homeboy Industries (Los Angeles, CA); and RiseUp Industries (San Diego, CA). Twelve of the fourteen participants worked for these organizations, with the organizations themselves selected based on their target population of gang-involved individuals and the offering of services and programming focused on desistance and employment. The 12 participants' specific roles within their respective organizations included case manager, employment counselor, job and life coach, program supervisor and manager, and trainers. Two additional participants were also interviewed who did not work for one of the four participating organizations but possessed extensive experience working in employment-focused service provision and program development for gang desisting individuals. One participant worked for a law enforcement entity within the County of Los Angeles and the second previously worked as the director of the Employment Services Department at Homeboy Industries.

Though offered the option of creating a pseudonym or some other method of confidentiality, all participants agreed to the use of their given name. Despite this allowance, the study elected to use only the participants' first names.

These 14 research participants comprised a diverse set of personal and professional characteristics regarding gender, race/ethnicity, geographic location, roles within desistance service provision, and lived experience of desistance (see Table 1 in the following section for more detailed participant information). This diversity helped provide "information-rich" data (Yin, 2016) within their interview responses by adding valuable contextual and anecdotal information. While the interview questions were intentionally tailored to avoid the need for those

participants who themselves desisted from gang involvement to share details of their experience, narrative data (including "their perceptions, aspirations, beliefs, or behaviors" [Yin, 2016, p. 51]) was inevitably collected as many of these participants with lived experience shared stories about their own process or the desistance process of immediate family members or intimate partners.

Interview Participant Profiles

Brief profiles of the 14 individuals who agreed to participate in interviews for this study were provided in the following section. The participants were grouped by the organization for which they worked (two participants who were not employed at one of the four organizations at the time of the study were grouped under "Outside Agencies"). Each profile contained the participant's name, gender, race/ethnicity, location, job title, organization or agency, description of duties, length of work in the field of gang desistance (it should be noted that this reflected only their work within gang desistance service provision—several participants possessed many more years' experience within service provision and social justice-based work outside of specifically gang desistance work), and the possession of personal experience desisting from gang involvement (or lack thereof). See Table 1 for demographic information of the interview participants.

2nd Call (Los Angeles, CA)

Carmen. Carmen worked as a Program Director for 2nd Call (Los Angeles) as well as the co-founder and Director for 2nd Call Georgia (Atlanta). In these roles, Carmen facilitated trauma-informed groups and classes (e.g., Anger Management; Domestic Violence, Life Skills); gang and prison reentry resource provision; career placement services for the construction industry; and supervised workers ("Ambassadors") for the Safe Passages program in Los

Angeles. Carmen had worked in the field of gang desistance for 8 years and possessed lived experience of criminal desistance and secondhand experience of gang desistance through members of her extended family.

Petra. Petra worked as the Compliance Director for 2nd Call (Los Angeles). In this role, Petra handled client intakes, progress reports, and status reports; reports to client referring agencies (e.g., LA County Department of Probation; California State Department of Corrections); job development and placement of clients; and group facilitation (Life Skills; Domestic Violence; Anger Management). Petra also earned a certification for gang intervention work (a field for which she also offered trainings on intervention and trauma-related topics). After joining 2nd Call as a participant, Petra had worked in the field of gang desistance for 6 years and possessed lived experience of gang desistance.

Chicago CRED (Chicago, IL).

Ezra. Ezra worked as a Job Coach in the Employment and Training Services Department for Chicago CRED (Chicago). In this role, Ezra prepared program participants for employment (e.g., becoming self-sufficient; maintaining employment); worked with clients to develop hard and soft skills and to stay on their career path; and provided street-based outreach and gang intervention services. After joining Chicago CRED as a participant, Ezra had worked in the field of gang desistance for 2 years and possessed lived experience of gang desistance.

LaQuay. LaQuay worked as the Senior Manager of Employment Services for Chicago CRED (Chicago). In this role, LaQuay managed the Workforce Development (WD) program; job development and placement; built partnerships with employers; and facilitated onsite WD trainings and classes for program participants (e.g., Soft Skills). LaQuay had worked in the field

Table 1

Interview Participants

Participant	Location	Organization	Professional Role	Years of Professional Experience	Lived Experience of Gang Desistance
Carmen	Los Angeles, Atlanta	2nd Call	Program Director	4	Y
Petra	Los Angeles	2nd Call	Compliance Director	5	Y
Ezra	Chicago	Chicago CRED	Job Coach	3	Y
LaQuay	Chicago	Chicago CRED	Sr. Manager of Employment Services	1.5	N
Raahsaan	Chicago	Chicago CRED	Manager of Employment & Training Services	17	Y
Sherman	Chicago	Chicago CRED	Job Coach	2	Y
Gonzalo	Los Angeles	Homeboy Industries	Life Coach	6	Y
Mariana	Los Angeles	Homeboy Industries	Case Manager	10	Y
Yalonda	Los Angeles	Homeboy Industries	Career Pathways Manager	12	N
Andrew	San Diego	RiseUp Industries	Machine Shop Supervisor	1.5	N
Dustin	San Diego	RiseUp Industries	Machine Shop Manager	7	N
Wendy	San Diego	RiseUp Industries	Case Manager	1	N
Jose	Los Angeles, Long Beach	Brilliant Corners	Director of External Affairs, Justice Housing Coordinator	15	Y
Erick	Los Angeles	LA Probation Department	Supervisor	25	N

of gang desistance for 3 years and possessed secondhand experience of gang desistance through a former partner.

Raahsaan. Raahsaan worked as the Manager of Employment and Training Services for Chicago CRED (Chicago). In this role, Raahsaan managed the Employment Training Center; supervised Job Coaches; facilitated trainings and workshops (e.g., Soft Skills; Professionalism;

Interviewing for Jobs); and dealt with program participant conflicts and issues as needed. Raahsaan had worked in the field of gang desistance for over 10 years and possessed lived experience of gang desistance.

Sherman. Sherman worked as a Job Coach in the Employment and Training Services Department for Chicago CRED (Chicago). In this role, Sherman assisted program participants with gaining and sustaining employment. After joining Chicago CRED as a participant, Sherman had worked in the field of gang desistance for 4 years and possessed lived experience of gang desistance.

Homeboy Industries (Los Angeles, CA)

Gonzalo. Gonzalo worked as a Work Readiness Trainer for Homegirl Café at Homeboy Industries (Los Angeles). In this role, Gonzalo walked with program participants ("trainees") as they transitioned into the Homegirl Café, one of Homeboy Industries' social enterprises; conducted biweekly check-ins; provided resources for education and training; collaborated with other Homeboy staff members (case managers, career counselors, therapists) to provide wraparound services for program participants; and communicated with Homegirl Café managers regarding client progress and issues. After joining Homeboy Industries as a program participant, Gonzalo had worked in the field of gang desistance for 6 years and possessed lived experience of gang desistance.

Mariana. Mariana worked as a Case Manager for Homeboy Industries (Los Angeles). In this role, Mariana guided program participants reentering society (from gang-involvement and incarceration); provided supportive services (e.g., housing; documentation); handled participant assessments; assisted clients with identifying a career pathway; and facilitated Life Skills

trainings. After joining Homeboy Industries as a program participant, Mariana had worked in the field of gang desistance for over 10 years and possessed lived experience of gang and criminal desistance.

Yalonda. Yalonda worked as the Career Pathways Manager of Programs and Partnerships for Homeboy Industries (Los Angeles). In this role, Yalonda built partnerships with other organizations and employers who could offer training, education and jobs for program participants to progress in life. Yalonda had worked in the field of gang desistance for 12 years and possessed no personal experience of gang desistance.

RiseUp Industries (San Diego, CA)

Andrew. Andrew worked as the Machine Shop Supervisor for RiseUp Industries (San Diego). In this role, Andrew supervised RiseUp Industries' social enterprise, a fully functional CNC machine shop; handled troubleshooting for the CNC machines; provided technical training for clients; and walked with program participants to address daily life issues that may have arisen. Andrew had worked in the field of gang desistance for 2 years and possessed no personal experience of gang desistance.

Dustin. Dustin worked as the Machine Shop Manager for RiseUp Industries (San Diego). In this role, Dustin oversaw RiseUp Industries' social enterprise, a fully functional CNC machine shop; trained clients in operating the machines; and addressed program participants' personal and professional issues when needed. Dustin had worked in the field of gang desistance for 7 years and possessed no personal experience of gang desistance.

Wendy. Wendy worked as a Case Manager for RiseUp Industries (San Diego). In this role, Wendy handled client interviews and intakes; created Individual Service Plans (ISPs); met weekly with clients; provided resources (e.g., identification documents; transportation; housing); and facilitated various groups (e.g., Financial Literacy). Wendy had worked in the field of gang desistance for 1 year and possessed secondhand experience of gang desistance through her immediate family.

Outside Agencies

Erick (Los Angeles, CA). Erick worked as a Supervisor with the LA County Probation Department (Los Angeles). In this role, Erick oversaw employment-focused programming that assisted desisting clients in transitioning back into their communities; developed programming addressing substance abuse and mental health issues; and assisted clients in becoming self-sufficient in order to gain and sustain living wage employment. Erick had worked in the field of gang and criminal desistance for over 25 years and possessed no personal experience of gang desistance.

Jose (Long Beach, CA & Los Angeles, CA). Jose worked as the Director of External Affairs and Justice Housing Coordinator for Brilliant Corners (Long Beach and Los Angeles). In this role, Jose handled government affairs and worked with community-based organizations to support their funding and development. Previously, Jose worked as the Director of Employment Services at Homeboy Industries (Los Angeles). In this role, Jose oversaw the Employment Services Department; developed and facilitated employment-focused programming; built a network of training partners and employers; facilitated work readiness trainings; and mentored program participants. After joining Homeboy Industries as a program participant in their Solar

Panel program, Jose had worked in the field of gang desistance for over 15 years and possessed lived experience of gang desistance.

Organizational Profiles

The selection of study settings followed a similar pattern as the participant selection. The ideal setting for the research was the "institutional scene" (Yin, 2016) of community-based agencies working with gangs and employing peer-based workers who possessed the lived experience of both gang involvement and desistance. Criteria for site selection was based on an organization's direct involvement in the work of gang-desistance through programmatic and service-based interventions and the availability of employment-focused desistance programming. Through these criteria, the four organizations were selected. All organizations worked directly with active and desisting gang members. The mission statements of each agency reflected their wrap-around approach to the employment-focused desistance programming and services they offered.

The following section provides a brief overview of the four organizations that participated in this study, grouped by locale. As the attributes of effective organizations are discussed later in the study, profiles of the organizations were provided, including information about their location, mission statements, areas of focus, programmatic and service provision, and social enterprises (if available).

Chicago, IL

Chicago CRED. Chicago CRED had sites in the South Side and West Side areas of Chicago, IL. Their areas of focus included Gang Desistance and Gang Intervention and they offered programs and services such as, Case Management, Workforce Development, Vocational

Training, Group Facilitation, Mental Health Services, and Life Skills Classes. They also had one Social Enterprise: CREDMADE (Food Packaging). Their mission statement read:

> Chicago CRED's mission is to have a transformative reduction in gun violence in Chicago. Chicago CRED focuses on young men who are at the highest risk of shooting or being shot and provides a holistic and comprehensive range of support services, including trauma care, cognitive behavioral interventions, mentorship, and transitional jobs. At the street level, Chicago CRED leverages intervention and conflict mediation to reduce the potential for shootings and retaliations. (Chicago Beyond, n.d.)

Los Angeles, CA

2nd Call. 2nd Call had programmatic sites in the South Central, Long Beach, and San Gabriel Valley areas of Los Angeles, CA and in Atlanta, GA (though the Atlanta site was not involved in this study). Their areas of focus included Gang Desistance, Gang Intervention, and Prison Reentry and they offered programs and services in Case Management, Vocational Training, Group Facilitation, Gang Intervention, Court-Mandated Classes (Parenting, Anger Management, Domestic Violence), and Life Skills Classes. They did not possess social enterprises as part of their desistance programming. Finally, 2nd Call's mission statement read: "2nd Call is a community-based organization designed to save lives, by reducing violence and assisting in the personal development of high-risk individuals, proven offenders, ex-felons, parolees and others who society disregards" (2nd Call, 2019).

Homeboy Industries. Homeboy Industries had two locations in the Boyle Heights and Chinatown areas of Los Angeles, CA. Their areas of focus included Gang Desistance, Gang Intervention, and Prison Reentry. They offered programs and services in Case Management,

Workforce Development, Vocational Training, Group Facilitation, Court-Mandated Classes (Parenting, Anger Management, Domestic Violence), Mental Health Services, Tattoo Removal, and Education. They also had numerous social enterprises, including Homegirl Café, Homeboy Bakery, Homeboy Merchandise, Homeboy E-Recycling, Homeboy Farmer's Market, Homeboy Chips & Salsa, Homeboy Silkscreen & Embroidery, Homeboy Catering, and Homeboy Diner at City Hall. Their mission statement read:

> Homeboy Industries provides hope, training, and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated people, allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of our community. Each year over 10,000 former gang members from across Los Angeles come through Homeboy Industries' doors in an effort to make a positive change. They are welcomed into a community of mutual kinship, love, and a wide variety of services ranging from tattoo removal to anger management and parenting classes. (Homeboy Industries, n.d.e)

San Diego, CA

RiseUp Industries. RiseUp Industries was located in the Barrio Logan area of San Diego, CA. Their areas of focus included Gang Desistance, Gang Intervention, Gang Prevention, and Prison Reentry. They offered programs and services including in Case Management, Workforce Development, Vocational Training, Group Facilitation, and Tattoo Removal. They had numerous social enterprises including The Machine Shop, RiseUp Industries Merchandise, Silkscreen & Embroidery, and RiseUp Industries Coffee. Their mission statement read: "RiseUp Industries minimizes gang involvement by providing integrated gang prevention, gang intervention, and post-detention reentry services." (RiseUp Industries, n.d.a)

Data Collection

The primary source of data came from interviews with individual participants. All 14 interviews were conducted via the teleconferencing platform Zoom (www.zoom.us). While the original preference for interviews was in-person at the organizational (or agency) site (as this would have allowed for opportunities to build rapport and observe physical cues such as gestures and expressions [Leavy, 2017]), teleconferencing was ultimately chosen as it allowed for "talking with people whom [I] might not be able to reach in person because they are located far away" (Leavy, 2017, p. 142). Data collection methods were selected based on their lending of triangulation to strengthen the validity of the study's findings through cross-comparison and analysis of the findings (Montiel, 2017). The three selected data collection instruments were semi-structured interviews, nonparticipant observation, and document(s) review. The selection of those three instruments provided the research with "more situated knowledge and allowed triangulation between each data source" (Liang & Peters-Hawkins, 2017, p. 50). Each method is described in more detail below.

Study Instrument I: Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen for this study as they "incorporate both open-ended and more theoretically driven questions, eliciting data guided by existing constructs in the particular discipline within which one is conducting research" (Galletta & Cross, 2013, p. 45). Lack of much available programmatic data related to programmatic enrollment, participation, and outcomes within the organizations encouraged a focus of data collection through interviews. As most of those interviewed possessed both personal experience of gang desistance as well as an intimate understanding of current needs and issues facing desisting gang members, data

collected through the interviews was especially relevant regarding the process of desisting and contributions to existing literature. To prepare for the interviews, an interview protocol (see Appendix B) based on the literature was created and shared with three of the study participants (referred to as "peer debriefing" [Creswell & Creswell, 2018]) prior to their interviews for review and suggested edits (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

When a final interview protocol was established, it was shared with all study participants prior to the interviews to allow them time for reflection and preparation (Patten & Newhart, 2018). The interviews were then conducted via the teleconferencing platform Zoom (www.zoom.us). Due to the purposefully selected sample size (n=14), only one interview was conducted with each participant, lasting between 35-145 minutes. The interviews were focused on open-ended questions around lines of inquiry (Leavy, 2017; Yin, 2016) developed from the review of the literature as well as my professional experience in gang desistance work. The interview questions posed to participants—involving participants with experience of gang involvement and desistance along with participants who do not possess that lived experience—reflected this distinction. Those with lived experience were asked about their own process of gang desistance and how this experience better supported them in working with desisting gang members. Beyond that distinction, the interview questions for both groups were the same as they related to their understanding of the needs and issues involved in gang desistance service provision. The interview transcripts generated by Zoom (www.zoom.us) and notes taken during the interviews were then analyzed and coded to identify emergent themes across the responses of those interviewed (Leavy, 2017) (for a complete list of interview questions posed to study participants see Appendix B.)

Study Instrument II: Nonparticipant Observation

Qualitative observation was defined by Creswell and Creswell (2018) as occurring "when the researcher takes field notes on the behavior and activities of individuals at the research site" (p. 186). For *nonparticipant* method of observation, Patten and Newhart (2018) wrote that "the researcher observes individuals without becoming involved in their activities. Observing people requires permissions when done in private settings" (p. 165). With permission of the "gate keeper(s)" (Seidman, 2006; Yin, 2016), I observed the facilitation of programming and classes related to employment and general desistance. To address the potential issue of disrupting the normal process of the activity by my presence (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), I was introduced to the program participants and explained my background in the work of gang desistance as well as the purpose of my presence and research. During the observation, I utilized notetaking and the analytic "memo not[ing]" (Leavy, 2017) method of recording my observations to generate thick description (Leavy, 2017; Yin, 2016). This helped provide a more detailed and comprehensive picture of the setting and activities toward enhancing the data's validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Study Instrument III: Document Review

Bowen (2009) wrote that "document analysis" allowed for data to "be examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge" (p. 27). Yin (2016) wrote that document collection and analysis "complement[ed] the collection of interview or other data within the same qualitative study" (p. 154). The analyzed documents for this study included: program descriptions and objectives; facilitation guides; schedules; programmatic reports; web-based information such as agency histories and mission statements; and published

memoirs and other writings emerging from the organizations or organization-affiliated individuals. Data on enrollment, client demographics, and programmatic outcomes were unavailable for analyzation.

Analytical Plan

The interview responses of the study participants shed light on the common motives to both join and leave a gang. They also helped to identify the best practices from service provision and programmatic viewpoints to offer support for the desisting individual toward achieving lasting separation from their gang. While the research questions were developed to allow for an inductive element in the approach to the research (letting the data lead to the emergence of concepts [Yin, 2016]), the overall approach could best be described as deductive, or "let[ting] the concepts—if only taking the form of initial categories . . . lead to the definition of the relevant data that needs to be collected" (Yin, 2016, p. 100). This deductive approach was based on my own experience in the work of gang desistance and my understanding of the concepts and practices associated with the work.

The collected data from interview transcripts and notes, document analysis, and nonparticipant observation was then coded and themed into relevant topical buckets. The utilization of three sources of data provided *triangulation* of the data, or "the collective use of multiple independent sources of data or methods for the purpose of establishing a validated and corroborated understanding of the phenomenon under investigation" (Morris & Parker, 2018, p. 27). The method of triangulation also helped to "[reduce] the possibility that the results of qualitative research represent only the idiosyncratic views of one individual researcher" (Patten & Newhart, 2018, p. 156).

The collected data was approached within a mostly deductive framework based on the experience and knowledge gained through my work with gangs and desisting gang members (in the fields of youth diversion and prevention, gang intervention, and prison reentry). This knowledge informed the selection of a research topic, the identification of research participants and settings, as well an awareness of the value of employment within the gang desistance process. That being acknowledged, I intentionally maintained an element of inductivity within the analysis of the collected data. By practicing reflexivity, I continually scrutinized my assumptions and conclusions to allow for inductive coding of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Leavy, 2017). Regarding my understanding of gang desistance, an inductive element to my analysis allowed for the emergence and direction of concepts and practices through the collected data (Montiel, 2017) with which I may have been previously unaware or whose impact I had not sufficiently valued within my own experience.

Data Analysis

Beginning with an open coding process to generate categories (or themes) and their properties (Yin, 2016), the data was then grouped into two main categories: the process of desistance for gang-involved individuals (e.g., types and impact of turning points; benefits and consequences of self-differentiation) and interventions or services to support this process (most needed services for desistance; value of service providers with or without the lived experience of desisting from gang involvement).

Following this open coding stage, the data was then selectively coded (Yin, 2016) to incorporate sub-categories such as needed traits for the individual desisting (e.g., self-awareness; hope); specific service and programmatic types and best practices for implementation (e.g.,

vocational training; incentives); characteristics and responsibilities of the service or program providers (e.g., consistency; accountability); and a fourth related to policy and systems critique (e.g., institutional barriers for individuals with criminal backgrounds; root conditions that can lead to gang involvement).

Having completed these two stages of coding, the primary categories and subcategories that emerged from the analysis were entered into a chart which allowed for comparison of those categories and subcategories addressed in the interviews. Each category and subcategory were then tabulated to track their presence within the 14 different interviews. This tabulation provided a score for each category and subcategory which was then used to identify the most prevalent themes. For example, of the 14 research participants, all noted the necessity of a "forward looking" mindset on behalf of the individual desisting from gang involvement (or, in some cases, the need for the service provider to instill this trait in the desister) while only five participants noted the practice of involving the desister's family in some stage of the service provision (thereby negating its inclusion in the findings).

While this method bordered on a quantitative approach to the analysis, it was helpful in lending a stronger level of objectivity to the analysis and ensuing explanation of findings. This was important since, having worked in the field of gang desistance myself, the scoring allowed for identification of the most effective elements in the work of which I had either been unaware or had not utilized in my own service provision and programming facilitation.

Limitations

Those limitations—or "methodological weaknesses . . . that may affect interpretations of the results" (Patten & Newhart, 2018, p. 303)—that arose throughout the design and conduction of the study were addressed in the following section.

Generalizability

Gangs were described as a dynamic phenomenon whose cultures, practices, and member demographics vary widely and are heavily dependent on local settings and conditions (Greenberg, 2007; Vigil, 2008). The participants and sites involved in this study offered uniquely knowledgeable understandings of those characteristics within the gangs they served or the particular community in which their services were provided. The selection of sites in different cities and geographical areas (Los Angeles, San Diego, Chicago; West Coast, Midwest), along with an ethnic and cultural diversity of selected study participants, was an attempt to encompass a range to create more generalizable findings for current and future research and practice.

Reliance on Participant Memory

The study utilized interviews, which inherently rely upon participants' memories. This limitation was contained to the few interview questions applied only to those study participants who themselves had experienced gang membership and the process of desistance. As noted in Chapter 2, self-reporting regarding gang involvement can be an issue regarding the veracity of those accounts (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Hill et al., 1999; Pacheco, 2019). This study acknowledged that limitation, but also noted that any data provided was related to the participant's gang involvement and was utilized solely as a basis to validate their depth of understanding for the needs and issues involved for those desisting from gang involvement.

Interviews

Literature often suggested the practice of multiple interviews with study participants to allow for more robust data capture and analysis (Yin, 2016). One-time interviews were selected for this study due to the logistical challenges of minimal site visit opportunities and limited availability of study participants for interviews due to professional and personal responsibilities. Because of this limitation, the research adopted a sample size (n=14) and diversity of positionalities in order to offer a breadth and depth of data to help address the limitation created by single interviews.

Validity/Trustworthiness

Yin (2016) provided a definition of validity as "the correctness of credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 89). Several methods to address the challenge of this study's validity were employed throughout the development, conduction, and analysis of the research. These methods included: three separate research instruments (semi-structured interviews, nonparticipatory observation, and document analysis) to create triangulation for validity; selection of study participants with lived experience of both gang involvement and desistance as well as desistance-focused services which offered firsthand, experiential understanding; the selection of four research sites provided ethnic, cultural, and geographical variation; and a comparison of the findings with relevant research and literature on the topic of gang desistance. Efforts were also made to incorporate and address those views or existing research findings that may have contradicted the precepts or findings of this study.

Ethical Concerns

Albert (2007) noted in her study on resilience in former gang members that research involving the sharing of past gang involvement should take measures to ensure that "the participant is not harmed in any way as a result of his or her participation in the research study" (p. 86). To minimize any potential harm resulting from formerly gang-involved study participants sharing description of that past gang involvement, the use of pseudonyms was an available option for the participants. Further, the informed consent form acknowledged the potentiality of issues resulting from the participants' sharing of past gang-involvement and activity. With these ethical concerns made clear to the participant, the choice of participation was left to the participants. For those individuals who chose to participate, confirmation of available mental health supports were identified in the event the interview proved emotionally difficult for the interviewee. Fortunately, these mental health supports were not needed for any of the participants. Further, all participants granted permission to use their given names with no requests for pseudonyms or other methods to conceal their identity.

A second ethical concern was related to my nonparticipatory observation of desistance programming where personal details and those related to gang-involvement could emerge in the course of the observation. To address this concern, my presence, as well as the topic and purpose of the research, was explained to those individuals under observation. Additionally, it was made clear that no details related to their individual identification or gang activity would appear in this dissertation. Having addressed these potential issues, continued participation in the observation was voluntary. Further, if my presence seemed to impede the effectiveness or facilitation of the programming under observation, I volunteered to exit the space and forego my observation.

Delimitations

As the researcher, I had to make decisions related to the scope of the study. Specifically, I delimited the research to four sites in three cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Diego. While gang activity and programs providing support to gang involved individuals were present in other cities, for the purpose of this project, I delimited the scope to sites where I had pre-existing relationships and where access was most readily available. Future research should expand the inquiry to incorporate the unique characteristics and qualities of additional cities and programs.

Timeline

Following is a brief timeline regarding different components of the study.

- Dissertation Proposal Defense: June, 2022
- Internal Review Board (IRB) Submission: July, 2022
- Data Collection: August, 2022 (start) to November, 2022 (end)
- Data Analysis: December, 2022 (start) to January, 2023 (end)
- Dissertation Draft Completed and Submitted to Chair: February, 2023
- Dissertation Defense: March, 2023

Conclusion

This qualitative study intended to identify the most effective practices for facilitating an individual's desistance from gang membership, with a focus on employment-related intervention. The voices of those working in the fields of gangs and gang desistance were centrally placed in the development and conduction of the study. The frequent marginalization of their voices in gang-related research and literature was a deliberate motivator for their inclusion through a qualitative approach. The deep and invaluable knowledge and experience they possessed—both

of gang involvement and the many factors involved in supporting one's desistance from the world of gangs—offered a nuanced and firsthand understanding of what is needed and effective in the work. The utilization of a qualitative approach offered the ideal platform to study and learn from these rarely acknowledged and utilized voices to better identify and understand the critical practices in support of desisting gang members who desire a safer, happier, and healthier life for themselves, their families, and their communities.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The following chapter presented the findings from data collected throughout this study. The chapter began with an overview of the study's background, its purpose and significance, and the research questions. Following this brief overview, the chapter then moved into a discussion of the study's findings. Presentation of the findings was structured upon the three research questions utilized for this study. Not only did the findings fit well within this structure, the structure also provided a progression from a focus upon the gang-desisting individual to the supportive interventions for their desistance process and finally to an exploration of the provision of those interventions. The three research questions were:

- What are the common elements and stages of the gang desistance process?
- What types of employment-related interventions (services, programs, supports) are most effective for facilitating an individual's desistance from gang involvement?
- What service provider and organizational characteristics are best suited to support the facilitation of employment-focused gang desistance?

For purposes of clarity, the research questions which constituted the structure of Chapter 4 (and sections within Chapter 5) were reworded from an interrogative to a declarative structure (for example, Research Question 1 was reformatted as a section heading to read "The Common Elements and Stages of the Gang Desistance Process"). Within the first section built upon the Research Question 1, findings related to the criticality of desistance, barriers to desistance, personal traits and prosocial factors supportive of desistance, and indicators of achieved desistance were presented. Based on Research Question 2, the second section presented those

interventions (programs, services, and other supports) best suited to support gang desistance, the development of vocational skills for the desisting individual, and the job placement and maintenance phase of the desistance process. Finally, based on Research Question 3, the third and final section presented the skills and qualities of both the service providers and their organizations that could best facilitate their clients' desistance from gang involvement.

Relevant quotes from the interviews were included to both strengthen the findings and center the voices of these service providers. Some of the included quotes may be difficult to read and peppered with decidedly non-academic language. But they were quotes coming directly from firsthand experiences of gang desistance and supporting others who are desisting. This study believed they reflected the reality of this critical work and were therefore included with their original wording.

Study Background

Purpose of Study

Surprisingly little research has been conducted on gang desistance and the process of leaving gangs. (Klein & Maxson, 2006, p. 154)

The purpose of this study was to identify the best employment-focused interventions and practices in support of desisting gang members to facilitate their transition toward a more stable life. The work of gang desistance involves providing the necessary skills, knowledge and resources for the desisting gang member to navigate the personal, cultural, societal, and institutional barriers in order to disengage from their gangs and successfully reintegrate into their communities and society. It is a thoroughly social justice-minded approach to reducing violence and improving the overall health of (predominately) individuals and communities of color who

have dealt with decades—and even centuries—of oppression, stigmatization and marginalization (Dichiara & Chabot, 2022; Durán, 2006; Vigil, 1988). This study viewed gang members as individual men, women and youth—i.e., *people*—who research has shown become involved with gangs for reasons including (though certainly not limited to): childhood risk factors (Hill et al., 1999); marginalization (Gebo, 2018; Vigil & Yun, 2002); trauma (Dierkhising et al., 2021; Thornberry et al., 2003); fear and the promise of safety or survival (Fox, 2013; Gagnon, 2018); and status or self-respect (Willis, 2018). Centered on the transformative impact of employment, this study aimed to develop a contextualized understanding of gang members and culture to identify the best employment-focused interventions and other supports needed for a successful process of desistance.

Significance of the Study

The majority of gang-related research has focused on the reasons young people join gangs (Rocque, 2017) and the ensuing (and mostly negative) effects on their lives, families, and communities resulting from this gang membership (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011). Within this wealth of gang research, the phenomenon of desistance has only recently been studied in-depth. Further, within the comparatively small amount of research and literature on gang desistance, the impact of employment on the desistance process has been little understood due to conflicting findings (Skardhamar and Savolainen, 2012). This study was designed to help fill that gap.

This study also aimed to raise the voices of employees at organizations and agencies engaged in the work of desistance with an emphasis on peer-based practitioners and leaders possessing the lived experience of gang involvement and desistance. Leavy (2017) wrote that "voice" in research is "the ability to speak and be heard and is implicitly political…. It is

important to seek out the perspectives of those who historically have been marginalized for active inclusion in the knowledge-building process" (p. 49). The inclusion of historically marginalized voices in this study was an intentional effort to highlight the profound personal and professional experience these men and women (predominately of color) possess and that is so rarely utilized to advance understanding of this critical issue. These often-discounted perspectives from the "boots on the ground" offered unique and experienced insights into what best facilitates desistance from gangs.

Findings

Common Elements of the Gang Desistance Process

There's no cookie cutting method, you know. Everybody has their own personality, their own biases, their own way that they do the amount of work that they've done on themselves.

(Gonzalo)

When Research Question 1 was initially conceived, it seemed a fairly straightforward inquiry in which a clear process of stages and universal traits involved in desisting from gang involvement would emerge. Certainly, there were common themes that emerged, but a primary emergent theme from the research interviews was the consistent emphasis on the individual. This emphasis spoke to the humanity of the process and the work, as well as the uniquely dynamic and complex nature of gang desistance for both desisting individuals and those supporting their desistance efforts. With that in mind, the following section began with a discussion on the criticality of gang desistance, followed by a presentation of the barriers that can impede or derail the desistance process, those personal traits and prosocial factors that can help prompt and maintain the process, and a look into when desistance from gangs is effectively achieved.

Criticality of Gang Desistance

Following the opening questions related to their professional roles and motivations, the content portion of the interview began when participants were asked for their thoughts on the criticality of the work of gang desistance. This section described the findings that spoke to the criticality of gang desistance, namely its impacts upon the desisting individual's family (as well as the family's impact on their decision to desist), communities, broader society, and, most critically, their own survival.

Family and desistance. Regarding the role of family in gang desistance, Raahsaan shared the following:

> I have to have my sanity to be able to think for myself, to make rational decisions about life, because my life—it's a ripple effect for all for others around me. My wife depends on me. My kids depend on me. My grandkids depend on me. So, I have to be in my right frame of mind, thinking right, making good decisions for my family. You know what I'm saying? So yeah. So those are some of the things that I think that really helped me personally get out of the gang.

Several of the participants with lived experience of gang involvement and desistance spoke to the influence of their family as motivations in their decision to desist. Petra shared the following:

> The only regret that I probably have in life was going to prison and leaving my son out here, and those years that I can never get back. . . . I used to think that, you know, me going to prison, like, I'm the only one that has to suffer the consequences. . . . It doesn't affect anyone else. You know, where I slept good for 12 years in prison my mom didn't

> and my son didn't. So I learned how, you know, my thought process was selfish and fucked up and clearly misguided, because where it didn't affect me, it affected those that cared about me the most, and because I know I don't want to inflict that type of pain on the people that love me and the people that depend on me, I have to make a conscious decision to do something different.

Yalonda offered a poignant story regarding the influence of children upon a client's decision to desist. When asked why they had come to Homeboy Industries, the client told her, "I want to make it better for my child—I want my child to know what Christmas is." Mariana also shared a story of a client who described the "happiness" that having a kid had brought to his life, and the increased motivation it instilled to leave his gang. The impact of their family's well-being not only applied as a turning point to begin the desistance process, but also as a reason to continue it as described by Jose:

> One of the major turning points for a lot of gang members is having a child right? I mean, that's a that's a huge event. It involves, you know, a whole 'nother human being that is dependent on you, right, and that can lead to wanting things like employment, like a higher education, because you want to provide a better life for your child.

Yet, family and partners are not always a positive factor for those who had desisted. Alongside the profoundly positive effect that families can have on the instigation and continuance of the desistance process, several of the participants described how their "loved ones" can also act as barriers to desistance. Yalonda stated that "it's difficult when your whole family [are] gang member[s] and you're trying to get out." Carmen shared her personal experience with this challenge:

> Even though I didn't physically continue in the gang world, I had to live as if I had left the game because of how deep my cousins and my family was in . . . I couldn't understand why I was getting shot at. . . . At that moment it felt like a game . . . like someone really just did a drive by on us? I was 11. My cousin was 14. . . . [The shooting resulted] because they knew she was the sister of [their] enemies.

Erick shared the following story when speaking to a client about having his tattoos removed as part of his desistance process and to improve his chances at employment:

> He said, "There's a big problem with that." I said, "What's that? . . . I understand you can't cover your gang tattoos because"—"No no no, it's not even that. . . . Well, my baby mama, my girlfriend, my significant other—she's a gangster lover. She got with me 'cause I'm a gangster. I look like a gangster. If I stop looking like a gangster she's gonna go with my homie. She's not gonna like me no more."

The impacts of family and intimate partners as prosocial motivations to desist was a prevalent theme throughout the literature (Bersani & Van Schellen, 2014; Decker et al., 2014; Laub & Sampson, 1993; Pyrooz et al., 2017) and their equally consistent presence within the interviews further emphasized those impacts. But, as both the literature (Aspholm, 2021; Gagnon, 2018; Vigil, 1988) and interviews made clear, the embeddedness of gangs and gang culture in families and communities can also act as demotivators for the desisting (or considering desisting) individual.

Breaking the cycle. Ezra shared the following:

> With me it was kind of different. Like, even being my father's youngest child. He was a notorious gang member for the area . . . and me being a youngest child, they kind of like–

–they sent me away to school almost like that life wasn't meant for me. . . . But something I've learned is like nature versus nurture almost kicks in all the time, right?

Wendy shared a similar thought: "It just keeps rolling down the generations. Great multi-generational, you know, gang families. I don't think people who have not experienced this work, or who don't know much about it—I don't think people understand that."

Nearly every participant response included some mention of impact of gang involvement on the gang member's immediate and extended families—"it disrupts families" (Erick). While impacts on communities and society in general were also addressed, the long-lasting—and often multigenerational—effects of a loved one's gang involvement on their (especially) children, as well as partners and other family members, were paramount.

Often referred to within gang desistance work as the concept of "breaking the cycle" (within gang desistance research, "breaking the cycle" most frequently applies to the cycles of violence experienced by gang members [McGregor, 2020; Whitney-Snel et al., 2020]), this concept spoke specifically to the gang member's desistance acting as deterrent to family members becoming gang-involved—especially the desister's children, siblings, and cousins. The following quote from Erick described the criticality of breaking this multigenerational cycle of gang membership:

> People don't understand. . . . It's a culture. It's a culture within a culture. . . . Maybe it has become a family tradition . . . and it's been a lot of killing, and there's been a lot of people holding grudges and hate. . . . So, it has become like a natural thing, and that's just what it is, it's a culture, and that's a culture that has their own world. We're talking about critical work. What I mean by that is everything is about survival.

Several of the interview subjects spoke of the impact their desistance had on a family member or the impact a family member's desistance had on them. Sherman shared an example of this:

> Actually, my younger cousin—he had heard about . . . the CRED program and all that stuff and he had brought it to me, and for him to be bringing this to me—if you know who this kid was, like, he was not a peaceful person—you know, this was the last thing that was on his mind. So, for him to bring it to me—I actually gave it a shot and gave it some thought. (Sherman)

Beyond the challenge of individual desistance, many of the participants' families had several generations of family members who were gang-involved, most commonly parents but even including grandparents (Sherman). This multigenerational gang involvement—also referred to as the "generational snowball" (Wendy) or "cultural whirlpool" (Erick)—added an additional challenge to desistance as gang-involvement has become a "family culture" (Erick) in many communities. Separating from that culture—the attempt at which, according to Gonzalo, can entail a challenging level of "culture shock"—could lead to anger and even ostracization from the family. Sherman spoke to this challenge, saying, "It takes time. It takes time, bro. Because with that—you gotta think, bro, you cutting off sometimes an uncle, in most situations a mother or a father. A brother. A spouse. Shit. You feel me?" Carmen, after she and her cousin narrowly avoiding being shot due to her cousins' brothers' gang-involvement, described her personal experience in breaking away from that side of her family:

> We had to move. I was angry that we had to leave [my family] behind, and then, just having to have a new identity, and saying, "I don't know them"—even though I knew

> deep down inside there were my blood. . . . So, I felt like a traitor, and to a lot of people I was lipped as a traitor. (Carmen)

Carmen's mother decided to relocate to help her daughter avoid the traumas that resulted from living with their extended gang-involved family members. It was a painfully difficult process separating from her family, but she had come to value her mother's decision, not only for her own safety, but also for that of her family and other community members who suffered as a result of her family's gang activity.

Breaking the cycle of gang involvement did not only apply to family. Jose explained this effect when detailing the impact that an individual's desistance can have on others:

> I think that through that [desistance] process we also deter future involvement for future folks, because if you pull a gang member out of the gang world, provide them options and resources, you know, that may mean four, five, or six, or ten other people aren't recruited into a gang in the future, because that person is not there to do that. So that's why I think it's really critical.

As did the participants for this study, gang desistance literature spoke frequently to the traumatic and long-lasting effects that gang presence and activity can have on families, neighbors, and others whose paths cross with those of gangs. These included immediate and extended family (Hashimi et al., 2021; Krohn et al., 2011; Young et al., 2014); friends and peers (Lauger, 2012; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991); and students and school staff (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Estrada et al., 2013). Howell & Griffiths, 2019). Whether for the individual, their family, or others, a gang member's decision to desist could create ripple effects that positively impacted those both near and far, sometimes for generations to come (Jose; Raahsaan; Sherman; Yalonda).

Broader impacts. Regarding the broader impacts that an individual's desistance can have, Mariana shared the following:

> It's important. . . . It's a family cycle. It's a neighbor cycle. It's a community cycle—everybody's affected. So, by me having changed . . . by me having stopped doing drugs, stopped living—you know, just turning fists and being violent, and you know, running with the crowd that I shouldn't be running, my neighbors could trust that, no, they're not gonna get beat up by confronting me for something. They're not gonna have to really confront me. My kids don't have to watch me fight. Their packages remain on their front porch. . . . It's just—it affects all of us, you know?

Sherman shared a similar thought about the impacts of gang activity on communities:

> The gang has crippled our communities so much. You know what I'm saying? It's definitely needed. . . . It's definitely time for a change. That's why gangs started—because they was fighting for some type of change. . . . So now we see that that's not working we need to figure out a different way of doing it. And that's where you come up with organizations like CRED.

Erick also alluded to this impact, stating, "I also have to think about the big picture of protecting that community."

Several of the participants included the impact on communities and wider society that desistance offered. The quote of Mariana's that opened this section spoke to the disruption that gangs can instill in a neighborhood. This was a sentiment echoed by Gonzalo who shared a conversation he had with clients while they were preparing Thanksgiving foodstuffs to deliver to community members in Boyle Heights, telling them that their work "had a bigger significance. . .

. I believe it's critical for society at large cause that person's gonna change their mind about, maybe, selling drugs, maybe even carrying a gun. Sherman stated that gang activity can "cripple communities," but, when that activity is reduced through efforts of gang interventionists and desistance support, "tension was relieved in the community." Raahsaan described how, following his desistance and ensuing redemptive work in helping others desist, community members began reaching out to him for help:

> It feels great to give back to the community. Like, right now, I got get calls from longtime friends that I grew up with in the neighborhood saying, "Hey, man, I know a young man that needs to get in the program. What he need to do?" Or a young lady just called me last week talking about her son . . . she need him to do something different . . . and how can he get into the program?

As gang activity and membership decreases through desistance, communities can feel safer and previously unavailable opportunities for growth and empowerment can emerge. LaQuay described that, in many of the communities where gangs were present, kids and young people did not see doctors and lawyers walking around the neighborhood—they only saw gang members (a reality also described by Harris [2011]). Beyond community safety and resilience, Raahsaan and others interviewed for this study offered active gang members and community members models and pathways toward previously unfathomed careers and life courses. These were the broader ripple effects of desistance.

The costs of gang violence were also a critical point for gang desistance. Jose explained these costs with an emphasis on the amount of money that has been spent to prosecute and incarcerate individuals (gang members have been shown to be more likely than most to

experience incarceration [Pyrooz et al., 2017]). He described how "people are starting to shift because they see that in many ways it's more cost-effective to address the lack of resources—the services that are needed—as opposed to dealing with incarcerating people." Jose went on to state that many cities across the country were growing increasingly open to funding community-based approaches (e.g., gang desistance services) due to these costs. It was not the most benevolent form of criticality—and clearly, the over-policing and persecution of communities (most commonly African-American and Latinx communities) was an underlying cause that needed to be addressed (Dichiara & Chabot, 2022; Durán, 2006; Howell, 2011; Vigil, 1988). Still, as Jose said, "it is the [current] reality."

It did not have to be the reality, though. Desistance literature contained many examples of local governments in cities across the country who were investing in the community-based approaches to reducing gang violence through services related to gang intervention, youth diversion, prison reentry services, and other community and peer-led practices as alternatives to suppression by law enforcement (Abt, 2019; Cahill et al., 2015; Mallion & Wood, 2020). The development of the GRYD Department of the LA Mayor's Office (Rice et al., 2007; Brantingham et al., 2021; Rice, 2012) and the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) Division of the LA Police Department (Leap et al., 2015; Rice, 2012) (which tasked officers with focusing more on programming, community engagement, and working alongside gang intervention workers [Leap et al., 2015]—an approach that was shown to have positive increases in community safety [Leap et al., 2015; Weisel, 2002]) were examples of alternative efforts to reduce gang involvement and activity through services and programming. These and similar efforts in other cities were certainly not the norm. But as these alternative approaches continued

to show evidence of effectiveness (Brantingham et al., 2021; Leap et al., 2015) through declining gang membership and activity alongside the declining costs of prosecution and incarceration, those cities still reliant upon suppression and incarceration would hopefully see the value of those different approaches.

Loss of life. Reflecting on his past gang-involvement, Gonzalo said, "It's incredible. Like, I really—I think about it sometimes. It's kind of like, 'How the fuck did I survive that?'" Regarding the tragedy of those individuals who did not survive or were incarcerated, Yalonda believed:

> [Gang members] are so valuable, and no one should be thrown away. I think there's so much that this population has to offer the world, and so much talent, and so much—so many good things that that can come of them.

The final and most important reason for the criticality of gang desistance was maybe the most direct: death. Chapter 1 provided statistics on the loss of life due to gang violence. While the number of gang-related fatalities were astronomical in the peak of gang activity in the early to mid-1990s (when, for example in Los Angeles in 1995, 807 individuals lost their lives due to gang violence), current totals remained sobering, especially in cities such as Chicago where 797 individuals were killed in 2021 (Grimm & Schuba, 2022), with "the bulk of homicides [being] the result of conflicts between rival gangs" (Associated Press, 2022). Erick stated the critical factor of the loss of life most directly: "There's so much loss for no cause." Sherman shared a similar sentiment, saying that "everybody just gonna kill each other 'til everybody gone."

Gang members were described as "individuals" (Gonzalo) and "assets to society" (Yalonda) who deserved opportunities and supports to desist and seek a new path. After all,

"there are a lot of good people in gangs" (Sherman) and many gang members "want to be a better person" (Dustin.) The work of gang desistance described by the study participants recognized this fact and strove to offer that opportunity to these men, women, and youth who wanted and deserved an opportunity for a safe and healthy life.

Barriers to Desistance

> *As a gang member, someone who has served 12 years in prison . . .* a*nd then coming out of prison, my mindset was, "I'm a felon. I'm not going to be able to get a job. I'm not going to be able to do this. Society is gonna hold my past transgressions against me to the point where I'm gonna continuously have to prove that the mistakes that I've made don't define the person that I am today."* (Petra)

The barriers to leaving a gang and becoming a "contributing member of society" [Homeboy Industries, Chicago CRED] can be numerous and include institutional, societal, and even personal factors. The following section described the most significant barriers as identified by the interview participants.

Lack of resources. Carmen stated: "2nd Call gave me the chance to start." Mariana also reflected on what prompted her desistance from gang involvement. Mariana's desistance process began when she went to prison, and upon her release she was ready for a new path. But therein lied the challenge:

> Having grown up and being gang-involved myself—or having grown up in the [gang] community knowing nothing else . . . going to jail, coming out and wanting something different and really not knowing what different meant and then going and discovering that at Homeboy. (Mariana)

Mariana's quote—a sentiment similarly expressed in Sherman's quote that opened this section—spoke to the many desisting gang members who may have wanted to change but did not know what was available or where to start to help them move in a new direction.

Again and again throughout the interviews (as well as within the literature [Krohn & Lane, 2015; Lee, 2016; Martinez et al., 2014; Pacheco, 2019]), the lack of available gang desistance resources—and resources in general—was noted as a significant barrier to moving forward. For many desisting gang members, the organizations involved in this study provided the first forms of positive, compassionate support they had ever received (Carmen). Mariana said that "it's important that when somebody comes for help that you have the resources available to them." Erick stated that "clients have barriers" but "there are not enough agencies in key areas." Even when there may have been entities providing services, due to poor and limited funding, those services were often lacking in quality and effectiveness or were offered by providers unfamiliar with gangs and the needs of desisting from them. This led to "hurting instead of helping" (Erick). LaQuay had watched both friends and clients begin the desistance process. She described how "it's lonely on the other side at first" and that "when you're alone" the temptation to fall back into the gang was difficult to avoid.

Efforts such as street outreach at Chicago CRED (Chicago CRED, 2023) and Father Greg Boyle (Boyle, 2011) at Homeboy Industries handing out his card after performing mass at adult and juvenile detention facilities represented effective tools for recruiting individuals to services and programming, but only for those individuals who happened to come into contact with them. Most people who walked through the doors of those organizations learned about them through word of mouth ("when you deliver, your street cred goes up" [Erick]). While this method of

learning about resources may have drawn some clients, participants expressed—and the ongoing substantial loss of life due to gang violence exhibited—that more effective methods of dissemination about available resources was a critical need for the work of gang desistance.

Erick stated that "we got to give them options for success." When those options were known and are effective and culturally competent, the desistance pathway could begin to take shape.

Stigmatization and institutional barriers. Dustin stated: "It's hard breaking down those barriers, but [RiseUp Industries is] breaking them down one by one." Participants frequently pointed to the barriers of stigmatization—both personal and societal (with the societal often leading to the personal)—as significant barriers to desistance. Petra's description of her experience after release from prison helped to illustrate this stigma: "Society is gonna hold my past transgressions against me to the point where I'm gonna continuously have to prove that the mistakes that I've made don't define the person that I am today." Mariana also spoke of her experience with stigmatization and barriers after being released and looking for work. Having earned a culinary certification, she applied for a job at USC. Mariana said, "I was actually recruited for that job. But then they withdrew their offer because of my criminal history." For both Petra and Mariana, their experiences with these barriers were part of the reason they sought support from the same organizations where they worked at the time of the study (2nd Call and Homeboy Industries, respectively.)

When asked about the important elements of the desistance process, Andrew noted the challenge of stigmatization: "It helps get rid of some of that stigma of who these people were and helps you see more of who they are right now." He went on to say, "I wish [state and federal

corrections entities] could . . . really give them a clean slate. From the stigma point, that's really on us to see them for who they are." Wendy expressed similar frustration with the justice system and its failure to provide truly rehabilitative services to overcome this stigmatization. She described how pairing their program participants with non-gang involved mentors helped address this barrier. Yalonda noted that she addressed this stigmatization by having clients focus on their assets and future goals, adding that "[non-gang members] have many of the same problems as gang members, but they're not labelled like gang members are." This responsibility of assisting their clients in overcoming barriers was something of which most of the participants were aware and actively worked to address both through services and the creation of an organizational culture where clients "feel that they belong" (Carmen; Gonzalo) (an important feature of organizations discussed later in more detail).

It was notable that not a single interview described a lack of skills as a barrier to desistance and employment. In fact, most of the participants referred to the skills and resilience their clients *do* possess and noted their approach of recognizing and utilizing these skills in a positive way to overcome barriers. A similar sentiment was offered by Deane et al. (2007) who wrote that the positive skills and characteristics individuals developed in gangs such as "group loyalty, adherence to a code, and mutual support among participants" could often "carr[y] over from their former situation to the new one" (p. 135). With the supportive encouragement of service providers and mentors working with them, these traits could be utilized to support their desistance, as well as the procurement and maintenance of employment.

Turning Points

It's the incomprehensible demoralization and despair. You know, first you start doing things because they're fun. Then you start doing things because they're a habit and they're an addiction. Then, you know, you just caught up. (Mariana)

Laub and Sampson (1993)—who coined the concept of "turning points"—described how turning points "can modify life trajectories—they can 'redirect paths'" (p. 305). Through the literature review, the most emergent examples of turning points as related to gang desistance included maturation, exposure to violence, incarceration, family, employment, and education. To learn from the perspective of individuals engaged in the work of gang desistance (as well as from firsthand experience), interview participants were asked to share what types of turning points they have found to be most impactful for gang desistance. From their responses, five primary turning points emerged: maturation, parenthood, incarceration, exposure to violence, and seeing others desist (described here as "peer modelling").

Maturation. As early as 1940, when Glueck and Glueck (1953) first noted the influence of maturation in prompting one's desire to desist, the most common turning point in both gang and gang desistance research continued to be that of "maturational reform" (as it was described by Laub and Sampson [1993]). While this study believed there were a range of turning points that can prompt desistance, it did agree with Glueck and Glueck's (1940) contention that "the biological process of maturation is the chief factor in the behavior change of criminals" (as cited in Burgess, 1940, p. 390). Described in the interviews with phrases such as "aging out" ("I was tired of looking over my shoulder" (Sherman), "didn't have the energy to be a gang member"

(Jose), and even "hitting rock bottom" (Dustin), some form of the factor of maturational reform was expressed by a majority of the participants as a push toward the desistance process.

Parenthood. Regarding the impact of parenthood on gang desistance, LaQuay stated: "I see that so much here in our program that a lot of them may have children. That is—that's a huge point for them to do something different, and to be a part of something different." An equally prevalent turning point was the presence of children in the gang member's life. Jose expressed that having a child was "a big event, it involves another human being" and led to his "wanting things for a better life." Not only could becoming a parent instigate the desire to desist, parenthood also helped maintain the individual on their desistance pathway. Jose went on to explain that, after enrolling in Homeboy Industries' solar panel installation training program, he was no longer a gang member, just "a tired student and father . . . it was becoming my identity." Petra shared that a regret of her gang-involvement and ensuing incarceration—and also a motivation to desist—was "missing my son." Sherman echoed a similar sentiment, stating that his son "is my everything—I ain't leaving him."

Incarceration, trauma and peer modelling. While maturation and parenthood were the two most common examples that emerged from the interviews, additional turning points were expressed by a majority of the participants. These turning points included: incarceration ("Prison helped me become a better person" [Carmen]; "One guy said, 'Hey, I was in prison for two years . . . and that was enough to make me never want to go back.'" [Andrew]); violence, death, and other traumas prevalent in gang involvement ("I was tired of the loss, the death" [Ezra]; "The death of someone that that you care about—whether it's a family member or another gang member, a fellow gang member . . . I've seen that" [Jose]); and, finally, peer modelling and

seeing other gang members desist ("I saw homies changing. . . . Seeing others changing gave me the courage to succeed" [Ezra]; "guys are [at RiseUp Industries] cause of other members" [Andrew]).

The five most prominent examples of turning points that emerged from the interviews—maturation, parenthood, incarceration, trauma, and peer modelling (which, though similar to the "Peer Mentorship" practice described in the next section, differed in that it was not an intentional intervention)—aligned generally well with those that emerged through the literature review: maturation (Chalas & Grekul, 2017); exposure to violence (Vigil, 1988); family (including parenthood and intimate partners) (Bersani & Van Schellen, 2014; Decker et al., 2014); and incarceration (Carson et al., 2013). The impact of employment (Hagedorn, 1998) did not emerge as a significant turning point in the interviews. Employment's impact was described more in terms of helping to maintain the desistance process, with an emphasis on the informal effect of prosocialization (Gonzalo) as well as providing incentives to choose employment over returning to their gang (Jose). Overall, the findings from the literature review and interviews worked to bolster their importance within the desistance process.

Traits and Characteristics for Desistance

> *The personality trait[s] [of desisting gang members] are really key to help individuals really understand where they are and to help us that's on the other side that's trying to help the individuals and then try to understand why things are happening the way that they are.*
>
> (Raahsaan)

Gonzalo stated that "there is no cookie cutter approach for this work." When speaking about personality traits that can be helpful and even necessary for a desisting gang member, it

can be important to remember that gang members are not a monolithic type (Greenberg, 2007) but vary in their personalities and motivations like anyone else. The following section was organized within the frameworks of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy—along with elements of prosocial and antisocial factors—to hone down these important desistance traits to those that appeared most frequently within the interviews. In order to reground these traits within the frameworks, this section began with a brief rehashing of Identity Desistance and Self-Efficacy theories before moving into a discussion detailing the personal traits of desisting individuals that were most conducive to facilitating a successful desistance process.

Identity Desistance. Paternoster and Bushway (2009) developed their theory of Identity Desistance in response to previous gang desistance theories which focused more heavily on external factors and supports in facilitating desistance from gangs. Identity Desistance Theory focused on the individual's own prompting to begin the process, described in more detail in the following quote:

> This perceived sense of a future or possible self as a non-offender coupled with the fear that without change one faces a bleak and highly undesirable future provides the initial motivation to break from crime. Movement toward institutions that support and maintain desistance (legitimate employment or association with conventional others, for example) is unlikely to take place until the possible self as non-offender is contemplated and at least initially acted upon. Human agency, we believe, is expressed through this act of intentional change. (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009, p. 1105)

The concept of transforming one's self-identification from that of a gang-member to a former or non-gang member appeared frequently within the interviews for this study ("I had to

have a new identity" [Carmen]; "a tired student and father . . . it was becoming my identity" [Jose]; "I don't deny that other person—I just don't give her the floor" [Petra]; "you have to make a new identity" [Sherman]), as well as within the review of the literature (Hennigan & Sloane, 2013; Maruna & Farrall, 2004; McGregor, 2020; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). This change in identity was often described as necessary for actualizing that "possible self" as a non-gang member and orienting oneself toward a vision of a future free from gang involvement. These intertwining actions appeared frequently both in the participant interviews (Carmen; "their future depends on being a different person" [Dustin]; Gonzalo; Jose; Raahsaan) and gang desistance literature (Harris, 2011; Hennigan & Sloane, 2013; Roks, 2018). This robust presence spoke to Identity Desistance's applicability to this study.

Self-Efficacy. Bandura (1977) developed his theory of Self-Efficacy in response to therapeutic efforts with patients in which they worked to overcome the patient's fears. Bandura (1977) explained the components of Self-Efficacy theory:

> Not only can perceived self-efficacy have directive influence on choice of activities and settings, but, through expectations of eventual success, it can affect coping efforts once they are initiated. Efficacy expectations determine how much effort people will expend and how long with will persist in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts. (p. 194)

Self-Efficacy Theory's emphasis on self-perception, the development of expectations of future success, and the building of efficacy to work through the inevitable challenges while seeking that future paired well with the process of desistance.

The concept of developing a vision of a future appeared frequently both within participant interviews ("You have to work toward that goal" [LaQuay]; "You have to move forward" [Wendy]; "It starts with . . . a vision of possibilities, of success" [Yalonda]) and the literature on gang desistance (Deane et al., 2007; Harris, 2011; Kelly & Ward, 2020), as did the possession of the self-efficacy to overcome the internal and external challenges on the path toward that future (Deane et al., 2007; Melde, 2013). The frequency and importance of these appearances spoke to the pertinence of Self-Efficacy Theory as a guiding framework for this study.

While these theories and their utilization as frameworks were described in Chapter 1, it felt important to revisit them in order to reiterate the guidance they provided throughout the development of research methods and data collection. Next, the personal characteristics that emerged as most impactful for successful desistance was discussed.

Self-Differentiation. Self-differentiation (which shared similarities with identity desistance) was essentially the process of developing and defining a new identity in place of a previous one—or, in some cases—an actualization of the life they were "meant" to live. Participants were asked if this differentiation is important to desistance and every single response was affirmative. Yet, there was also agreement across the participants that the former self should not be forgotten or cut off completely. Both Andrew and Raahsaan stated the value of "carrying" that old identity so as "not to forget where you came from."

Especially for those who had desisted themselves, participants believed it was important to remember that self as it remained a reinforcing reminder of the positive transformation they had made ("Making a positive out of a negative" [Wendy]; "It's a reminder of who you're not"

[Yalonda]). Petra shared that she "had to go through that part of me to get to who I am now," a sentiment similarly expressed by Jose who said it reinforced the fact that he "used to be a gang member" and Carmen who, when separating the two identities, was able "to discover the real me." To emphasize the need for carrying the former self and point to the dangers of not doing so, Gonzalo shared an anecdote of a former homeboy of his who had tried to completely cut off his identity as a gang member:

> I believe that it's not healthy to try to disconnect altogether because I got friends who are formerly lifers who are trying to lead a "normal" life. You know, they have the degrees, they make 30 dollars an hour. They're not involved with any re-entry or nothin' like that. But I could tell that they're struggling.

Locus of control. Regarding the desisting gang member's agency in desisting from their gang, Sherman stated: "Trust me. The streets is gonna bring it to you every day. It's going to make sure—to make sure that you ain't with the shit no more." Carmen also commented on the need for agency for successful desistance:

> I was never taught to be self-empowered. I was never taught to say, "Hey. I'm beautiful. I'm pretty. I'm worth it. . . . I'm the one that finishes my own lifestyle. I'm the one that finishes my own empowerment." No one else could do that for me.

Discussing the resilience of former gang members, Albert (2007) identified "internal locus of control" as a key quality in a gang member's ability to desist from their gang. Albert (2007) defined that quality "as 'a generalized sense of being in charge or having personal power' [Benard, 2004, p. 22] in one's life" (p. 202)—with an emphasis on avoiding a sense of victimization toward "the adversity they had experienced" (p. 203).

The concept of an internal locus of control was described variously by participants as "self-esteem" (Petra), "grit" (Dusting), "drive" (Ezra), "belief in self" (Sherman), and other related terms, and appeared frequently throughout the interviews. Their appearance was especially common when speaking of desister's ability to manage the many challenges and setbacks common in the process of desisting (Gålnander, 2020; Rocque, 2017). In the context of gang desistance, these challenges included both external factors such as the death of a family member or friend (Sherman; Ezra; Jose); their gang reaching out—or making "the call" (Erick)––for them to participate in gang activity (Raahsaan); threats of retaliation for desisting (Andrew; Carmen); lack of support systems (Erick; Jose); and societal stigmatization and ostracization of "once a gang member, always a gang member" (Gonzalo; Sherman; Yalonda). Internal factors also presented challenges, many of which highlighted the lingering characteristics of gang involvement including: traumatic experiences (Yalonda; Carmen; Petra); responding to situations with anger and violence (Gonzalo; Petra); self-stigmatization (Erick; Petra; Wendy); the "addictive" quality of the gang life (Petra; Jose); and loss of identity (Erick; Raahsaan).

Self-awareness. To address these challenges, participants expressed the traits that desisting gang members needed—and traits that service providers should work to instill—to overcome the challenges and continue the process of desistance. Most prominent was the trait of self-awareness (Ezra; Mariana). Andrew shared that "they must be introspective" in order to, as Dustin believed, to "see that in themselves"—a similar sentiment to Erick's statement about the purpose of his programming being "to let them see themselves." LaQuay offered a more defined need for this self-awareness when she described it as "self-awareness of personal needs," an

awareness that Sherman believed could then allow the individual to "listen to his *self*." Dustin spoke to the challenge of this development of self-awareness in former gang members:

> These individuals—they've never been shown, and even if they have been shown, they never been in a place in their lives where they can see what it's like to be someone who that they're happy with—that they can look in the mirror and go, "Wow! I'm accomplishing something that is worthwhile." (Dustin)

That was a self-perception that must be changed. Petra expanded on this necessary change:

> It's another reason why this desistance stuff is critical, because it can put people in a position to learn or to be able to build on their self-esteem, and be able to learn that I am definitely worth more than what I've limited myself to, and it's just about providing those resources and giving them incentives and things to encourage them to want to step outside the box that has become normal and helping them realize that that shit ain't normal.

Seeing the self in a new, positive way was one foundational element of that belief in one's ability that was the cornerstone of Self-Efficacy.

Forward-thinking. The second most common trait expressed in the interviews that supported the efficacy of desistance for gang members was a forward-thinking mindset—a symbolic turn from that literal "always looking over my shoulder" (Jose) characteristic that gang members must develop for survival on the streets. Their orientation must be shifted toward their future in order to "have a vision of what they want" (Sherman) and "develop a vision of possibilities for themselves . . . [so that] they can recognize the positive of where they're going" (Yalonda). It could be challenging, though. As LaQuay shared, it should begin with small steps:

> I think a lot of times they have to see some success first, and then, once they can see some success, even if it's something . . . like obtaining your high school diploma, if it is going to work and showing up for work for 30 days and still having that job. Sometimes they're able to see some of those smaller wins as like, okay, the things are working out, maybe I can achieve some more. And then enough of those smaller wins allows them to begin to think about the future.

This change in direction was noted as essential and nearly every participant included the development of this forward-thinking and visioning as a key responsibility of their service provision—to help their clients "know where I'm trying to get" (Ezra) and have "something to look forward to" (Carmen). Gonzalo stated that "I ask them 'What do you want to do?' because I want them to move forward"—a statement that expressed both the need for thinking of the future and the self-awareness to individually define that future.

Self-management. Self-management often shared some similarities with self-awareness (and even self-differentiation in a desistance context) but was distinguished as being more of an actionable result of that self-awareness. Phrased by Petra as "responding versus reacting" (i.e., employing self-control and communication in place of violence), self-management could be indicative of a transformation from gang culture in which "reacting versus responding" was more encouraged. Both Gonzalo and Ezra shared stories of clients in new jobs who chose to respond professionally and even compassionately in challenging situations that, in their previous gang involvement, would most certainly have ended in violence. In both instances, the self-awareness of what would have been lost (that vision of a future) incurred a response rather than a reaction.

Every organization that employed the interview participants included either counseling or classes on "Anger Management" to help foster this trait of self-management.

Choice (or wanting change). The element of choice within the desistance process is critical. Several participants echoed this criticality. Erick stated: "Success is when the person is ready within—we're just the linkages." Sherman offered a similar sentiment: "They have to want this." Boyle (2011) echoed this belief in the following quote: "Homeboy Industries is not for those who need help, only for those who want it" (p. 8). As it did in gang desistance literature (Harris, 2011; Kelly & Ward, 2020), the self-efficacious action of "choice" and the decision-making ability to make that choice—most importantly in the choice to desist from their gang—was a consistent theme across the interviews. Carmen—who worked for 2nd Call where a foundational practice was using "I not You" language ("speaking 'I' gives me the power" [Carmen])—described this choice as "wanting to take the power back" and required the self-awareness to "understand what happens if I choose" or, in LaQuay's words, "to make decisions that benefit me." LaQuay went on to describe Chicago CRED as a "safe place" for this decision to desist to be realized.

The desire—the *want*—to change was another common trait expressed in the interviews. Often described similarly to the process of addiction and recovery (a comparison that also appeared in a majority of the interviews and was worth highlighting for understanding the challenges of leaving gang life), participants noted the essentiality of "wanting" to change, which, when accomplished, leads to "wanting more things like getting a job or an education" (Jose). While this quality often occurred before engagement with a service provider, it could be

fostered and strengthened by the provider, or, possibly, incurred through the availability of services.

Additional traits for gang desistance. Finally, and again since they appeared in a majority of the interviews, important traits were identified for desistance, including: "loving oneself and/or others" ("being forgiving of self" [Mariana]; "there's nothing negative about loving someone" [Dustin]); "hope"—especially for a better future ("gang members have hopes and dreams too" [Gonzalo]; "give them hope" [Andrew]); self-accountability ("owning what you did" [Erick]); "keep yourself accountable" [Raahsaan]); leadership ("I always possessed leadership characteristics" [Ezra]; "[leadership] is in you, not on you" [Petra]; "the leadership qualities of these guys is off the charts" [Dustin]); and overcoming imposter syndrome, or the feeling of not belonging or deserving something better (Petra).

That was an exhaustive section, but it felt important and relevant as it applied both to those traits that could positively influence an effective desistance from gang involvement ("What is it going to take for me to live?" [Petra]) and offered focal points for those providing desistance services. Gonzalo explained that "there is no cookie cutter approach" to serving desisting individuals, but in order to help them actualize the "hopes and dreams" (Gonzalo) that many gang members possessed, the imbuement and development of these traits were impactful.

Prosocial Factors

The preceding sections of "Turning Points" and "Personal Traits and Characteristics" highlighted many of the internal elements that can support effective gang desistance. But external factors can be influential as well. The concept of prosocial factors emerged prevalently in the review of gang desistance literature and so were discussed in the interviews. Roman et al.

(2021) defined prosocial factors as "opportunities and experiences with new or strengthened social relations that offer opportunities and provide support for or reinforcement of a new non-gang or non-offender identity" (p. 5). The following section described the most common prosocial factors as identified by the participants.

Peer mentorship and modelling. Regarding the importance of peer mentorship and modelling, Chicago CRED (2023) offered the following:

> Life coaches wear a lot of hats: teacher, advisor, advocate, and friend. With caseloads of up to 15 at any one time, they guide participants through CRED's 18–24-month program, are available around the clock, and provide support in moments of crisis. They facilitate group discussions aimed at self-regulation and reflection and create safe spaces for participants to be vulnerable and share their stories. Many CRED life coaches have had similar life experiences as participants.

As part of his desistance process, Raahsaan "always tries to stay around people doing more than me." Raahsaan referred to these supportive individuals as his "fan base," a description echoed by Mariana who called them her "feel-goods."

The most effective mentors and models for desisting individuals were those who had desisted themselves (a belief expressed frequently within the literature [Deane et al., 2007; Decker, 2002; Young & Gonzalez, 2013]). This fact was a large reason why all four organizations employed some form of peer-based mentorship and modelling to support their clients. Homeboy Industries titled these individuals "Work Readiness Trainers" (Gonzalo is a Work Readiness Trainer for the Homegirl Café social enterprise) while at Chicago CRED they were titled "Life Coaches" (Ezra and Sherman were both Life Coaches supporting clients along

their pathway to employment.) Andrew felt this modelling was important in acting as a recruitment tool for RiseUp Industries to attract participants. LaQuay described seeing others desisting as having a "ripple effect" that could encourage active gang members to begin the process of desisting when "they see homies making positive change—it can act as a prosocial form of peer pressure" (LaQuay), or, as Ezra said, "make it cool to succeed."

But the value of mentorship and modelling was not contained just to onsite programming. The organization where Jose worked—Brilliant Corners—provided clients with Life Coaches for the first 90 days after a client had moved on to employment. Wendy described how RiseUp Industries encouraged and provided opportunities for their participants to speak to youth in schools and other settings where gang activity was present—not only to dissuade young people from joining gangs, but to reinforce the speakers' own desistance through active mentorship. The peer-based modelling approach was also a foundational component of gang intervention and outreach work, wherein desisted individuals worked on the streets to reduce violence and engage gang members in services that supported desistance (Peterson & Howell, 2013; Rubenson et al., 2021; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). Chicago CRED captured this approach in their programming description: "[Intervention workers] serve as our HR department, recruiting participants into our program" (Chicago CRED, 2023, p. 4).

Finally, the value of mentorship was not contained solely to former gang members. RiseUp Industries built a mentorship program for their participants wherein the participant was paired with a mentor who did not possess the lived experience of gang involvement and desistance. While mentors with lived experience were certainly more "relatable" (Mariana), Ezra

believed that those without it could "offer exposure" to jobs and other experiences that "people on your block" may not have been able to provide. Sherman described this value:

> Just because they ain't nobody involved in the game don't mean they can't be a part of this and help us. You know what I'm saying? Or just help us understand that shit, because you always need somebody. If all of us standing in a circle, we ain't gonna be able to see the same shit, bro. I need for you to be standing on the outside because you gonna see something one of us missed. Why we've been gangin' and gangin' and gang-gangin' it. You see what I'm saying?

Homies. Sherman bluntly stated a fact regarding gang members: "There's a lot of good people in gangs." The second most common prosocial factor for desistance were gang members themselves. Gangs can certainly be a negative factor for someone desiring or attempting to desist. Dustin—as shared earlier—described how one RiseUp participant had to relocate after deciding to desist due to threats from his former homeboys. Sherman recalled homies labeling him "a lame" when he began his desistance—a word that may sound harmless but was deeply insulting in gang culture and intended to derail his desistance.

The impacts of gang involvement could undoubtedly be negative for those involved, but that does not mean that positive elements and practices could not exist within gangs and the gang members themselves. After all, said Raahsaan, part of the reason people joined gangs was "to feel part of something bigger than themselves" or, in the words of Carmen and Erick, "to feel a sense of belonging." When his dad went away to prison, Sherman found support from his father's homeboys—"I had real dudes out there"—who made him go to school and, if he didn't, would "smack me upside the back of my head." Additionally, after he had effectively desisted,

Raahsaan "had [homies] who were happy for me." Petra had fellow gang members who actively encouraged her to seek employment and commended her for the change she made. Their words continued to motivate her in her desistance journey.

A number of the participants described the "family" quality that some gangs possess, usually when speaking of the reason people sought gang membership—especially when their own families were not a positive presence [Carmen; Yalonda]. Erick shared a story, though, that exemplified this familial quality of looking out and caring for each other that can exist in gangs. When he was implementing a new program focused on employment for former gang members, he felt it was important for their wellbeing to engage with the leaders of the gang from which several of the participants were desisting. Erick described the interaction:

> They were like, "You know, you guys are Probation. You guys took your time and provided this respectful presentation and introduction. It's not even saying that you're coming to us for permission. No, you're actually connecting with us . . . and that's all we asked for—we asked to be part of the process." That's what they wanted, man. They said, "We wanted to be part of the process" and now they're like, "We know where we could refer some of our youngsters that we don't want . . . to come back." You see? It was very powerful. We've done it several times, and it's always been positive, I had never had a negative outcome, negative nothing. It was always about respect.

The preceding descriptions of the prosocial qualities present in gangs that could support their desisting members was not meant to shine a rosy light on gangs. Leaving them, after all, was the central focus of this study. Neither was it meant to encourage service providers to go out in the streets and engage with active gang members and leaders. But the prosocial influence of a

desisting gang member's homies was a factor mentioned by a majority of the participants and was a quality worth noting for those engaged in the work.

Employment. Employment offered the third opportunity for prosocial engagement for participants. The development of the social enterprise model at three of the four organizations involved in the study (Chicago CRED, Homeboy Industries, and RiseUp Industries) was based on the prosocial impacts that could emerge within a workplace (see "Definition of Terms" for a more detailed description of the social enterprise model). Within the field of social services, social enterprises were companies developed between a non-profit organization and a for-profit entity to provide simultaneous personal (wraparound services) and professional (hard skills for specific industries) development for desisting individuals while also generating revenue to pay for the social enterprise and provide unrestricted funding for the organization.

For social enterprises serving gang-involved individuals, this often involved gang members—even former enemies—working side by side. Gonzalo—who worked at the Homegirl Café social enterprise at Homeboy Industries—provided a description of why this model was effective:

> There could be a bigger picture for you developing. And I . . . feel that, when you are working—which worked for myself—you feel part of a team, you feel a sense of meaning, you feel like you are accomplishing something as opposed to just not or being in the streets. . . . When you get that recognition, the human being lights up.

RiseUp Industries (n.d.a) provided further description of the prosocial value of employment in the description of their onsite Machine Shop social enterprise:

> The Reentry Program offers more than income—it offers a sustainable career. . . . Former enemy gang members work side by side, helping one another to complete the Reentry Program and make positive life choices. The kinship they've fostered is an example to us all. (History section, para. 3)

Employment beyond the organizational or social enterprise setting could be a prosocial factor as well (Humphrey & Cordella, 2014). Petra shared how employment helped her desistance journey by showing her that she could be successful in different environments and around different people—that "I belong here" (Petra). Gonzalo frequently told his clients that their time within social enterprises at Homeboy Industries was "a steppingstone to something better." Jose believed that employment—along with building the individual—also offered the resources and incentives to keep from returning to the antisocial world of gangs.

Prosocial mapping. The final component of this section on prosocial factors for gang desistance was a practical tool that some of the participants utilized to identify prosocial figures in a client's life. I was first introduced to this intervention through GRYD. Described in Chapter 2's section on "Effective Practices for Gang Desistance," GRYD service providers created a "strength-based genogram" which mapped out client's social circles (with their immediate family as the starting point) in order to identify those individuals who could provide positive support in the client's desistance process (Cahill et al., 2015) (Young & Gonzalez [2013] also described the value of genograms for identifying prosocial supports). Mariana explained her utilization of this intervention as "identify[ing] positive factors [in the client's lives] and seek[ing] those out." Alternately, both LaQuay and Erick worked with their clients to "identify" and "critique" antisocial individuals and influences and seek out prosocial versions instead.

Effectively Desisted?

The structure of this section based on Research Question 1 was framed around the process of desistance—its criticality, turning points to prompt the process, personal traits and characteristics to maintain the process, and prosocial factors to support the process. Therefore, it was fitting to close with the question of when—or if—a person can say they have fully desisted.

Within gang desistance literature, there were attempts to identify an endpoint to the process. There was reasoning behind identifying this endpoint—especially for policy related to incarceration, post-incarceration supervision, and even employment (Bushway et al., 2011; Polaschek, 2019)—as it could mark the point someone was eligible for release from custody or hired on for a job. For the participants of this study, though, desisting from gang involvement was an ongoing and even life-long process and was focused on the individual's perception of their desistance status as opposed to quantitative markers.

Responses from participants highlighted that focus on the individual's sense of their place within the desistance process. Erick believed that "success is when the person is ready within." Wendy stated:

> I don't believe there's a finish line. I believe that you're always going to be hit with—you know, you're gonna be driving down the street and see another gang member that knows you. But life still goes on. . . . I think that it would be awesome if there was a finish line . . . but [there] isn't.

According to Dustin, those challenging and triggering moments required "constant work to address these triggers." In addition to triggers and other factors that could challenge a successful desistance process, Andrew, Yalonda and Sherman pointed to the barrier of ongoing

stigmatization that former gang involvement and incarceration carried. LaQuay felt that desistance was an ongoing process, but that a "good time away" from gang involvement—or "a longer time away from the gang than in the gang"—could be indicative of having effectively desisted.

Those participants with lived experience of desistance expressed similar thoughts. Speaking to her former identity as a gang member, Petra stated: "That side of me still exists. I just choose positivity over negativity. I still get triggered—but I *choose* to allow that woman I've become to live." Raahsaan said, "I think it's gonna be an ongoing thing cause gangs are always gonna be around and there's always gonna be problems and disagreements." Mariana described how "I have setbacks and things can always happen, but I get back up. . . . The criminal mindset always sticks with you . . . but they are just ideas now." Carmen shared how "seeing others going through what I did" could be challenging and "brings back the trauma" and "regrets" of her former life, but ultimately being a model of desistance helped her maintain her own unique process. Working with individuals attempting to desist was a consistent trigger for the participants with lived experience. But, working with them also helped show Sherman the progress of his own desistance and that "once you really separate [from the gang], people, the community, will recognize it."

The preceding data emerged from questions focused on the desistance process and the individual(s) involved in that process. It identified many of the internal and external needs, prompts, and elements involved for a pathway leading to successful desistance from gangs. The next section explored the findings from the research that addressed the services, programs, and other supports to best facilitate an individual's desistance from gang involvement.

Most Effective Employment-Related Interventions for Gang Desistance

The choice and ensuing action to desist from gang involvement can be simultaneously challenging and courageous. Engagement with organizations and service providers to help facilitate the desistance process is a critical action that either hamper or increase the individual's commitment to the process. The following section discussed those interventions that can best prepare and facilitate an individual's desistance as identified by research participants, documents collected from participating organizations, and nonparticipatory observation. The section began with a detailed presentation of those interventions (programs, services, mentorship, other supports) most conducive and effective in supporting an individual desisting from gang involvement, followed by a focus on the importance and impact of vocational training to prepare the client for the ultimate objective of employment. The section closed with a description of elements supportive of helping the individual both obtain and maintain their new employment.

Interventions and Services

Despite the personal and societal barriers against which desisting individuals often struggle, they were determined and courageous enough to make it through the doors of organizations to seek support(s) and guidance. In the work of gang desistance, gang-involved clients arrived with an especially unique set of needed supports and interventions. In the following section, effective approaches and interventions for desistance work were described with a focus on their ability to build the client's efficacy toward gaining and maintaining employment. While most of the participants and the organizations where they worked employed a "wraparound" form of service and programming provision ("I wear so many hats" [Wendy]; "I

do a little bit of everything" [Carmen]), the following findings focused on those that were uniquely tailored for gang desisting individuals.

Individualized approach, or "meeting them where they're at." Andrew stated: "It's been really enlightening hearing from some of the guys themselves, like, 'Hey, look, we're this way because of this.' And it's, like, 'Okay, you know, we'll meet you there.'" Participants in the study described how each client is an individual with unique needs, desires, and experiences (Jose) and that working with them requires "a uniquely tailored approach" (Raahsaan). Dustin described this approach as "what the individual is looking for at that moment," similar to Sherman who said, "You just meetin' them where they at—on the level they on. That's how I do my work." The concept of "meeting them where they're at" appeared in a number of articles as an effective service provision approach for building trust with the client (Greenberg, 2007; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). Andrew believed that "our job is to see them for who they are." Carmen described a time when she was facilitating a life skills session for gang-involved youth who refused to engage in the discussion. She decided to dismiss the class not wanting them to feel forced to participate. But Carmen noticed that after the youth left the building they continued standing just outside, so

> I had class with them . . . outside in the parking lot in an alley *with them*. . . . I had to remove myself from the curriculum and I had to remove myself from what's been working and create something for them where they feel they belong, where they can feel that they're getting that need met.

Carmen's was an example of "meeting them where they're at and finding a solution together" (Mariana). The initial period of engagement was when the relationship and trust was built and

approaching clients individually was key to building that critical relationship and keeping them on the desistance pathway (Petra; Carmen). Gonzalo noted that "if you're doing [this] kind of work, you know you have to deal with people on a personal level."

The practice of creating an individualized approach was challenging to service provider's—and organization's—capacity both professionally and personally. Participants shared stories of "burning out" due to the demands of large client caseloads and their spectrum of needs, as well as the emotional toll of working with gang-involved individuals (which could include the unpacking of the client's experiences and traumas and, most challenging, losing clients due to their returning to gang-involvement, incarceration and death [not to mention the triggers involved for those providers with lived experience described in a previous section]). Some participants described self-help practices such as daily mantras (Carmen) or turning off their phone [Sherman]; taking dedicated time to themselves: "my 'cheesecake' time" (LaQuay); and intentionally celebrating success[es] (Mariana). Gang desistance work could be unavoidably taxing and required providers who—similar to the clients themselves—had the motivation and self-management to maintain through the challenges.

Intakes and assessments. The conduction of client intakes at the outset of service engagement and assessments both at the outset and throughout the service provision (assessments can include informal check-ins [Dustin; Ezra; Gonzalo; Sherman]) were noted as important parts of a service provider's job (Erick; Mariana; Petra; Wendy). Intakes and assessments helped the service provider develop a uniquely-tailored pathway toward employment (Erick), engage the client "where they're at" (Carmen), and establish a trusting relationship (Ezra; Gonzalo).

Despite not being a stated part of his role, Dustin used his more informal check-ins with clients to learn "what the individual is looking for at that moment." Raahsaan stated:

> First you want to find out what somebody may have a passion for, even if they [n]ever done something, or if they had a dream as a kid, or what they want it to be, and see how that plays a factor."

Gonzalo shared a story describing a similar approach:

> I was sitting with [three young female clients], and I was talking to them like, I say, . . . "So let's think about what you really want to do." They say, . . . "Well, I don't know." . . . I say, "Well, what have you ever wanted to do?" One said, "I want to be the medical field." So, I say, "Okay, let's make that a goal and take the steps toward the goal."

Regardless of the method or terminology, asking for and identifying those unique needs, desires, and experiences could begin to build the efficacy of the client and unpack "the bag" [Erick] that so many carried over from their gang involvement (which could also include excuses and reasons not to pursue desistance [Erick; Jose]). Engagement, by way of getting a client to open up and share about themselves, could also lead to a stronger service provider-client relationship built on mutual trust and grow the client's efficacy to connect with their true self (Petra) and strengthen their commitment to desistance (Carmen). Further, it could establish the provider as a support system and offer the client and provider an opportunity to "find the solution together" (Mariana).

Life coaches/navigators and mentors. The majority of participants with lived experience of desistance described the impact of seeing others desist and having mentors who had desisted to support them in their own desistance process. This impact was the reason that

each of them—whether specifically as their role or utilized as part of their service provision—acted as mentors for their clients and program participants. Similarly prevalent within the literature (Braga, 2016; Deane et al., 2007; Pacheco, 2019), the presence of these individuals in support of desisting individuals appeared as a critical need (though, the quality of their service provision was important as negative interactions with these individuals can disrupt the desistance process [Medina et al., 2012]).

With lived experience. Homeboy Industries (n.d.c) stated:

> Navigators serve as mentors who create a sense of belonging, consistency and guidance that help trainees move through a new way of life. Always available through their open-door policy, the Navigator . . . helps clients develop plans for the future and directs them toward critical resources. (Case Management section, para. 2)

Chicago CRED (n.d.b) shared a similar description of this role:

> [Life Coaches] been there before and they are guiding us and doing more hands on outside of work that's not being seen. . . . They have genuine love for us. We've got someone in our corner that is real. (Life Coaching section, para. 3)

Carmen put it most succinctly: "real models, not role models." Referred to as Life Coaches at Chicago CRED and Navigators or Work Readiness Trainers (for those serving clients within the multiple social enterprises) at Homeboy Industries, these men and women with lived experience of desistance were integral to their clients' success and, conversely, to their own continued desistance (for this study—and due to its frequency throughout gang desistance literature—the title of "life coach" was utilized.) This characteristic of providers (commonly expressed as being of great value due to the inherent relatability and understanding of the desistance process) was

also a common theme within the literature (Deane et al., 2007; Medina et al., 2012; Rubenson et al., 2021; Sanchez, 2018; Young & Gonzalez, 2013).

While life coaches were involved in providing a range of supportive services such as accessing resources and group facilitation, their primary value was the wellbeing of their client. CRED described this responsibility in their program description: "The creation of safe and reliable relationships helps these men heal and gives them the tools they need to stabilize their lives to make the jump to the legal economy" (Chicago CRED, n.d.b, Life Coaching section, para. 7). Carmen believed that the healing-centered, trauma-informed services offered at 2nd Call were elements that set them apart from many of the other organizations providing services to gang members. The healing that life coaches provided helped to address the traumatic experiences of violence, abuse, neglect, and loss that involvement in gangs involved for their clients (or, to put it bluntly, gang members "have witnessed levels of violence that would traumatize the most seasoned soldiers" (Chicago CRED, 2023, p. 3).

Having experienced this trauma themselves, the participants consistently noted the emotional work they did with their clients—always approached with compassion and nonjudgment (Jose; Ezra). Raahsaan described the traumas his clients carry—seeing people killed, absent parents, assault and abuse, homelessness, substance abuse—and the necessity for mental health counseling and support. Ezra encouraged his clients to be open to and express their feelings so they could self-regulate and process them. To assist her clients, Carmen's approach involved "not telling, but showing [clients] how to manage feelings." Erick shared that "we have hardcore gang members crying . . . almost every single day."

The idea of "showing" was included in multiple participant responses and addressed the clients' need to "show me someone who did it" [Ezra]. LaQuay said that her clients "have to see success first" to begin working toward their own. Knowing that the clients were constantly watching and learning from him, Raahsaan described himself as "a walking billboard" to exemplify successful desistance and show that a better, more meaningful life was possible. Petra "knows that eyes are on me" and used this fact to remain constantly aware of her responsibility as a life coach for her clients. Gonzalo shared a story of a client working in the kitchen at Homegirl Café who was triggered by a coworker. Instead of responding violently (as he admitted he would have in the past), the client walked away from the situation and sought support from Gonzalo based on the modelling that Gonzalo had provided.

This "showing"—akin to the "modelling" discussed earlier in this chapter—required the life coaches to not only provide a sense of compassion and safety, but also to recognize that their own desistance process was unique to them. So, when clients came with their own unique combination of experiences and needs, life coaches were mindful of this in their approach and modelling. Gonzalo stated that "I have to be self-aware" and aware of other's struggles and issues (since they are different than his own), while Mariana consistently reminded herself when working with clients not "to forget that it's *their* journey." To best achieve this awareness of other's unique needs and challenges in desisting, several participants (and not just those with lived experience) described the importance of learning from their clients just as the clients are learning from them: "We learn from all our clients" (Erick).

Participants also shared how this role of life coach was challenging but reinforced their own commitment to their desistance process. Ezra experienced this reinforcement through his responsibility as a model of desistance to others:

> My biggest thing now is . . . I don't want to be a hypocrite. . . . [Ezra and his clients] just had a check-in a week or two ago and they asked, . . . "What's one of the things that . . . keeps you going through the day?" And I was like, "Not being a hypocrite to you guys, because how is it going to look if I'm sitting here trying to tell you to do better, think better, or move like this and then you see me on the news and I've done something?"

Working with desisting individuals helped to remind Petra that she was "still programming—still a client." LaQuay, describing a program at Chicago CRED in which program alumni return to speak with current clients, stated that doing this helped those clients recognize their own achievement in effectively desisting from their former gangs. The impact of the work on the life coaches themselves was notable and spoke to their own ongoing process of desistance as well as the depth and quality of the relationships and support they provided their clients.

Petra stated that the value of engaging with life coaches with lived experience allowed her to "share my experience and, hopefully, what I'm talking about will make [her client] understand that, yeah, that's not something that I want to do." This experience provided the interview participants with the ability to speak truth to clients based on personal experience and allows life coaches more license in holding their clients accountable and instilling the practice of self-accountability (Gonzalo; Raahsaan; Wendy). An applicable example of this was 2nd Call's practice of using "'I' statements" (instead of "you")— "I am who I am because of me" (Carmen)—to build self-efficacy and accountability within their clients.

For those just beginning the desistance process, having the support of life coaches who have desisted themselves and who know the challenges and how to work through them can offer both a symbolic map to follow as well as a very real and passionately committed person to help the client create their own path forward. In the end, maybe the most important impact of life coaches and their modelling of desistance was expressed by Ezra: "It's hard" but "it gets greater later."

Without lived experience. Sherman stated: "You can learn something from everyone . . . if we're all standing in the same circle we're all seeing the same thing." The presence of providers with lived experience was clearly impactful (Ezra; Gonzalo; Petra), but providers without the lived experience of gang involvement and desistance were described as being of value as well (not a single mention of this provider characteristic of non-lived experience was uncovered through the literature review, save for referential mentions of service providers lacking the cultural competence to work with gang-involved individuals [Medina et al., 2012; Decker, 2002]). This value, as expressed by participants, fell mainly into two categories: overcoming a sense of imposter syndrome and providing insight into and experience(s) with broader elements of life. Ezra stated that providers without lived experience offered exposure to new people and ways of life—as long as that provider was coming from a genuine place. Jose felt that having a mix of providers with and without lived experience was the best approach, as it mitigated the awkwardness and stress clients may have felt when they were employed in settings not populated by former gang members ("I don't know how to talk to a white guy."[Jose]) Gonzalo saw a mix of life experience in providers as a positive element and was actively working to build a network of mentors without lived experience of gang desistance to support

clients at Homeboy Industries—a practice that RiseUp Industries developed at its inception and from which they had seen great success. Wendy believed that this mentorship program reaffirmed the clients' desistance efforts and showed them that "they belong in society."

Andrew, who considered himself thoroughly "strait-laced," has had clients tell him "I want to be like you" and believed that his example provided an expanded vision of goals and the efficacy to achieve them. Erick approached his work with an openness to learning from his clients by trying to understand the culture from which they were desisting, an approach which led many of them to thanking him for "making me feel safe" despite their different life experiences (and especially significant as Erick worked in law enforcement, which has been shown can act as a deterrent to desisting gang members engaging in services [Rubenson et al., 2021]). LaQuay was open with her clients regarding her lack of lived experience and similarly worked to learn from them in order to be more effective. She believed that having a mix of staff with and without lived experience provided clients with different forms and applications of services and life knowledge. Yalonda stressed the importance of nonjudgment in working with her clients, knowing that—more than most people—gang members can "see your heart, what's true."

Undoubtedly, the presence of providers with lived experience was critical to the work of gang desistance. Sherman made this clear, saying, "No one in the streets would engage" in services that did not include staff with lived experience—"See it like a comic book—you better send in Batman." But lack of lived experience should not deter people who have not been involved with and desisted from gangs. Being open about one's non-gang past, approaching clients without judgment, seeking opportunities to learn about gang life and culture, and taking

opportunities to connect through shared experiences could all offer inroads to building the trust and engagement that was needed to effectively support clients in their desistance process.

Life and soft skills. 2nd Call stated the following in their brochure: "We assist all individuals with life skills and gainful employment based on their own determination and commitment for success" (para. 6). Each of the four organizations involved in this study provided some form of "Life Skills" support, either through service provision or training. Referred to as "soft skills" by several of the participants and taking place either individually or in a group or class setting, life skills development addressed the following areas: financial management (or "financial literacy"); parenting; healthy relationships; domestic violence (often for court-ordered clients); substance abuse (especially critical for desisting youth and young adults [Ezra]); self-awareness; communication; education (most commonly focused on obtaining a GED or high school diploma); and creative arts.

For gang desistance, one life skill in particular was noted as most helpful: anger management (sometimes referred to as "conflict management"). Developing the skill to "respond" versus "react," participants explained that experience in gang involvement forced individuals to respond aggressively and even violently to challenging situations ("You have to let the aggression go" [Ezra]). The example shared earlier by Gonzalo—wherein a client was triggered while working in a social enterprise and elected to walk away from the instigator and communicate his feelings to his life coach Gonzalo—was a good illustration of anger management in practice. LaQuay expressed a desire to develop a "Rage Room" for CRED clients where the focus would be providing an "outlet for when 'I can't just go and knock someone out.'"

The building of these skills was important for "growing the person" (Wendy) with a focus on their ability to maintain employment beyond the organizational setting—namely their "self-sufficiency" (Erick), self-accountability, and continued work on identity desistance from their gang identities and lifestyle. Raahsaan shared his thoughts on the importance and applicability of life skills development: "Anyone can get a job, but keeping it's more important."

Incentives. Jose spoke to the value of incentivizing programs and services for desisting gang members:

> That's the kind of approach that I like to take is really knowing that I'm in competition with an illegitimate source of income. And I've got to do everything I can to meet that and beat that. . . . If not, I'm going to lose the battle with that street hustle.

Certainly, the prospect of obtaining employment at the close of programming with the ability to provide for self and family could be an incentive for clients (LaQuay). But this incentive would not always be easy for many clients to see—or trust—at the start of their desistance process. In order to build engagement with services and commitment to clients' desistance, the organizations offered different forms of incentives to their clients and program participants (the provision of incentives was a frequent theme within the literature as well [Dong & Krohn, 2016; Melde et al., 2011; Roman et al., 2019; Venkatesh, 1999]).

First and foremost—for those organizations who had created social enterprises—clients received hourly pay or monthly stipends while they worked and received services. Several of the participants referred to this as "paid training" and noted its importance (Dustin; Jose). At Homeboy Industries' social enterprises, entry-level workers received minimum wage with the possibility of promotion and increased pay. Additionally, for those clients who were in the

beginning of Homeboy's 18-month program and not yet working at one of the social enterprises, they received a monthly stipend of $1800. RiseUp Industries paid their clients minimum wage, which may "raise some eyebrows" (Andrew), but the clients knew that the skills they were developing in their work with CNC machines would secure them high paying union jobs at the end of their programming. Participants from Chicago CRED did not state the pay for those clients working in the social enterprise, but program participants received weekly stipends of $500 (clients who tested positive for drugs—and as long as they continued in the program—received $450 with a return to $500 when they tested clean.)

Nonmonetary forms of incentives were also mentioned. 2nd Call—which received many clients through court orders requiring them to complete domestic violence and anger management classes—offered clients the incentive of having their charges dropped if they completed a certain number of hours (Homeboy Industries also offered this to a smaller number of clients). 2nd Call and the Day Reporting Center where Erick worked both incentivized engagement through the provision of supportive services to address life issues (e.g., transportation; food and EBT [Electronic Benefit Transfer] cards; educational support and access; tattoo removal).

Regardless of the amount or type of incentive, offering something to attract and retain clients was a practice within each organization or agency where the participants worked. As Andrew described, it was "very easy to go to that quick money that gangs offer." Providing incentives to offset a return to one's gang can be a critical tool for successful gang desistance work.

Group work, storytelling, and celebration and recognition. The final three interventions were not specifically stated as interventions by participants, but their value was extrapolated from the many references that emerged over the course of the interviews.

Group work. Examples of utilizing group work as an intervention included the youth life skills groups described earlier by Carmen; participant-led support groups (RiseUp Industries); Criminal and Gang Members Anonymous (based on the 12-step model of addiction support groups) (Homeboy Industries); groups to address gender-specific issues (Chicago CRED; Homeboy Industries); and post-employment support (2nd Call). The majority of these groups were facilitated by staff with lived experience as this created higher level of trust and engagement within the groups. To highlight the importance of this, at RiseUp Industries, where the staff did not include individuals with lived experience, the program participants took it upon themselves to create a group that met weekly to discuss and process life and work-related issues.

Storytelling. Like group-based work, the impact of storytelling (i.e., sharing one's story) was referenced frequently throughout the interviews. Raahsaan (who referred to one's story as their "testimony") believed that "stories of gang desistance are critical" for others desisting and said that "sharing my story makes me feel good" and "shows people options." Carmen stated that desistance "gave me my story." Gonzalo shared elements of his story as a tool to engage with clients—though he was careful not to overshare to avoid glorifying his gang involvement (these are often referred to as "war stories.") Mariana, who led biweekly hikes in the mountains surrounding Los Angeles, intentionally carved out time for the clients to share stories. Two participants (Gonzalo; Raahsaan) had written books about their life, and RiseUp Industries partnered with a doctoral student to produce a book detailing the desistance and reentry journeys

of four of their program participants titled *Writing After Life: Stories from Those Who Served a Life Sentence* (Garcia et al., 2018).

A common practice for Homeboy Industries' founder Fr. Greg Boyle was taking "homies" with him when he did talks so that they could share their stories of gang involvement and desistance (Boyle, 2011). RiseUp Industries actively encouraged clients to share their stories with youth to dissuade them from joining gangs (Garcia et al., 2018). Several of the organizations (most prominently Homeboy Industries) shared stories of clients desistance journeys and employment on their websites and social media pages (Chicago CRED, n.d.a; Homeboy Industries, n.d.e).

Storytelling was described in the literature as a powerful tool for developing self-awareness and maintaining one's commitment to desisting from gangs (Pacheco, 2019). Carmen noted the importance of "shifting one's narrative" so that desisting individuals could change their perception of self to a more positive light. Telling one's life story—especially for lives filled with the traumas of gang involvement—could be a challenging, emotional experience for the storytellers and even for those hearing the stories. But, it could also act as motivation for the service providers, since, as Erick stated, "You're now part of their story."

Celebration and recognition. Andrew spoke to the importance of celebration and recognition for his desisting clients:

> When a guy graduates . . . we hold a graduation for him and when the guys are seeing their senior member, their friend graduating, and they've got that American dream right there in front of them. That's a catalyst of hope for themselves. . . . One of the members

> gets off parole that's a big celebration for everyone in it. It's like, "Okay, I'm next—that can be me."

Petra also spoke to this value: "Encouraging them, like, 'You deserve this.'" Mentioned occasionally within the literature (Buckley, 2021; Cahill et al., 2015; Lee & Bubolz, 2020), a majority of the participants and organizations—either directly or indirectly as part of a response to a different topic—spoke to the value of recognizing and/or celebrating their client's achievements "throughout their [programming]" (Wendy). These achievements included: moving on to outside employment; program completion; childbirth; birthdays; wedding anniversaries; sobriety anniversaries; obtaining a GED or diploma; earning a driver's license; and release from parole or probation. Wendy shared how RiseUp Industries holds a graduation ceremony for clients who complete their 18-month program. Gonzalo described a baby shower he helped coordinate for a trainee working at Homegirl Café. Erick—speaking of the often-overlooked value within social services of implementing evidence-based practices (Marshall, 2011)—explained how he learned through research that "reinforcement" could be an impactful tool. He then developed a consistent practice of celebrating different achievements to offer this reinforcement to his clients to support their continued desistance.

Homeboy Industries provided a structured form of celebration and acknowledgement of clients at the daily "Morning Meeting." Every morning, all the clients and staff at the organization gathered in the lobby. The meetings followed a structured agenda that opened with news, programmatic updates provided by either staff or clients within each department and social enterprise, and notifications of upcoming events. The meeting then moved on to the celebration and recognition portion wherein birthdays were announced with everyone singing "Happy

Birthday," followed by recognition of sobriety anniversaries, childbirth, graduation, removal from probation and parole, and other events and achievements. Following this (fairly raucous) portion, one client or staff member was invited to share a "Thought of the Day" in which they offered a message or consideration for attendees to carry with them for the rest of the day. The meeting then closed with a prayer (usually led by a client) and adjourned with copious amounts of daps and hugs. Having attended one of these morning meetings, the positive energy and sense of community that attendees experienced in the daily Morning Meeting was palpable.

The value of these celebrations and recognitions included the "building of trust and engagement" with the services and service provider (Wendy); giving the clients "hope" (Andrew); affirmation of progress in their desistance (Raahsaan); and a "sense of belonging" (Gonzalo). Additional values gleaned from the indirect references to celebration of client achievements included an increased sense of efficacy and deeper commitment to the desistance process.

Like much of the research has shown, a strong reciprocal relationship existed between client and/or work and the service provider. This was evidenced by several participants who described the value that celebrating their client's achievements also had for them. Andrew shared the following description of this:

> I tell the guys like, whatever their success is, I steal some of it. When I see one of them get off parole, I celebrate with them. One of them graduates, I celebrate them. . . . I steal a little bit of their success.

Erick said that celebrating and partaking in his clients' success "recharges me" and added that many of his clients returned following their job placement to update him on their progress and receive the positive recognition and reinforcement they trusted he would provide.

Raahsaan and Sherman expanded upon the impact of celebration and recognition by explaining how it impacted their own desistance process. Both spoke to the great motivation they gained in continuing their own journey away from gang involvement when members in the communities where they grew up (including former homies of theirs) recognized and commended their desistance and ensuing redemptive work to repair communities. The practice of celebration and recognition for one's efforts at desistance could be incredibly impactful actions that equally served the motivation and commitment for client and service provider alike.

Vocational Skills Development

> *[Program Participants] receive employment, classroom training, and real-world experience on contract work to give them the skills needed for a well-paying career.* (RiseUp Industries, n.d.b, How We Change Lives section, para. 1)

Most of the personality traits and service interventions described in this study focused on the personal side of the desisting gang member. But, with this study's ultimate focus on employment, the development of the professional side was also critical. Two main themes emerged from the interviews in relation to the elements necessary for building the professional: training/education and hard skills development. It was worth noting that much overlap existed between "hard" and "soft" skills (e.g., "self-management," "communication," "financial management"). For this study, the inclusion of these skills in their respective categories was decided by the context in which they were shared in the interviews.

Hard and Soft Skills. Many individuals desisting from gangs possessed relatively little of the work experience that could develop those hard skills helpful for gaining and independently maintaining employment (Dustin)—especially living wage employment. For this reason, the development of work-related skills was a priority for the research participants and their organizations. While most of the participants focused on the development of soft skills for their clients, needed hard skills were frequently mentioned and their services often entailed the development of these skills.

The bulk of the hard skills described by participants and included in organizational literature (websites; brochures) was related to professionalism and "personal responsibilities" ("building the habit of responsibility" [Carmen]). These skills included time management, punctuality and "staying busy" (Andrew; Sherman); financial management (or "personal finances") (Andrew; Erick; Wendy); completing employment-related documents such as resumes, cover letters, and applications (Mariana; Yalonda); working with technology (Sherman; Petra); industry-specific technical training (e.g., manufacturing [RiseUp Industries, n.d.b]; construction [2nd Call, 2019]; food packaging [CREDMADE, n.d.]; and solar panel installation, electronics recycling, silk-screening, and food preparation [Homeboy Industries, n.d.f]).

The most important soft skills that emerged were self-regulation and effective communication. Raahsaan—who believed that in order "to be [an] effective [employee] you have to manage yourself first"—shared the following story about a former client who had moved on from CRED to outside employment and had an issue with his timecard:

> He asked the floor supervisor [who] said something that triggered him. And this young man said, "Raahsaan, I was so mad and upset. But you know what Raahsaan? I just said,

> ‘You know what I ain’t gonna say nothin.’” I just told him, ‘Hey, can I clock out and go home, so I can calm myself down?’” And they let him clock out and go home. I said, “That’s growth.” Because the young man I’m talking about—in the past he woulda been, like, throwin’ the “F” bomb in your face, and talkin’ about he don’t care what happen—“Call the police!” But that’s growth.

Raahsaan’s story exemplified the development of the professionalism and self-regulation needed for individuals who were once gang-involved. Jose, who emphasized the need for mental health work prior to employment, provided an example that described what could happen without the effective development of these necessary skills:

> I’ve had gang members over the years . . . we get them a job, and they’re back two or three days later, and I’m like, “What happened?” And, you know, “I got into an argument with the supervisor.” “Why?” “Because they were telling me what to do.” And I’m like, “That’s kind of their job. . . . That’s kind of what they’re supposed to do.”

The likelihood was high that formerly gang-involved individuals would be employed within settings and amongst people who were unfamiliar with gang members and gang culture. Employment offered the means and self-agency for a definitive step away from gang involvement. The ability to maintain a job despite the challenges desisting individuals would inevitably face could be critical and dependent on the ability of the individual to deal with the challenges thoughtfully and professionally.

Vocational training and education. Regarding the value of both education and employment-focused education and training, participants shared the following: “I learned I was teachable” (Mariana); “In the absence of the trainer is when the training shows” (Carmen); and

"Job and career training . . . provides skills for their own career and reinforces their life transformation" (Dustin). A primary objective of this study was to identify organizations who served desisting gang members through employment-focused services and programming. A further desire was the inclusion of organizations who offered social enterprises as part of their desistance programming. Three of the four organizations who took part in the research—Chicago CRED, Homeboy Industries, and RiseUp Industries—developed social enterprises which provided hard skills development for program participants and generated income to support the social enterprise and expanded services. RiseUp Industries' website provided the following description of The Machine Shop social enterprise and what it offered program participants:

> The Machine Shop Social Enterprise is central to our Reentry Program and prepares members for careers as CNC (Computer Numeric Control) machine operators. They receive employment, classroom training, and real-world experience on contract work to give them the skills needed for a well-paying career. Revenue from this enterprise helps offset costs, making the Reentry Program more sustainable and amplifying the impact of contributions. (RiseUp Industries, n.d.b, How We Change Lives section, para. 1)

Made possible by the acquisition of private funding, social enterprises could be an innovative model and highly effective for the development of the skills clients need to obtain and maintain employment. Dustin stated this value more clearly:

> That's . . . a huge importance that our guys—if they're on RiseUp property and during that 40-hour work week—they can go to a recovery class, or they can go to a counseling class, or they can go to a financial literacy meeting. And they get paid for it. . . . The stress of "oh, I'm missing work to go to this to go to counseling" or "I could be doing

> something else to go to counseling" is taken away. So, then, I think it allows that individual to really focus on what is being provided. And I think, you know, going forward, I think a lot of programs should look into that.

It was no surprise, then, that every interview participant listed training—and especially *paid* vocational training—as a key intervention for their clients (it was worth noting how Gonzalo's job title of "Work Readiness *Trainer*" and clients being referred to as "Trainees" indicated the emphasis on training at Homeboy Industries). Wendy, who worked for RiseUp Industries, stated that the goal of their 18-month program was to develop their clients so "they can hit the ground running" when they move on to a career. Andrew, also at RiseUp Industries, believed that training could "get them excited about a career." Ezra (Chicago CRED) shared that vocational training offered "exposure to new jobs they didn't know existed." Jose described how his experience as a student in the Solar Panel Installation training program at Homeboy Industries "became his identity" (identity desistance in action) and reinforced his desire to continue on his desistance pathway.

A social enterprise setting was not the only training options available for clients at the different organizations. 2nd Call partnered with local unions, companies, and the National Building Trades Academy to provide construction-specific training for its clients (2nd Call, 2019). Erick developed partnerships with local community colleges to offer both academic and employment training and certifications for his clients. Chicago CRED offered enrollment into a range of employment-based certification programs to expand its career pathway options outside of those available through their social enterprise (Chicago CRED, 2023). Additionally, beyond employment-focused training, interview participants (many of them who acted as facilitators and

trainers themselves) also spoke of the importance of a training approach for personal development (e.g., anger management; general life skills) (LaQuay; Petra; Wendy). The fact that Chicago CRED's and Homeboy Industries' Life Coaches were intentionally interwoven into the social enterprises and expected to support their clients with more than just professional skills spoke to this importance.

Regardless of the specific topic or focus, training was an integral part of every organization's service delivery and programming. As opposed to academic education, training was structured on the Andragogical approach of "Adult Learning" which "contend[s] that adults are self-motivated and tend to assume responsibility for their role in the learning process" (Abeni, 2020, p. 55). Thus, training could provide an environment for increased engagement along with skills and knowledge building which could increase the clients' professional skillset and strengthen their self-efficacy toward desistance.

Job Placement. Somewhat surprisingly (and likely due in part to the selection of interview questions), the job placement stage of services was discussed only minimally and often referentially through another topic. One reason may have been the fact that the organizations researched for this study offered social enterprises and trainings designed for specific industries and job types (building trades [2nd Call, 2019]; food packaging [CREDMADE, n.d.]; electronics recycling [Homeboy Industries, n.d.f]; CNC machine operation [RiseUp Industries, n.d.b]). That said, several notable components important to placing their clients in jobs were expressed by the participants.

The first component was the availability of choice when it came to identifying a career pathway. A previous section described the "forward-thinking" mindset that the participants

worked to instill in their clients. Several of the participants included the development of a career pathway based on their client's professional interests and the previous work experience they may have possessed. Older clients often arrived with a better vision of their ideal career pathway (Erick), while younger clients could require more support in developing this vision and the pathway to achieve it (Jose). Erick believed this was due in part to the likelihood that older clients had likely spent a significant amount of time in prison whereby they had time and (possibly) institutional forms of support to identify the type of work they would like to pursue following their release. Jose also noted—and he stressed the fact this was based on his own experience working with clients—that female clients often possessed a stronger idea of the type of work they would like to pursue and the efficacy to successfully obtain that work.

Regardless of the type of work, nearly every participant was clear that the jobs they sought for their clients were sustainable and offered living wage employment—"not just crap labor jobs" (Petra)— with opportunities for advancement to new positions or transitions to new types of work (Jose). The most frequently suggested type of work was labor union work ("the 'full respectability package' of union jobs" [Na et al., 2015, p. 2017]) as it provided levels of job security, robust support and advocacy, professional development, structured advancement, and pay that exceeded most other employers or fields (Dustin; Jose; Petra; Na et al., 2015). Petra described unions as possessing "family"-like a quality that could engender commitment in desisting individuals both toward the job or employer and their own continued desistance process.

The second component of the job placement stage that emerged was the practice of a pre-employment assessment. Staff from Chicago CRED described this as part of their job placement

services. Erick explained how he developed his pre-employment assessment tool based off of the issues communicated to him by employer partners who had hired his clients. Several participants also made it clear that, whether through a formal assessment or based on their understanding of the client's readiness, some clients desired jobs that were unrealistic or for which they were simply too ill-equipped (e.g., lacking the relevant skills and/or experience; unprepared for conflict in a work setting) to move on to employment (Erick; Jose; LaQuay; Petra). Despite a client's stated level of readiness, honesty and bluntness was often required when it came to a client's vision of a career, as shared by Jose, who preferred "taking a very realistic approach to employment-focused interventions. . . . We're not talking about right or wrong. We're talking about what is a realistic approach." Raahsaan described these moments as "come-to-Jesus" conversations that pushed clients to honestly answer the question: "Can you do the job?" Importantly, the participants made it clear that ongoing services were available for clients to develop themselves to the point they were job ready.

A final thought related to job placement came from two of the participants and was worth including as a sort of conceptual footnote. Both LaQuay and Jose expressed their belief that job placement did not act as a "turning point" for gang desistance (this reflected the debate within gang desistance research regarding whether or not employment was a turning point [Rice, 2015; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2012; Willman & Snortum, 1982]). While they both believed it could act as an essential stage of the process, LaQuay and Jose viewed—in some instances—employment more as a realization of the desistance process than a turning point (though they agreed on the belief that the desistance process was an ongoing one.)

Maintaining the Job

Job placement could certainly be a critical part of the desistance process and mark a significant moment for the desisting individual. But all the work and dedication from both the desisting individual and the service provider in building toward that employment meant nothing if the job could not be maintained ("anyone can get a job—but keeping it is more important" [Raahsaan]).

Self-efficacy. Obtaining employment meant that the client had left the organizational setting with its services, programs, staff, and other supportive components (though that did not mean that ongoing forms of support were not available.) The bulk of the responsibility to maintain the job then rested squarely on the shoulders of the desisting individual. Therefore, it was paramount that the individual possessed the skills of self-efficacy and self-management to maintain and grow into this new identity. The building of this efficacy had been an integral presence throughout the desistance process and, following job placement, was where its effects were often most pronounced.

Carmen stated that maintaining and continuing to grow one's sense of efficacy "improves job maintenance," especially when it reached the point of becoming a habit and allowed one to deal with the triggers, setbacks, and other challenges common to the desistance process (Gålnander, 2020; Rocque, 2017). She encouraged her clients to develop dedicated self-care practices to assist in working through whatever challenges they may face. An interesting thought regarding these challenges and setbacks came from LaQuay:

> This is going to sound kinda contradictory, but I honestly think one of the best tools for an individual to maintain a job is to lose a job at least once. I just think that a lot of times

> we don't think things are real until it's real. . . . You like this job. Lose the job, or lose the money, or lose the connections with the support and resource, because they're going to be some additional consequence other than just losing that job. They're gonna be natural consequences. Not something that I'm imposing on them, or something else. And I think that kind of builds that that drive a little bit more, that motivation to really work. And how do I work to keep this this next job and be able to maintain that job?

While this could be valuable, Gonzalo cautioned that losing a job also had the potential of sending the client "back to zero."

What made desisting gang members unique—and especially if their self-efficacy and identity desistance had been effectively realized—was the possession of certain skills that were valuable to an employer (Deane et al., 2007). Both Dustin and Ezra described their clients as endowed with "grit." Dustin went on to explain that "they perform exceptionally well [compared to] other staff" for the companies who hired them (due, in part, to the "competitive nature" and leadership skills many developed during their gang involvement [Dustin].) Erick said his clients often possessed a "workhorse" quality when it came to employment. Having experienced and survived the traumatic and lethal world of gangs (and, for most, incarceration), as well as the strength to begin and adhere to their desistance process, former gang members often possessed a level of toughness, resilience, loyalty, and respect (as long as it was earned) uncommon to most. Many of the participants noted these qualities of former gang members and believed they were valuable traits for the workplace.

Post-hire support. Dustin shared the following statement regarding post-hiring support for former clients: "RiseUp wants that lifetime engagement." Every organization—including the agencies for which Erick and Jose worked—offered post-hire support for their clients. Andrew explained the importance of this, highlighting what a "massive transition" it could be for clients to leave RiseUp Industries and join a new workplace. Knowing that challenges would arise—especially in the initial period of employment—participants described both formal and informal supports available to their clients.

Homeboy Industries' Retention Program was a structured practice that involved check-ins with their former clients after their first day of employment, again after the first week, and then followed by monthly check-ins thereafter to offer any ongoing individual or logistical support that may be needed (e.g., childcare; transportation; work materials) (Yalonda). RiseUp Industries eased the impact of this transition through a process wherein the client worked part-time for an initial period before moving to full-time (Andrew). This was in conjunction with consistent weekly check-ins with their former case manager to offer "positive reinforcement, critical feedback, and support" (Wendy). LaQuay described Chicago CRED's post-hire support as "detailed" and most commonly used to address personal needs of the clients. Jose described a practice at an organization where he worked after Homeboy Industries (The Meaney Foundation) wherein they provided a life coach for the first 90 days of a client's new job to ease the transition and offer supports related to work and life issues.

Post-hire group-based services could also be helpful. 2nd Call hosted a weekly "Employment Life Skills" group in the basement of a church in South Central Los Angeles that was facilitated by "Big John" (a former union representative). This weekly meeting was attended

by individuals seeking work as well as former 2nd Call clients who had transitioned into employment. I had the opportunity to observe one of these meetings, and, expecting it to be attended by out of work individuals or those seeking employment, was surprised to find that many of the attendees were gainfully employed. The issues and emotions expressed in that safe and supportive setting created by Big John exemplified the need for support even for those with jobs.

The qualities of loyalty and respect were included earlier when describing the attributes that many gang members possess. These qualities could display themselves through the more informal forms of post-hire support—namely the availability for clients to reach out to their former service providers. This common practice was described by Dustin at the close of his interview when he said: "Members may leave but they often come back." But these reach outs were not only to seek support for work-related issues and personal needs. More often, they were simply updates from the client about their new job, usually with a positive connotation such as the skills they were learning, the new coworkers they were engaging with, or the ways in which they were spending their enlarged paychecks (Andrew; Erick). Erick described how his clients often returned to "show off" their new work uniforms and equipment, and, most poignantly, to thank him for his support (this "thank you" also offered the quality of "recharging" the service provider [Dustin].)

It could be an instinctive practice for many service providers, but intentional and consistent post-hire support could re-emphasize the qualities of trust and compassion that the service providers and organizations built with their clients during their desistance process. Lack of ongoing support could be construed as an undermining or falsification of these qualities and

had the potential to act as a trigger for the clients—even after they had moved on to outside employment—that could disrupt their efforts toward effective desistance.

Working With the Employer

It's as much about the employer as the employee. (Yalonda)

Clients were not the only entities that benefited from ongoing support. While most of the participants focused on the client when speaking of post-hire services, employers also required continued engagement with the service provider. There were several reasons for this support. First, employers could often feel that—whether true or not—"they are taking a risk" by hiring a former gang member (Andrew; Erick). Much of this fear was based on their lack of knowledge about gang culture and the stigmatization of gang members in media and society in general. Erick provided a good description of this fear and how he explained it to his clients before starting a job with a new employer:

> You gotta understand, that when you work in the mainstream, [the employer] might turn on the TV and maybe put on the news. And then we see the guy that you send me who looks just like [a gang member on TV]. And the news, all they give us is the negative. So, when [the employer] sees these guys coming, and just saw one just like him [who] did something bad in the news, [the employer is] already on alert . . . already thinking "I might have to…. call 9-1-1." . . . They see everything in reality—black and white, good or bad. "Is this guy a bad guy? He looks like a bad guy."

Despite this fear, Andrew added that, for the most part, RiseUp Industries' clients performed exceptionally well at their jobs and that their success "gets rid of stigma" and, more importantly, "opens doors for others."

But the opposite was also a point of discussion. Participants described the challenges that arose when a client did not perform well with their new employer (Jose; Erick). Issues such as resistance to authority, self-sabotage (e.g., unprofessionalism; not showing up to work; conflict with coworkers), and romantic partners or former homies showing up to the workplace and creating problems were mentioned by participants (Erick; Jose; Raahsaan). These issues required an effective response by the service provider to "put out the fire" and maintain the relationship with the employer (Erick).

As essential as it was to build up the client before they are placed in a new job, many of the issues for the employer could be reduced with work prior to their hiring of the client. Participants shared different practices they used for this employer preparation component of the work. LaQuay was developing a training program for current and prospective employers with the objective of informing them about "the consequences of this work," developing best practices for working with formerly gang-involved individuals, and creating a work climate and management approaches that were "assertive and empathetic and hold accountability" (LaQuay). Yalonda viewed her work with employers as a "collaboration" and provided a description of the work she did with them prior to hiring a client:

> It starts with a conversation about the communities and . . . sort of informing the employer of—I guess, making them trauma-informed. So, look at who we really are aside from just that criminal label, or what happened right? Allowing them a peek into the actual person . . . where they're trying to go as opposed to where they've been. And it comes with—a lot of times—the employers hav[ing] that commitment also to make our formerly incarcerated, or former game members, a useful part of society. . . . They want

to reach this community and get them back into the workforce. So, it's really a collaboration between that employer and Homeboy.

An additional benefit of this pre-hire work with employers and engaging them in the process was the creation of a "warm hand-off" method for the clients. When the employer had engaged with staff and clients at the organizational site, become familiar with gang culture and the needs of desisting gang members, and was committed to the criticality of employment for desisting individuals (and even their communities), a level of trust and respect developed between the client and employer (Deane et al., 2007). Instead of sending a client off to some job where neither they nor the employer had prior contact, the warm hand-off helped to ease that transition and improve the outcomes for both (LaQuay). The value of employers and their impact within employment-focused desistance work could be critical and making them a part of the process could ensure a sustained and effective partnership.

Discussion of this study's findings thus far had addressed the desisting individual as well as the needed interventions and other supports to help facilitate their desistance process. The final research question explored the third component of this process—the service providers and organizations serving those individuals desisting from gang involvement.

Characteristics of Service Providers and Organizations Best Suited to Support Employment-Focused Gang Desistance

> *The foundation of my success lays in the heart of Rise[Up]. This company restores former gang members' lives, including mine. . . . RiseUp Industries is my compass to do what's right. Do I fall short sometimes? Heck yes, but I continue to try and do better every day. We are a community of kinship on this journey, together.* (Garcia et al., 2018, p. 53)

Gang desistance literature (Krohn & Lane, 2015; Lee, 2016; Martinez et al., 2014; Pacheco, 2019) and interview participants frequently mentioned the lack of resources available for desisting gang members (Carmen; Erick; LaQuay; Mariana; Petra). Additionally, the inability to provide truly effective services (Medina et al., 2012; Decker, 2002)—as "not all non-profits can deal with the gang population" (Erick)— "can set the client up for failure" (Mariana). The organizations who took part in this study represented models that provided proven and innovative approaches in support of individuals desisting from gang involvement.

The quality and effectiveness of service providers and organizations involved in the work of gang desistance were critical to their clients' ultimate success in extricating themselves from gang involvement. As these attributes were noticeably absent within gang desistance research, it felt important to present this study's findings related to these qualities to offer current or prospective providers and organizations an inventory of the needed elements that could enhance their gang desistance work.

The Service Provider

Our goal is to make sure . . . that a group of dedicated professionals are holding the trainee in a safe space as they move their lives forward. (Homeboy Industries, n.d.c, Case Management section, para. 4)

We're just the linkages and support system. . . . Their own mindset for being ready comes from within them. (Erick)

One interesting theme that emerged through the analyzation of the data for this study was that of the many elements shared between gang desisting individuals and their service providers. These shared qualities included self-awareness, accountability, forward-thinking, resilience,

communication, honesty, and learning. The following sections explored several of these shared elements along with those distinct to service providers in the work of gang desistance and why they offered effective supports to their clients working toward employment and reintegration to society.

Compassion. Dustin stated the following regarding the importance of approaching and working with clients compassionately:

> That's why I think it's so important doing this, that it has to be true, "true" meaning that it has to be from the heart. There's no other way to do this. . . . It can't just be "check box—you did this class; you did that class. You're good." . . . There has to be that compassion because . . . that's where the individual goes—that's where they get the confidence to go, "I'm strong enough to keep going."

Gonzalo shared a similar thought on compassion within service delivery: "That could be a big game changer because they feel like this guy cares about me . . . and he cares without wanting something from me." Yalonda believed the following about most gang members:

> [Most gang members] are just living in fear, just looking for love, right? So . . . offer them a job where they can go to work every day and put their mind on learning something new and trying to do something better . . . to stay engaged in the right thing.

She went on to state that, as a service provider, she had "to see the shared parts as human beings" to best support their desistance efforts. The idea of approaching the work of gang desistance with a sense of compassion was a consistent theme throughout the interviews and across the organizations. This approach was described in different ways—"love" (LaQuay), "kinship" (Boyle, 2017; Homeboy Industries, n.d.d; RiseUp Industries, n.d.b), "heart" (Dustin, Sherman,

Yalonda), "empathy (Wendy)"—but all spoke to the impact this could offer someone coming from the gang life. Sherman described how "we don't give hugs in gang culture—at CRED it was a family." Participants emphasized the value of offering their clients a sense of family and community when they arrived.

Throughout Homeboy Industries' website, literature, and even merchandise, the word "kinship" appeared constantly. The Homeboy Industries webpage for donors (titled, appropriately, "Kinship Circle"), centered the following quote from Fr. Greg Boyle's book *Barking to the Choir* (2011):

> The measure of our compassion with what Martin Luther King calls "the last, the least, and the lost" lies less in our service of those on the margins, and more in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them. It speaks of a kinship so mutually rich that even the dividing line of service provider/service recipient is erased. (p. 165)

Previous to arriving at 2nd Call, Carmen described how "I wanted to be heard. I wanted to be loved. I had the sense [of wanting] to belong to something." 2nd Call—like all of the organizations in this study—worked to offer that sense of belonging that Carmen and other participants sought for themselves at the start of their desistance processes and that they went on to provide for their clients. LaQuay said that "at CRED you get the love" since they may not have been receiving it at home. Wendy (RiseUp Industries) approached her clients with "compassion and empathy" and made it clear to them that "I will listen to you." Andrew, also at RiseUp, said, "You have to feel their hearts."

Compassion could be more than just a hug or an open ear. When Wendy's approach conveyed that she "will listen to you," it was not only to show an appreciation for the person, but

also to build trust. This, in turn, built her clients engagement with services and programs, encouraged them to treat others compassionately, and helped to maintain their commitment to desistance (or "the confidence to maintain" their desistance [Dustin]). Raahsaan said that at "Chicago CRED, relationship-building is key." A previous section shared an anecdote from Gonzalo describing a trainee at Homeboy Industries who responded to a triggering situation involving another trainee with restraint. Gonzalo explained his belief that, having dealt with the trainee in a compassionate manner during earlier challenging moments (when he justifiably could have reprimanded or penalized the client in some way), this trainee embodied and applied that quality to his own interactions with others. This example showed how a compassionate approach not only built trust and engagement with the client, but also offered them applicable tools for their own life and forward movement in their desistance.

Honesty and accountability. Regarding the importance of approaching clients honestly and realistically, Dustin at RiseUp Industries stated:

> I tell my guys all the time when they start. I tell them . . . "I'll be frank. I don't give a shit what you did in your past. I really don't. . . . All I care about is what you are going forward. . . . We do care about you and we're going to hold you accountable." . . . When I first started this, I thought, "Man, the accountability issue is going to be tough when you're dealing with . . . former gang member[s]." . . . But in reality . . . they want to be held accountable because they want to know what right is.

The value of this approach was echoed by Petra at 2nd Call: "When you want to do something different—because what you're doing is not working for you—then come on back. We're here when you're ready."

When working with gang desisting clients, an equally important theme to compassion was the need to work and communicate with clients honestly and realistically—or, as Erick shared, by "keeping it real." Both compassion and honesty built trust and were applied throughout the client's engagement in services (and beyond). Their combined approach offered an impactful balance for the service provision. Dustin described his approach to working with clients as a combination of "love" and "be[ing] honest with them."

Being honest and realistic with a client applied to different elements of the desistance process and service provision. Erick explained how his utilization of an—often bluntly—honest and realistic approach with clients acted as a sort of word-of-mouth hook for other desisting gang members to seek out his services—often due to their respect for his straightforward approach. Dustin's combined approach of love and honesty was a tool for building accountability between he and his clients—and within the clients themselves. Petra established honest communication with a client early on in order to gauge their readiness and commitment toward desisting. Similarly, Jose believed that being honest was critical (especially, he noted, in working with youth and young adult clients) to their ultimate success as it offered the development of a "realistic pathway" forward.

Raahsaan, Mariana and Petra all practiced honesty by sharing their own stories so that the realities of desistance—with its challenges, needs, and different stages (i.e., "the big picture" [Gonzalo])—were clearly understood by their clients. Ezra, who, as a Life Coach at Chicago CRED was equally open with clients about his own desistance journey, believed that, if he and other providers were not genuine in their approach and communication, "[the clients] will disengage." Alternately, several of the participants without lived experience also stated that

being honest about their lack of first-hand experience was respected by clients and strengthened the relationship. Both LaQuay and Wendy (who both possessed secondhand experience of gang desistance through intimate partners but had not desisted themselves) addressed this lack of experience by asking clients questions to learn about gangs and gang culture—a strategy that also built the clients' sense of recognition (and, consequently, belonging).

Offering an honest and realistic approach applied both to the clients and employers. Jose believed that being realistic about the pushes and pulls his clients were experiencing as gang members (i.e., "what we're up against"[Jose])—which could be difficult to see when they were engaged in services and appeared to be doing well—helped to develop interventions to truly help them move forward. Gonzalo utilized a realistic approach with his clients when developing a pathway toward employment. Erick also described his approach in this way, with the added element of "being respectful" as a realistic understanding of the types of jobs for which they were qualified and the methods to obtain those jobs may not have matched with the client's vision and could set them up for failure.

Dustin, Erick, Jose, LaQuay, Raahsaan, and Yalonda all described the necessity of being honest with employers about the reality of working with individuals who had been gang involved as "employers need to know the consequences of this work" (LaQuay). Often, employers would reach out to offer job opportunities to organizations after learning about gang desistance efforts and organizations involved in the work (Yalonda). Dustin, Erick and Yalonda believed that employers often possessed a stigmatized view of gang members—despite an expressed commitment to the desister's rehabilitation—that negatively impacted the client's ability to successfully integrate into their new workplace. Throughout her pre-hiring work with employers,

Yalonda's objective was to "make them trauma-informed" so that they could "see the person" and understand the realities and ongoing challenges that desisting gang members had to manage. Raahsaan described this as teaching the employer "how to navigate" these realities for the client's ultimate success in their employment and desistance process. A final critical need for developing an honest, realistic understanding of gangs for employers related to the fact that a failed hiring can affect both the client's continued commitment to desistance as well as the continuation of the relationship with the employer. When that relationship was damaged, as Erick, says, "everyone loses."

Wearing different hats. Throughout the interviews, participants consistently noted the number of different responsibilities that were required beyond their job titles. Whether stated directly or emerging from descriptions of their various duties, the realities of providing services within gang desistance work required providers to be flexible and expand their capacity. Andrew, as the Machine Shop Supervisor at RiseUp Industries, was primarily expected to assist his clients in developing their technical capabilities in working with CNC machines (as well as maintaining the machines). But, as Andrew quickly found out, he often needed to "walk with them" in addressing daily and life issues, sometimes requiring him to push and challenge them to work through these issues and stay focused on positivity and transformation ("you're better than this" [Andrew]). Sherman—who provided maybe the briefest description of his responsibilities of all the participants ("I help guys with gaining and sustaining employment")—went on to describe his other responsibilities which included: working through daily life issues; engaging with clients and prospective clients out in the streets; developing soft and hard skills; and connecting clients with resources to address life issues such as substance abuse and mental health

counseling. Wendy said that, outside of her role as a case manager, “I wear so many hats.” Carmen similarly described her role as including “a little bit of everything.”

Desisting gang members can present an incredibly diverse spectrum of experiences, traumas, needs, and skills (Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Pacheco, 2019; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Rocque, 2017; Tonks & Stephenson, 2019) and those working to support their desistance should develop the capacity to be similarly diverse in their service provision (including participating in the occasional research interview.)

Participants frequently described the challenge of managing these diverse responsibilities and referred either directly or indirectly to the emotional toll that it inflicted on them. This was the unavoidable reality of working with clients coming from gang involvement. But, as this chapter opened with a discussion of the criticality of gang desistance work, the work could be incredibly impactful for the desisting individuals, their families and communities. So, while often challenging and difficult, every single participant described the feelings of joy, motivation, and continued recommitment that serving their clients provided for them and their own ability to keep moving forward in the work (and within their own desistance journey for those formerly gang-involved participants).

Conclusion. The preceding three qualities that increased the service providers effectiveness in the work of gang desistance were those most frequently identified through the data analyzation process (though, it must be noted, the qualities of service providers was a topic rarely—if ever—addressed in the literature—save for that of cultural competency regarding gang culture and involvement [Medina et al., 2012; Peterson & Howell, 2013]). Yet, by no means were they the only qualities mentioned. Additional qualities shared by participants included the

following: being nonjudgmental; consistency in their service delivery; seeking ways to relate to clients (especially for providers without lived experience of gang desistance); solutions-based services; self-care practices; engaging with humility; and learning from their clients in order to offer more impactful support. Like the "wearing of many hats," the qualities that could make a service provider effective were numerous and varied. In the end, just how Raahsaan described that service delivery required "different strokes for different folks," service providers should similarly work to identify those unique personal traits and skills they possessed that could make their support of the client most effective.

The Organization

The final findings from the research focused on the organizations themselves and what made their efforts effective within the work of gang desistance. The creation of social enterprises, employment of staff with an emphasis on those with lived experience of desistance, and services designed specifically for active and desisting gang members were all organizational elements that distinguished these organizations from many others involved in the work of gang desistance. Following were additional components that supported these organization's efforts and the success of their clients.

Organizational culture. The importance of organizational culture for effective service delivery was exemplified in this quote from RiseUp Industries (n.d.b):

> Our work environment develops opportunities for team building and community among our members. Good, solid work ethics (learned, practiced, evaluated and ingrained) play a critical role in obtaining and maintaining employment following the program. The

> senior members have an opportunity to teach these work ethics to the newer members that they peer mentor. (How We Change Lives section, p. 2)

Erick echoed this belief when he stated:

> It's a big deal in this culture when they find someone or individuals who make them feel safe to the point where they can share and you have the best interests for them—regardless of what they share with you.

Content available on the four organization's websites and within the collected organizational literature provided descriptions of the type of culture the four organizations directly involved in this study—2nd Call, Chicago CRED, Homeboy Industries, and RiseUp Industries—created to best engage their gang desisting clients. Homeboy Industries was the oldest of the four organizations and one that had been at the forefront of gang desistance work since its inception in 1988 (as well as having been a model that both CRED and RiseUp Industries looked to when developing their own unique programming and services). The following was included on the "Our Mission" page of Homeboy Industries' website:

> Homeboy Industries provides hope, training, and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated people, allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of our community. . . . They are welcomed into a community of mutual kinship, love, and a wide variety of services. (Homeboy Industries, n.d.e, Our Mission section, para. 1)

This quote was illustrative of the language that defined these organizations and their cultures. Terms such as "kinship," "community," "empower," and "hope" populated descriptions of the organizations, as well as their programs and services.

Research participants working at these four organizations provided further descriptions of the qualities and culture their respective organizations offered that spoke to the holistic, compassionate approach and services the clients received. These descriptive qualities included: a sense of "belonging" (Petra [2nd Call]; Sherman [Chicago CRED]); a "family" (Dustin [RiseUp Industries]; Raahsaan [Chicago CRED]; Petra [2nd Call]; Gonzalo [Homeboy Industries]); "healing" (Carmen [2nd Call]); "hope has an address" (Mariana [Homeboy Industries]); a "whole team embrace" (Gonzalo [Homeboy Industries]); and "the whole person" (Yalonda [Homeboy Industries]). Certainly, these descriptions can be applied—and often are—to any organization wanting to attract clients through promotion of a supportive, caring setting. The natural and sincere manner in which they were expressed by participants, though, struck this listener as authentic and spoke to their guiding and defining quality for the organizations.

What also separated these organizations from others who employed the language as a type of "hook"—and was intentionally included in the descriptions provided by the four organizations—was the accompanying culture of effectiveness. Gang culture could be reliant on the "word-of-mouth" form of information sharing (Erick) and the fact that "each year over 10,000 former gang members . . . come through Homeboy Industries' doors in an effort to make a positive change" (Homeboy Industries, n.d.e, Our Mission section, para. 3) spoke to this effectiveness. To illustrate the importance of this continued engagement with gang members, Ezra stated that gang members would "disengage" if they perceived that the organization or service providers were not genuine and would, as described, spread that perception amongst their fellow gang members.

Another important element of these organizations' effectiveness was the employment of former gang members and program participants. 2nd Call, Chicago CRED and Homeboy Industries each employed former participants and individuals who had desisted from gang involvement within leadership and decision-making positions such as supervisors, managers and directors. LaQuay described the importance of centering those with lived experience in an organization as a motivator for desisting clients who, in seeing examples of successful desistance, were more motivated to continue on their own desistance journey.

The combination of these factors—a welcoming environment, effective programs and services, and staff with the lived experience of desistance—could provide a template for keeping an organization's doors open and, most importantly, the continued success of its clients.

Organizational evolution. Chicago CRED (2023) stated: "We have evolved by carefully listening to our participants, walking with them and learning from them" (p. 10). Another indicator of effectiveness was an organization's willingness to evolve their services, service provision and programming (Gebo, 2018; Decker, 2002). Participants from each organization noted a culture of willingness to evolve in order to best serve their clients. This evolution was described in different forms. RiseUp Industries—the one organization that did not currently employ staff with firsthand experience of desistance (though some staff had family members who had desisted)—was working to begin hiring individuals with this background (Dustin), as well as looking to enroll female (all current clients are male) and younger clients (current clients are all over the age of 30) (Dustin). Participants at Homeboy Industries described efforts to develop an alumni network of former participants to support current participants (Yalonda) as well as the creation of a mentorship program similar to RiseUp Industries' where clients were

paired with mentors who do not possess the experience of gang involvement (Gonzalo). 2nd Call had branched out from its original location in the Crenshaw area of Los Angeles to open service sites and offices in Pasadena (north of Los Angeles), Pomona (east of Los Angeles) and Atlanta, Georgia. 2nd Call was also developing an internship program in partnership with the University of Southern California to provide experience to people interested in working with gang and prison populations. Chicago CRED participants (as the opening quote made clear) described an organizational culture of "learning from participants" to best meet their needs (Chicago CRED, 2023). Chicago CRED was currently developing a training for prospective employment partners to better educate them on how to support the hiring and ongoing development of clients at their businesses (LaQuay). Additionally, CRED was working to establish a national network of leaders and organizations in the field of gang desistance to develop and generalize best practices (Chicago CRED, 2023). They were also expanding into more of Chicago's communities in need of community-based models and resources to address gang violence.

Carmen, Gonzalo, and Erick each described the ever-changing dynamics of gangs and the importance of developing or evolving services and other interventions to be culturally competent and impactful through their service provision. The breakdown of traditional gang structures and practices, the growing influence of social media, and the rising rates of violence during the COVID pandemic were examples of these changing dynamics and the criticality of staying abreast of them. As these organizations' presence and their evidence of effectiveness gained more attention, local, state and federal entities were becoming increasingly open to alternative forms of addressing gang violence (Jose). The example of these organizations' willingness and ability to evolve could act as a model to other entities stepping into the work.

Advocacy. 2nd Call's (2019) brochure stated: "Our organization assists individuals who have felt disenfranchised and hopeless" (para 3). The advocacy-related language offered by the organizations spoke to the necessity of this element within their approach to gang desistance work. In her book titled *Father G and the Homeboys*, author Celeste Fremon (2008) described multiple examples of both law enforcement personnel and community members attempting to intimidate and even threaten Father Greg Boyle and other Homeboy Industries staff members for their work with gang members. Only in recent years have city, state and federal entities begun to express interest in or implement non-punitive, community-based efforts toward addressing gang violence (most commonly due to their more "cost-effective" models) (Jose).

Regardless of the growing interest in this approach, the stigmatization and oppression of gang members and those who served them was still very active. Many participants spoke to these challenges, either specifically describing them or offering them through critiques of government, media, and society. The presence of this antagonism and criticism toward gang desistance work was reflected in the decidedly social justice-based language included in the organizations' websites and available programmatic literature. 2nd Call's brochure (2019) explained how they serve "high risk individuals, proven offenders, ex-felons, parolees and others who society disregards" (para. 1). Chicago CRED described their work of "addressing the bigger picture and working to change systems to better serve communities suffering from the toll of gun violence" (Chicago CRED, n.d.a, A Holistic Approach section, para. 16). Homeboy Industries' website expressed a similar belief, describing that, when it was founded in 1988, "Law enforcement tactics of suppression and criminal justice policies of mass incarceration were the prevailing means to deal with gang violence" (Homeboy Industries, n.d.a, About Us section, para. 5) and

how Homeboy Industries "stands to change the way the world views, judges and treats the most marginalized and demonized among us—the formerly incarcerated and gang involved" (Homeboy Industries, n.d.b, Advocacy section, para. 1). RiseUp Industries' website described the critical need for their type of programming: "Previously incarcerated, formerly gang involved individuals face numerous barriers to successful reentry, especially employment. This pushes many back into criminality and perpetuates the cycle of recidivism" (RiseUp Industries, n.d.b, History section, para. 3)

Jose and Erick—who both worked for entities outside of the four that participated in this study—were similarly involved in advocacy for a different approach in addressing gang violence and desistance. At the time of the study, Jose was employed as the "Director of External Affairs" (as well as the "Justice Housing Coordinator") for Brilliant Corners based in downtown Los Angeles. Part of his role included working with governmental entities to develop and implement alternative efforts to address gang violence, incarceration, and recidivism. In his role with the LA County Probation Department, Erick successfully worked with other county departments to revise their hiring policies in order to offer employment opportunities for his formerly gang-involved and incarcerated clients who were previously unable to access county positions due to their criminal background records.

Though their focus was on the individual clients and the communities from which their clients come, the organizations and participants involved in this study were aware of the tenuous nature of support for the holistic and compassionate efforts they provided to gang desisting individuals. To strengthen the support for this alternative response to the impacts of gangs on individuals, communities and society, moving beyond the organizational walls and into the

sphere of policy and advocacy can be critical to the survival and expansion of effective gang desistance work.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings from the various study instruments utilized for this study (interviews, document analysis, and nonparticipant observation) with an intentional centering of the voices of the 14 individuals who elected to participate in the research. I have had the great privilege of working with and learning from several of them prior to this study and was deeply appreciative of the opportunity to reengage with them. All 14 participants displayed a remarkable commitment to the work of gang desistance and an even deeper commitment to the well-being and success of the clients and communities they serve.

Importantly for this study, the knowledge and experience they shared regarding what is effective within employment-focused service provision for desisting gang members was drawn from their firsthand experience as service providers, and, for 8 of the 14 participants, personal experience with the desistance process. The traditional progression of research can lend the review of topical literature a quality of supremacy with which the research hopes to line up for purposes of validation. While this turned out to be the case for much of the data that was collected, the—often brutally—honest and straightforward sharing by the participants carried with it a profoundly inarguable realism that both enlightened and humbled my own understanding of gang desistance work. Hopefully it offered the same effect to academics and other service providers engaged in the study and work of gang desistance.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Through a review of relevant literature, development of research methods, and collection of data, this study sought to understand the process of desisting from gang involvement and identify effective interventions to support those individuals engaged in the desistance process. This final chapter presents a discussion of the study's findings.

Discussion of Findings

The professionalism and openness of the participants during their interviews—as well as the information collected through document analysis, much of which had evolved since my experience with the organizations—provided rich insight into what makes employment-focused gang desistance services and programming effective. The reasons for this effectiveness will be discussed in the following sections which, similar to Chapter 4, are structured upon this study's guiding research questions:

- What are the common elements and stages of the gang desistance process?
- What types of employment-related interventions (services, programs, supports) are most effective for facilitating an individual's desistance from gang involvement?
- What service provider and organizational characteristics are best suited to support the facilitation of employment-focused gang desistance?

The first section of Chapter 5 discusses the foundational elements of gang desistance—the desisting individual and their unique desistance process. The second section looks at why the interventions identified in this study are effective, with a focused discussion on the client as an employee and the employer who hires them. The final section shifts its focus to the service

providers and organizations themselves involved in the work of employment-based gang desistance and what makes their efforts impactful—both through engaging desisting clients in services and maintaining the clients' commitment to the desistance process. The chapter then closes with discussions upon the significance of this study's findings, the limitations of this study, and identification of areas for future gang desistance research.

Common Elements of the Gang Desistance Process

The review of gang desistance research and literature identified a number of emergent themes related both to the elements and individual traits needed for gang desistance, as well as a breakdown of the gang desistance process itself. Themes identified for these two areas through the data collection (semi-structured interviews, document analysis, nonparticipant observation) not only corroborated the themes from the literature review, but also expanded them. The following two sections discuss these findings.

The Desisting Individual

First and foremost, the person who begins the desistance process has already initiated a process of identity desistance—which, in a gang context, involves an awareness of the self as an individual separate from their gang. Within the many examples of turning points that were identified both within gang desistance literature and the research for this study, all could be said to possess this quality of individualizing the desister. These turning points included maturation (recognition they no longer possess the desire or energy to gang bang; tired of the violence and trauma incurred through gang involvement [Bersani & Doherty, 2018; Carson & Vecchio, 2015; Chalas & Grekul, 2017]); incarceration (not wanting to go back to prison as a result of gang involvement [Carson et al., 2013]); children, family and intimate partners (desire to break the

cycle; prosocial influence of an intimate partner or family member; missing life events due to incarceration [Bersani & Schellen, 2014; Decker et al., 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011]); capacity for violence and trauma (seeing a homie shot and/or killed; recognizing they are not a violent person [Decker & Lauritsen, 2002; Tonks & Stephenson, 2019; Vigil, 1988]); spirituality (finding a higher purpose; finding a new sense of belonging [DiPietro & Dickinson, 2021; Johnson, 2014]); and employment (developing a sense of value through work; prosocial influence of co-workers and workplace culture; legal means of income [Hagedorn, 1998; Kelly & Ward, 2020]). In each of these turning points, the individual was seeking some form of a new identity that was separate—and more meaningful or beneficial—from that of a gang member.

Personal characteristics helped both to prompt identity desistance and push the desisting individual to seek a new life. Some of these characteristics could be identified, instilled or developed through the support of service providers or prosocial influences such as mentors, family members, and even homies. But inherent characteristics—identified more numerously through the interviews than the literature review (those characteristics noted within the literature are cited)—such as leadership, resilience (Albert, 2007), hope (Weaver, 2016), toughness or grit (Deane et al., 2007), and intelligence (most prevalently as it related to self-awareness) were frequently described by interview participants as being of value for desistance.

Two individual elements mentioned by numerous interview participants and present within the analyzed documents were their possessing the senses of "fear" (Fox, 2013) and "the need to belong" (Dong & Krohn, 2016; Johnson, 2007). These two elements, while not exactly "traits," were interesting as they applied both as reasons people initially joined a gang as well as the reasons they eventually desired desistance from that gang. It is important to note that these

elements of fear and a need to belong were not just instinctive reactions to the gang life but indicated an awareness of the self. Several participants referred to these elements as requiring "courage" or "bravery"—not just for the safety from retaliation from their gang, but for their willingness to even acknowledge these "feelings" (a commonly taboo acknowledgment within gang culture [Ezra]).

Desisting from one's gang is certainly a courageous act. While more frequently mentioned in the literature review, their physical safety—and even, in some cases, the safety of their family and loved ones—could be a concern (Greenberg, 2007; Rice, 2015). But, more essentially, the courage lied in the desisting gang member's willingness to engage with those qualities that were so thoroughly discouraged in gang culture. This courage was also required as the desisting individual may have been separating from the only substantive community they may had known and one that included their homies, friends and even family (this also spoke to critical importance of prosocial bonding development and integration into new communities).

The impact of those desistance prompts and turning points, inherent characteristics, and self-awareness (and openness to what emerges from that self-awareness) could mean nothing, though, if the individual did not possess the self-efficacy to disengage and begin the desistance process. The development of this trait should be a main objective of the services and programming with which the desister will (hopefully) engage to build their self-efficacy and thereby strengthen their commitment to the desistance process.

The Desistance Process

A gang member decides they want something different. The next question is: *So now what?* The literature (Harris, 2011; Martinez et al., 2014) and the interview participants

mentioned this question that all desisting gang members inevitably face. Due to lack of awareness about available forms of support, not only was this question difficult to answer, it also indicated the challenges and setbacks that many individuals experienced during their desistance process (Gålnander, 2020; Rocque, 2017). Participants described the many challenges they continued to face even years into their desistance process. Whether through working in the field of gang desistance with its inherent triggers or simply living their day-to-day lives, the residual effects and stigmatization of their gang involvement never fully disappeared.

These effects occurred both internally and externally. Internally, the desisting gang member may still have been drawn to the "addiction" of gang life with its stimulative highs and lows (addiction-related terminology was expressed frequently by the participants to describe gang involvement and desistance). They also struggled with the ongoing stigmatization of their gang involvement leading to a sense that they "do not belong" within their new setting (Bushway et al., 2011; Maruna, 2014; Rosen & Cruz, 2018); or they lacked the fortitude or hope to continue working toward their desistance and vision of a different life (Redner-Vera, 2011).

External factors created challenges as well. These factors included pressure from homies to abandon their desistance or intentionally disrupt the process; structural barriers such as background checks and other institutional stigmatizations; and the simple logistical challenge of financial resources to support themselves and their family, procure transportation and housing, or pay restitution and other court-related costs necessary for moving forward. Every participant who had desisted themselves described the ongoing battle with these challenges—a common challenge experienced by formerly gang-involved individuals despite having successfully desisted (Lee & Bubolz, 2020; Pyrooz, 2012; Rosen & Cruz, 2018). The ability to overcome

these challenges and maintain their desistance—whether through possession of efficacy or the willingness to seek out and accept forms of support—was noted as critical to a successful desistance process.

Desistance from gangs is most certainly a process. An argument existed within the reviewed gang desistance literature as to whether desistance was a process or a singular action ("knifing off") (Maruna & Roy, 2007). While a majority of researchers believed it to be a process, the data collected through the research for this study made it clear that desisting from gang involvement was a continual process over the life course that required constant maintenance and utilization of support mechanisms. The fact that the structured programs provided by the organizations involved in this study ranged from 12–18 months and offered ongoing support following program completion was indicative of gang desistance being a process and one involving different stages—each replete with relevant challenges and setbacks. Fortunately, if and when a setbacks occurred (which, for desisting gang members, was a common part of the desistance process [Gålnander, 2020; Rocque, 2017]—often due to "manifold social adjustment problems" resulting from their gang involvement [Wolff et al., 2020, p. 868)])—the four organizations' doors were always open (Petra) for continued support to maintain (or reengage in) the desistance process.

Most Effective Employment-Related Interventions for Gang Desistance

The emergence of similar themes identified through the literature review and the research (interviews, document analysis, nonparticipant observation) provided a mutual reinforcement of their importance and impact within the gang desistance process. This section explores those

themes related to the services, programs, and other supports that can help facilitate an individual's desistance process, with a focus on the role of employment.

Services, Programming and Supports

Many shared examples of services, programming and supports helpful to the desistance process emerged from the literature review and data collection. Examples of these included: targeted counseling (e.g., mental health, substance abuse) (Berger et al., 2020; Mallion & Wood, 2020); housing, transportation and clothing (especially for interviews and work) (Harris, 2011); education and vocational training (Bahn, 2011; Gebo, 2018; Huerta et. al., 2020); group-based work (such as anger management and Criminals and Gang Members Anonymous [CGA]) (Berger et al., 2017); and exposure to broader awareness of self and life such as hiking, sports, field trips, and employment industries (Berdychevsky et al., 2022; Decker, 2002). For example, according to Young and Gonzalez (2013), desistance could be supported by "introducing the individual to recreational, educational, and social" opportunities (p. 8). These could all be incredibly helpful and impactful for a desisting individual, but several forms of interventions emerged from the interviews as critical to supporting an individual toward successful desistance.

Both in the literature and data collection, continual emphasis was placed upon treating the desisting individual as a unique person with their own set of experiences, beliefs, and ideas for their future. This element was most frequently referred to as providing an "individualized approach" or, in action, "meeting them where they're at" (Greenberg, 2007; Young & Gonzalez, 2013). A guiding component of this study was the humanization of active and desisting gang members. It was notable that the research participants who did not possess lived experience of gang involvement and desistance often referred to their intentional efforts toward seeing

themselves within their clients (Andrew; Yalonda). The purpose of this approach was to learn how to best serve their clients and create an atmosphere and relationship in which the client was *seen.* Participants made constant reference to both prospective gang members' and prospective gang desisters' desire "to belong"—a desire that could be fulfilled by the prosocial engagement with services (Pacheco, 2019). Not only did an individualized approach to services engender this sense of belonging, it also built the desister's sense of themselves as a valued individual separate from the gang (their identity desistance) which in turn contributed to the building of their self-efficacy (Kelly & Ward, 2020).

The provision of wraparound services was critical to desistance as they served to further individualize the desister as well as engage the many different and unique personal components the individuals possessed. Researchers commonly referred to the need for a range of interventions and resources to support effective desistance (including employment) (La Vigne et al., 2008; Decker, 2002). Raahsaan said that "anyone can get a job, but maintaining that job is more important." In order to maintain that job, the availability of a range of services that furthered the identity desistance and strengthened the self-efficacy of the desisting individual (Kelly & Ward, 2020) was an approach whose effectiveness was evidenced by the fact that each of the organizations utilized it.

Finally, the presence of individuals who had desisted themselves and acted as life coaches, mentors and models to desisting clients could be critical to their clients' (or mentees') success. Through the literature review and interviews (and even videos on YouTube in which program participants at the four organizations described their experience receiving services [F.H. Paschen, 2018]), the importance of individuals with lived experience of gang involvement and

desistance within the service provision was stressed (Deane et. al., 2007; Venkatesh, 1999). For example, Harris (2011) wrote that "[gang desisting] clients frequently stated that having a peer-mentor was important to instigating and sustaining their cognitive transformation" (p. 79). Similarly, one Chicago CRED program participant featured in a YouTube video shared that engaging with others who had successfully desisted made their own desistance possible (F.H. Paschen, 2018).

Other influential factors of this peer-based presence included the ability to keep their clients accountable, development of prosocial bonds, and increased trust and engagement with services (Dong & Krohn, 2016). Even those research participants who had desisted themselves described how they continued to reach out to others who had desisted for support through personal and professional challenges and as motivation to continue their own desistance process. Additionally, several participants described the presence of peer-based staff as offering the organizations a cultural competence and validity that, in turn, acted as a source of recruitment for active gang members considering desistance. Peer-based staff had been a noted strategy in the literature, discussed by Deane et al. (2007), Decker (2002) (who stated that "meaningful gang crime prevention programs should recruit gang members to participate as staff and consultants" [p. 282]) and Rubenson et al. (2021).

Employment

The impact of employment on gang desistance was the foundation of this study and provided the qualification for the selection of the organizations and their staff members who participated in the research. The organizations' employment of those interview participants who possessed lived experience of gang desistance helped emphasize employment's value for those

currently desisting. An important element of employment as an intervention was how it was framed within the phenomenon of gang desistance, and research for this study showed that employment was most commonly the manifestation of the *process* of desistance (Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2012; Weaver, 2016) (the "employment" of clients in the organizations' social enterprises was more representative of a vocational training intervention as opposed to a career.)

But simply obtaining a job—whether individually or as part of service provision—was not all that was involved for employment's impact to be realized. As Greenberg (2007) stated: "Gang members face especially acute challenges when they return to the community. The majority have little or no work skills" (p. 7). While there were some transferrable skills developed within gang involvement such as loyalty, respect for rules, and supportive of (in this case) coworkers (Deane et al., 2007), the development of the client was essential. Also essential––and mentioned only once in the review of the literature—was the quality of the employers regarding their understanding of what the formerly gang-involved individual was bringing with them to the job (Deane et al., 2007) (or "their bag" [Erick]).

The employee. In order for a desisting individual to obtain a long-term, living wage career, it was critical that the organizations and service providers offered individualized employment-focused services, programming and interventions to best prepare their clients for realizing that goal (Bahn, 2011; Na et al., 2015; Pyrooz, 2012). Again, the fact that the organizations offered extended programming with the open-door return policy for clients who experienced setbacks on their desistance journey spoke to the necessarily process-oriented view of gang desistance. When these supports had effectively built the client's self-efficacy and

identity desistance—and the service providers felt the client was prepared to step outside the organization's walls—then this manifestation could take place.

Interview participants frequently shared stories of clients returning for visits after having moved on to a career. They also shared how these visits begin to taper off in frequency after time had passed and the former client grew more bonded to their new job. Successfully maintaining a career (even if that meant transitioning to different types of work or losing a job and seeking out another) could represent the final phase of the desistance process (Weaver, 2016). This was not to say that the desistance journey was complete. Every participant noted the ongoing challenges either they or their clients experienced following job placement, as did some literature, such as Lee and Bubolz (2020) who spoke of the "stigmas that former gang members experience and anticipate from . . . the general public (including employers)" (p. 65).

Employment that offered a living wage and a positive, prosocial work environment helped to resolve many of those reasons that a person joined a gang in the first place (Weaver, 2016)—especially lack of financial resources and seeking a sense of belonging (Alonso, 2004). Their sense of efficacy provided the motivation and capacity to overcome the daily (non-gang) issues that "normal" people experienced in their everyday lives as well as those triggers or pushes that had to be managed so as not to "fall back." Jose described how, through enrolling in Homeboy Industries' Solar Panel Installation training program—and his subsequent hiring as the director of the training program—he experienced a shift in identify from a gang member to that of a "tired student and father" and, eventually, a contributing member of his community. Jose's example brought to mind the description from Weaver (2016) of employment's impact on an individual through building their "self-concept and social identity" (p. 19), as well as harkening

to the theory of self-efficacy and it's development of "belief in one's ability to . . . remain crime free" (Bahr et al., 2010, p. 670).

My work within gang desistance service provision entailed those elements laid out in this study—personal and professional development, group and training facilitation, client assessments, engaging employers, job placement, and ongoing supportive services. Throughout the interviews and document analysis (especially the testimonial-styled literature [Garcia et al., 2018] and YouTube videos featuring current and former clients of the organizations [F.H. Paschen, 2018]), a constant phrase was *if it wasn't for [organizational name] I would be [lost, incarcerated, dead]*. I heard this over and over again from clients during my time at Homeboy Industries. While I was careful to acknowledge this belief in my clients who had moved on to outside careers (many would not stand for any diminishment of the organizations' or their staffs' paramountcy in the individual's transformation), I always stressed the importance of recognizing their own role—of "patting themselves on the back." This was because it was them—the *individual*—who made the decision to leave their gang, who stayed committed to the services and programs laid out for them, and who was actualizing that person they had dreamed of becoming. Employment offered these individuals a concrete objective for which to strive, the culmination of their efforts to stay on the desistance pathway, and a reliable influence to continue becoming that "possible self" described by Paternoster and Bushway (2009).

The employer. The employer could be as essential to the client's successful desistance as the service provider was prior to their employment. Plenty of programs existed who could quickly place clients in a job. Usually, these jobs were not career-based and offered a brief respite to the individual before the type of work (menial, back-breaking, meaningless,

undesirable locations or shifts), the work environment (antisocial, stigmatizing, lack of advancement opportunities), or the income from that job pushed the desisting individual to reengage with their gang (i.e., "they do more harm than good" [Medina et al., 2012; Decker, 2002]). Matching the client to the right type—or "fit"—of employment could be critical to maintaining one's commitment to the desistance process (Taliaferro & Pham, 2017). A service provider trying to identify employment opportunities for their clients could be tempted to take any available employment opportunity. Sending a client to a job for which they had no experience, was located far from their home (and in unfamiliar communities), offered less than living-wage income, or was situated in an unsupportive or stigmatizing environment could all act as disruptors to the desisting individual's commitment to the job and, consequently, their desistance process.

The most successful employment opportunities shared by the interview participants were within unions—especially labor unions. Unions tended to promote similar qualities as those in gangs—group loyalty, adherence to codes and guidelines, and mutual support (Deane et al., 2007)—and offered highly livable wages with structured pay increases, advancement opportunities, and ongoing professional development programs. Additionally, union work was mostly physical and did not require the employee to work intensively with technology (as individuals coming from gang-involvement were rarely acquainted with it, much less in possession of the necessary skills to obtain a job within the "knowledge economy" [Brown, 2011; Farrall et al., 2010]). 2nd Call, Chicago CRED, Homeboy Industries, and RiseUp Industries (the latter three of which have developed vocational training programs and social enterprises to prepare their clients for specific unions) had all built lasting relationships with

unions, and their clients' success—often excelling within these labor-intensive industries—opened the door for current and future clients.

Regardless of the amount of development the desisting individual had experienced, the move outside of the organizational setting could be difficult. It therefore behooved the service provider and employer to be best prepared to support the individual in their transition and offer a work environment that was understanding of the challenges involved. An employer that the provider and client trusted to be supportive and understanding of the client and the challenges they would continue to experience in their desistance was also noted as critical (Deane et al., 2007). Several of the participants spoke about the work they did with employers prior to hiring a client (Dustin; Erick; LaQuay; Yalonda). This work included: educating them about bringing on an employee who carries that "bag" of gang involvement; describing the impact employment will have on the individual, their families, and even their communities; and, most importantly, building a relationship wherein the employer trusted they would have the ongoing support needed to deal with issues that would (almost inevitably) arise.

Overall, the second research question sought data that addressed the central effort of this study—to identify the most effective practices (services, programs, interventions, and other supports) that could lead both to job placement and job maintenance. While the initial move into desistance and the receiving of impactful supports were critical, assisting the client with the correct job placement—in regard to the job's responsibilities and the quality of the employer—could constitute that final stage of the desistance process and lead the former gang member to becoming a respected and valued member of a community—especially those communities in which they were once part of the "destruction and madness" (Raahsaan).

Characteristics of Service Providers and Organizations Best Suited to Support Employment-Focused Gang Desistance

If not for CRED, I woulda relapsed. (Sherman)

Similar to the lack of discussion within the literature regarding the quality of the employer within employment-focused desistance services, there was little to no discussion of the needed characteristics of the service providers and organizations offering the services. These critical points will be discussed next.

The Service Provider

Within social work—and especially in working with gang-involved individuals—the ability to manage oneself was essential to remaining effective and offering the best support to clients (Decker, 2002). This was the reason the practice of self-care for service providers was so frequently emphasized by the interview participants It made sense. When working with gang members—even those committed to desistance—the work required an expanded professional capacity (Decker, 2002); the cultural competence to effectively engage with and build the commitment and trust of clients (Pacheco, 2019; Sanchez, 2018); and—the most challenging factor—pushing through the loss of clients back to the streets, incarceration, or, in the worst cases, death. Throughout my six years as a service provider at Homeboy Industries, I can recall at least six current or former clients who lost their lives through drug overdoses or gang-related killings (including one who passed due to the "death by cop" method described in Chapter 2). It can be brutal work both professionally and emotionally and frequently leads to "burnout"—a concern for service providers noted in several studies (Bagnall et al., 2015; Dierkhising et al., 2021; Mears & Travis, 2004). I experienced this burnout in my own work at Homeboy

Industries, and it was only a month or two after a client interrupted our session to ask me, "Hey dawg, how are *you* doin'?" that my time there ended.

To remain effective and experience longevity in the work of gang desistance requires simultaneous management of the clients' progress and the service provider's own well-being. To achieve this, interview participants detailed different methods of self-care. Examples of these methods included "phone off" time outside of work, if possible (LaQuay); working out (gym, running, hiking); and communicating to and seeking support from staff—either when needed or as a consistent practice (Mariana; Raahsaan). Braga and Kennedy (2002) noted the need for organizations to offer their staff "adequate training, supervision, and support" (p. 257) to help manage the challenges of the work. Clients also offered helpful forms of support for service providers. The most common example of self-care was drawing joy and motivation from the clients' success.

There are many opportunities for this within gang desistance work where even small steps of the client can have profound and transformative effects (obtaining their driver's license, completing a class, moments of self-restraint in challenging situations). Obviously, the bigger accomplishments—reintegrating with their family, release from custody (most commonly parole), or a successful job placement—are extremely motivating and fulfilling, but it is important to draw that joy and motivation from wherever and whenever possible.

A practice that each organization in this study employed was that of celebratory acknowledgement of accomplishments (to a point that this study felt compelled to include it within the description of most effective interventions). Celebration was noted in a number of studies as a motivating practice within service provision for client engagement and commitment

to services (Buckley, 2021; Cahill et al., 2015; Lee & Bubolz, 2020). Not only was this effective for building a clients' self-efficacy, identity desistance, and commitment to the desistance process, but celebration also acted as a critical self-care practice for the service provider. Whether directly stated or emerging from responses on other topics, the provider became intimately intertwined in their clients' lives and success. This symbiotic nature helped to foster the relationship, the trust, and the sense of "family" that was so helpful for a client's desistance process. But it was also the reason the work could be challenging with so much personal and professional investment in the clients' success. Ultimately, the profile of a gang desistance worker required a continuously shifting balancing of compassion, trust, open-mindedness, accountability, patience, fearlessness, learning, and, of course, effectiveness. The participants in this study represented these traits and their nomination by organizational leaders to participate in the interviews was an acknowledgment of their effectiveness.

The Organization

The core focus of this study was identifying effective types and implementation of employment-focused interventions (services, programs, other supports) to help facilitate an individual's desistance from gang-involvement. These interventions were identified both in the literature review and the data collection and have been discussed in detail. Only through the interviews, document analysis, and nonparticipant observation, though, did the importance of the elements that allow for those interventions to be possible emerge. These elements included previously discussed topics such as the qualities of the service providers themselves and the importance of a strong relationship with the employers who offer the job placement opportunities

to the desisting clients. A third element that emerged through the data collection involved essential components of the organizations for which the service providers work.

Chapter 4 shared a number of these components: a welcoming ("family"-like) and culturally competent organizational culture; presence of peer-based staff and mentors; a willingness to evolve in order to provide more relevant and effective services; and engaging in advocacy and social justice efforts to promote and push the work to a larger platform. These components helped to have a more impactful role in the clients' desistance efforts—the most important element of a service-providing organization. But this effectiveness also served as a recruitment tool. Each of the four organizations received some percentage of their clients through the word-of-mouth system amongst gang members and within the communities where they lived (the organizations also received clients through referrals from courts, law enforcement or other governmental entities.) This reputation within the gangs and communities the organizations served could make or break them. These four organizations' success and continued growth and expansion spoke to the quality of their reputations and the reasons they received clients voluntarily walking through their doors.

Next, the organizations were all embedded within the communities from which their clients come (Homeboy Industries began in the heart of Boyle Heights before moving to a more neutral area in LA's Chinatown area—adjacent to Boyle Heights—for the safety of its clients as it was mostly a "neutral" area free from gangs—a need noted by Pacheco [2019]). This presence built further trust and engagement and made the availability of their resources both more accessible and more widely disseminated.

Finally, three of the organizations—2nd Call, Chicago CRED, and Homeboy Industries––were led by people who have a wide-reaching reputation for leadership and effectiveness (important qualities for an organization [Decker, 2002]). 2nd Call was co-founded and continued to be led by Skipp Townsend who appeared in several of the articles included in the literature review and is nationally known in the work of gang desistance and intervention for providing effective trauma-based desistance services. Chicago CRED was founded by and continued to be led by Arne Duncan, the former Secretary of Education under President Obama. Homeboy Industries was founded and continued to be led by Father Greg Boyle (maybe the most well-known name in the work of gang desistance). Each of these leaders were charismatic with a strong local and national presence and they utilized this visibility to advocate for their organizations and the work of gang desistance in general.

Through the identification of effective interventions, characteristics and responsibilities of the service providers, and qualities of the organizations that made them effective, this study hoped to be of value for other individuals and organizations interested in or currently involved in the work of gang desistance. Gangs are a presence in every city across the United States. The men, women and youth involved in gangs continue to be marginalized by government and society which incurs barriers toward available efforts and resources and, ultimately, continues the destructive cycle of loss and trauma in the communities where they live. But—like the participants and organizations involved in this research—there are many individuals and organizations who continue to provide needed supports to serve this demonized and often disregarded population.

Significance of Findings

The phenomenon of gang desistance and the work to support those desisting from gangs is presently increasing within academia. The growing breadth of topics related to gang-desistance (gender, race/ethnicity, international context, narrative-based research) and the increasing diversity within the researchers are indicative of this growth. Still, the role of employment has lagged behind exploration of other elements and interventions. The effect of employment on the gang desistance process is a critical intervention that—as this study's participants and organizations exhibited—can be incredibly impactful over the life course of the desisting individual. Studies looking at the impact of employment-focused interventions (such as vocational training and job placement) do exist (e.g., Deane et al. [2007]). But much of the research and literature continues to look at *why* individuals desist. This study was primarily focused on *how.*

Earlier, I described the challenge—having worked as a service provider, trainer, and program developer in the work of gang desistance—of remaining open to new ideas and approaches. Certainly, many of the practices and concepts that I found to be effective in my own experience were reflected in the literature and research, and most of these are fairly well-known within gang desistance work. Through the interviews and document analysis, though, little known or organizationally unique elements of the work emerged. These included: LaQuay's (Chicago CRED) creation of a "Rage Room" for her clients to release their pent up energy and emotions in a way that avoids harming another person or their community; RiseUp Industries' intentional coupling of clients with mentors who did not possess the lived experience of gang involvement and incarceration; the constant implementation of "I not you" (Carmen) language

for 2nd Call's clients; and Yalonda's method of building a relationship with the human resources representative at businesses looking to employ clients from Homeboy Industries.

The culture of continual improvement and evolution within these organizations was an emergent quality that enhanced their effectiveness and reputation. Offering opportunities to clients for a broader exposure to life and the world—such as hiking, field trips to museums, arts and music programming, mentors without lived experience of gang involvement—are certainly interventions that may not seem essential on paper but can be incredibly impactful when intentionally designed for a client's growth. The importance of providing high levels of attention and support to the employers is an often overlooked and extremely beneficial practice, with Chicago CRED's plan to develop a training for employers to improve their ability to work with former gang members being an innovative example of how this support can be improved. Finally, the social enterprise model that Chicago CRED, Homeboy Industries and RiseUp Industries developed is especially significant for their ability to provide simultaneous personal and professional development while also creating sustaining and flexible funding for the organizations.

The research—and in some instances, themes that emerged from the literature review—provided these and other practices and concepts that can dramatically improve the effectiveness of employment-based interventions for gang desistance. It is important, though, to still highlight those components that may be well-known but whose continued application proves their effectiveness. Through centering the experience and voices of those committed to and embedded within the work of gang desistance, this study hopes to reemphasize the criticality of these proven elements and the foundational quality they provide to gang desistance efforts. Practices

such as an individualized approach, peer-based mentorship and modelling, wraparound services, and building the self-efficacy and identity transformation of the desisting gang member are essential and should be an integral part of the framework for all gang desistance work.

In the end, alongside the services, providers, and employers, the most significant purpose of this paper was a focus on the desisting individual. The intentional effort to involve interview participants with lived experience of gang involvement and desistance resulted from this focus and had dual purposes: the centering of their often-marginalized voices and the provision of firsthand experience regarding the desistance process and effective interventions to support it. More importantly, their stories exhibited how valuing and humanizing current and former gang members can lead to their truly becoming those "contributing members of society" that the research participants and their organizations consistently expressed as being the ultimate goal. Gangs and gang members do not suddenly drop from the sky. They are present in communities in every city and—increasingly—in suburbs and smaller cities and towns. Their rise often coincides with larger issues such as migration (including more localized movement caused by gentrification), economic downturns, lack of resources, and, most broadly, societal discrimination and oppression. Regardless of the reason, individuals are drawn to gangs for reasons we all share—the seeking of acceptance and belonging, safety and security for self and family, and the resources to obtain a quality of life that this country proclaims we have a right to pursue.

When the active or desisting gang member is seen as a person with value and provided the means to achieve their unique dreams and ambitions, the "ripple effects" of this change impact not only their own life, but the lives of their families, communities, and society at large.

The work of effective gang desistance is built open offering these transformational services. The focus on employment-based objectives represents a very tangible and lifelong opportunity to transform and create that ripple. Hopefully this study offers examples of the practices, supports, and concepts to achieve this opportunity and bolster the work of gang desistance through service provision.

In closing the discussion of findings, although this study met the purposes of identifying effective employment-based interventions to support individuals desisting from gang involvement, there were limitations involved that are important to note. Additionally, the research presented topics that sat outside this study's stated purview that would be helpful in providing guidance for future gang desistance research and service provision are also presented in the following section.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations involved in this study that had some level of impact on its overall objective of identifying best practices for employment-focused gang desistance work. There were several.

First, participant availability related to time and capacity constraints and the geographic locations of the organizations created logistical limitations for the gathering of more data. Additionally, the three cities in which the organizations are located—Los Angeles, Chicago and San Diego—do not fully reflect the unique characteristics and needs for desisting gangs and gang members in other communities and cities across the country. A wider geographic representation, as well as the engagement of organizations serving specific ethnicities and populations (e.g.,

American-Indian, Asian-American; female gang members, gang-involved youth), would have helped to develop a broader understanding of effective gang desistance practices.

A second limitation was the inability to observe service and programming provision at two of the sites (Chicago CRED, RiseUp Industries). While an attempt was made to learn about these organizations' culture and environments through their websites, YouTube videos and social media content, the inability to observe them in person limited the understanding of their culture and what makes them effective. This limitation was further impactful since both Chicago CRED and RiseUp Industries modelled elements of their services (namely their social enterprises) after Homeboy Industries'. The opportunity to see how they have evolved those services to reflect the unique gang and community cultures from which their clients come would have added depth to this study's understanding of their approach and effectiveness.

The third limitation is acknowledged with some level of reservation since it challenges the validity of the collected data, namely the data resulting from the participant interviews and analysis of organizational documents. This limitation arises from the concern expressed within gang desistance literature regarding the validity of firsthand accounts of gangs and gang desistance and the lack of available data related to outcomes of gang desistance interventions (only one organization—Homeboy Industries—has been the focus of a peer-reviewed study). Though the interviews reached a level of saturation and felt authentic—and while the continued existence and planned expansion of the organizations indicates effectiveness within their services and programming—the inability to confirm the information shared in the interviews and unavailability of programmatic data acted as limitations to their validity.

The final limitation addresses my own experience within the work of gang desistance and the existing relationships I hold with several of the research participants. This limitation resulted from my previous work in the Employment Services Department at Homeboy Industries for six years (during which I met and discussed best practices with individuals who would later establish RiseUp Industries), as well as my work as a training coordinator for gang interventionists at the Urban Peace Institute, wherein I collaborated with participants from 2nd Call and Chicago CRED. Through this experience I developed my own ideas of what comprises effective gang desistance interventions and personal connections with several of the participants. While efforts were made to employ as much objectivity as possible to my analysis of the collected data, the experiential understanding of the work and the existing relationships with participants created a limitation to a more thorough objectivity of the data analysis and presentation the findings.

Recommendations for Future Study

Chapter 3 detailed the research methods for this study, one method of which involved a quantitative approach to identifying emergent themes (i.e., tabulating the various themes and including in this study only those shared by a majority of the participants). While this offered a stronger quality of validity to the findings, it negated the inclusion of several themes that are worth consideration for future academic research.

Service Providers Without Lived Experience

The incredible impact of service provision and organizational culture in which providers with lived experience are centered has been strongly emphasized in this study. But that does not mean that providers or organizations without that firsthand experience cannot be of value. As someone who did not share the experience of gang involvement and desistance, much less the

positionality regarding race and culture of most of the desisting individuals with whom I worked alongside, I can attest to the fact that the lack of these shared qualities did not make me ineffective. As only a minority of research participants did not possess lived experience, discussion on this topic remained limited within the study. Future research focused on the attributes and practices of individuals in the work of gang desistance who do not possess lived experience would be beneficial—most importantly to limit any harms to the clients that could result from this difference in life and cultural experience.

Gang Desistance Work in Other Cities and Countries

The participation in this study of individuals and organizations based in several major U.S. cities—Chicago, Los Angeles and San Diego—was an attempt to diversify and strengthen the findings. But this represented the understanding of the needs and characteristics of only three cities and two regions of the country (and their respectively unique gang and community cultures). Gang desistance efforts focused on employment actively exist in cities both nationally and internationally. The opportunity to conduct research amongst a wider range of communities and cultures would help to greatly expand the understanding of effective gang desistance practices.

A Common Language

Through the various research methods employed for this study, it was interesting to see the commonality within vernacular and practices pertaining to the particular organizations involved in the study. On one hand, it spoke to the unique approach and beliefs that defined each organization. It also highlighted an ongoing issue within the work of gang desistance. This is the lack of a common vernacular for the work. Most indicative of this range was the absence of

awareness of the gang desistance concept. Often referred to as "gang intervention" (which harkens to "violence intervention") or "gang reentry" (which harkens to "prison reentry"), gang desistance is a uniquely situated and challenging field with interventions and other practices specific to it. The development of a common terminology would help to provide increased cohesion within the field and would ultimately serve to provide a level of standardization to the language and practices of gang desistance. It would also encourage more engagement from academic researchers and even funders by offering more generalized understanding of the work and its impacts.

Additional Interventions for Gang Desistance

Several types of gang desistance interventions were shared within the research interviews but were not discussed in detail (as they were not shared by the required majority of participants). They are included here to offer potential areas for future research on effective practices for gang desistance. These additional interventions included: the role of spirituality within or as a form of service provision (indigenous or culturally-specific spirituality can be especially effective [Deane et al., 2007]); storytelling as an empowering and transformative practice—both for the storytelling individual and as an intervention for youth and young adults at-risk of or engaged in gang activities; identification of the best types of employment for gang-desisting individuals and most effective methods of engaging prospective employers in the work; and the interplay of related efforts to reduce community violence and recidivism including youth prevention and diversion, gang intervention, and prison reentry. More research into these gang desistance-related topics would help to greatly expand the understanding and effectiveness of the work.

Awareness of Services

2nd Call and Chicago CRED both provided gang intervention services (i.e., the interruption and reduction of gang membership and activity [especially violence] through peer-based engagement on the streets of gang-impacted communities) as part of their programming efforts. This was noted by participants from those organizations as a valuable recruiting tool beyond word-of-mouth and institutional referrals. Research aimed at identification of effective methods for recruitment to organizations providing gang desistance services would not only offer higher engagement within those services but would also help address the lack of awareness among gang and community members of available services (a critical issue mentioned by a majority of research participants.)

Conclusion

This study sought to identify the most effective employment-focused interventions for supporting individuals desisting from gang involvement through an exhaustive literary review, the collection of thoughts and experiences from individuals who know the desistance process firsthand and now support others who are desisting, the review of documents and literature, and observation of organizational programming. These interventions have been identified and laid out in detail, along with additional findings related to the desisting individual, the desistance process, and those qualities of gang desistance service providers and organizations that effectivize their efforts.

The willingness of the interview participants and organizations to participate in this study was invaluable to its development and findings. Their participation also spoke to the dedication and passion they possessed for the work. It is incredibly challenging work. Serving gang

members toward transforming their lives and removing themselves from a group and culture in which they are so deeply embedded can feel hopeless at times, especially when clients return to their gang and experience the traumas of violence, addiction, incarceration, and, most devastatingly, death.

These challenges, though, also speak to the criticality of the work, and, when framed in an applicable manner, can be utilized as motivations to continue serving and pushing to support more gang members in leaving "the life." The participants and organizations involved in this study are examples of the types and quality of individuals who are essential to the work, who believe that gang members are as valuable as anyone else, and who understand what it takes to help them see that in themselves. The impact and effectiveness of employment for a desisting gang member was the central tenet of this study and its findings as it offers that antidote to Frankl's (1992) employment neurosis.

While some studies and those conducting them may believe that employment is not effective in desisting from gangs, this study showed that, not only is employment-focused desistance work impactful, it is, as Erick said, "doable," and, most importantly, as stated by Sherman, "this shit works."

APPENDIX A

A BRIEF HISTORY OF GANGS & GANG RESEARCH

The following section offers a background on the history of the gang phenomenon in the United States (with some notes on the international state of gangs) along with concurrent gang theory and research. As much of the relatively recent field of gang desistance studies is based upon this history, this section hopes to offer a deeper understanding of how gangs developed in the United States and why they have become so deeply woven into the fabric of this country.

Gangs

Street gangs were as much a part of the American fabric as hot dogs. They were a do-it-yourself vehicle for underclass males who had no access to mainstream jobs, upward mobility, or power.

(Rice, 2012, p. 120)

Despite the fact that an agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a gang continues to evade researchers (Gebo & Tobin, 2012; Mallion & Wood, 2020; Sanchez et al., 2022), the study of gangs themselves has grown robust. This is not surprising as gangs are a very dynamic phenomenon of the human society and incorporate a vast array of elements (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015)—socioeconomic, ethnicity, locale, age, gender, levels of participation and violence, formation of, joining and exiting, research approaches, social justice, trauma and victimization, stigmatization, interventions, media romanticism and manufactured alarm. For the purpose of this study, it was important to explore several of these elements, primarily the history and formation of gangs, as they play an important role in understanding the need for effective desistance strategies and practices.

History of Gangs and Gang Research

The absence—especially in the early and mid-20th centuries (representing the first and second periods of gang research [Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007])—of gangs, gang members, and researchers of color was profoundly obvious and telling of the institutions and values of American society in this period. With the increased migration and immigration of communities of color across the country in the second half of the 20th century (the third period of gang research [Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007]), cities diversified and gang activity grew more prevalent. Simultaneously, the presence and study of gangs of color increased, and by the late 20th century, came to dominate the research and literature on gangs. Though still vastly comprised of white male researchers, it was also in the late 20th century that the work of researchers of color would begin to emerge, bringing a more topically diverse and insightful approach to the field.

First Period: Late 19th to Early 20th Century

The period of gangs and gang research occurring from the late 19th century to the early 20th century was detailed in the following sections.

Gangs

Evidence of gangs in the United States (U.S) stretches back to its founding, if not earlier (Klein, 1995)—though others have pointed to the early large-scale waves of European immigrants to the United States in the post-Revolutionary War period as the beginning of gangs in the U.S. (Howell & US Department of Justice, 1998; Wolf, 2022). The first true "street gangs" ("the streets define gangs, giving them their power as unique sociological entities, their identity, and their mystique in the eyes of society" [Papachristos & Hughes, 2015, p. 119]) as we

understand them today—originally defined by Frederic Thrasher (1927) as "an interstitial group originally formed spontaneously, and then integrated through conflict" (p. 57)—are often considered to be those that arose and all but controlled the streets of lower Manhattan in the mid-nineteenth century (Howell, 2012). The rise and prevalence of gangs tended to coincide with waves of immigration (Howell, 2012; Howell & Griffiths, 2019). These first gangs were no different. Beginning with large scale Irish immigration into the United States in the mid-1800s, ensuing waves of immigrants from (mostly) Southern and Eastern Europe would lead to the formations of gangs from these communities (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991), often in reaction to the inequitable social and economic contexts in which they existed (Klein, 1995). The main centers of these early iteration of gangs in the United States were predominately centered in New York City, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago (though there was certainly gang activity in all major cities [Hesse et al., 2016].)

Generally speaking, second-generation Americans (the children of immigrants from another country) were those who comprised the gangs. There is research to show that by the third or fourth generation, involvement in gangs and criminality tended to drop off dramatically as descendants of immigrants were acculturated into American society (Aspholm, 2021)—as has been the case in many European, Central and South American, and Asian communities. Noticeably absent from this trend were African-Americans and American Indians (Franzese et al., 2006; Freng et al., 2012)—neither of whose residence in the United States can be said to have been a matter of choice. During this initial period of gangs, for those descendants of southern and eastern European—and Irish—immigrants, the process of acculturation prevailed and white street gangs would mostly disappear. If gang-related activity did persist, it often

evolved into what we would today call organized crime, such as the Italian mafia, or Irish, Russian, Jewish mobs (Aspholm, 2021). Organized crime—defined as "group attempts to regulate and control the production and distribution of a given commodity or service unlawfully" (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022, p. 369) and differentiated from "street gangs" by a more formalized structure, stronger political influence, national and even international reach, and less concern with territory [Lee, 2016])—certainly fostered cultures of delinquency and violence, but their levels of structure and organization differentiated them from the street gangs that are the focus of this study.

As described, this first period of gang activity came to a close around the late 1920s as the acculturation process ran its course and the descendants of these mostly European immigrants and gang members were subsumed into general American society and adopted "middle-class norms and values" (Klein, 1995, p. 52). With the migration of African-Americans from the South and increased immigration from Mexico to the western and upper Midwest United States in search of employment, the racially-based conflicts with established and recently arrived White residents—and the subsequent actions of redlining and demolition of communities of color for infrastructure projects by local governments, alongside harassment and oppression by law enforcement—would incur a new era of gangs and increased violence in the mid-20th century (Bloch & Phillips, 2022; Hesse et al., 2016).

Theory and Research

Similar to the emerging field of gang desistance, the more established field of gang research is also marked by a lack of settled definition and theory. Appearance of the word "gang" has been identified as far back as the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer and William

Shakespeare (Klein, 1995). But gangs were not only a European/Western phenomenon. Groups involved in criminality and/or violence have existed in countries throughout the world for centuries—including China, India, Russia, and more (Franzese et al., 2006).

True research on gangs did not appear until the early twentieth century when sociological and criminological researchers from the University of Chicago began focusing on these groups as a distinct phenomenon (Chaskin, 2010). The United States would become the center of the development and research for gang studies throughout the twentieth century. This academic focus was due in large part to the prevalence of gangs, itself seen as a result of a dramatic increase in immigrants beginning in the late 19th century arriving predominately from southern and eastern Europe (Fleisher, 2018; Gebo, 2018; Vigil, 1988).

Other researchers also looked into the subject of gangs, but, while the term "gang" was present in research as far back as the late 1800s (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996), it was not until Chicago-based Frederic Thrasher's seminal work—*The Gang: A Study of 1,313 Gangs in Chicago* (1927)—that serious academic treatment of gangs began (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996).

Thrasher (1927) came out of the "Chicago School" where a focus on the theory of social disorganization was developed and implemented within research (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). This theory was based on the idea that "ethnic heterogeneity, low socioeconomic status, and residential mobility reduce the capacity of community residents to control crime" (Howell & Griffiths, 2019). Thrasher (1927) utilized this social disorganization theory to outline five community factors that lead to "ganging": community disorganization; ineffective families; poor-quality schooling; association with undesirable peers; and lack of leisure-time guidance

(Howell & Griffiths, 2019). Through his extensive research on Chicago gangs, Thrasher (1927) identified different types of gangs: diffuse, solidified, conventionalized, and criminal (Spindler & Bouchard, 2011); provided characteristics of what constituted a "gang," including: intimate face-to-face interaction, a sense of organization and solidarity, connection to a particular area, and a common tradition (Esbensen et al., 2001); and, somewhat ironically for later thinking in the field he helped establish, expressed some level of asset-mindedness when it came to gangs, describing them as "friendship groups" (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007; Moran, 2022), agents "that could provide at least a semblance of order in some 'disorganized' communities" (Howell & Griffiths, 2019, p. 88), and stressing that some gangs were good and some were bad (Esbensen et al., 2001).

Finally, it was about this same time in Chicago that what is often referred to as the first gang prevention and/or intervention efforts were designed and implemented. The Chicago Area Project (CAP) was established in 1934 by famed sociologist and gang researcher Clifford Shaw. CAP was a program that "targeted youth gangs with case managers who worked with gangs in the streets—meeting them in their homes, at their schools, and local hangouts" (Lopez-Aguado, 2013, p. 188). CAP also worked to build the "collective efficacy" of the community to take the lead in battling youth gangs and criminality (Chaskin, 2010).

Thrasher's (1927) research and Shaw's CAP program (1934) were heavily focused on the neighborhood or community's efficacy in addressing the gang problem. Klein (1995) described this objective:

It was felt that local community groups—indigenous groups—should be socially and

> politically empowered to improve neighborhood conditions. Tying informal community structures to formal agencies—schools, enforcement, welfare—would provide the social structure for healthy socialization and vitiate the need for gangs and other forms of deviance. A proud community with the will and resources to handle its problems was the goal. (p. 139).

CAP would set the blueprint for future gang prevention and intervention programs through its emphasis on community-driven solutions and utilization of institutional structures to support the community-led efforts. The creation and implementation of the GRYD Department of the Los Angeles Mayor's Office in LA is one current example (Rice, 2012).

It is important to note that this first period of gang research was overwhelmingly focused on gangs and gang members of European nationalities. In fact, I was unable to find any studies that focused on non-White gangs and gang members (though Thrasher [2013] does note the varying ethnicities of gangs in his 1927 study [Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007; Lee, 2016]). Non-white gangs—especially African-American and Mexican-American gangs—did exist and were involved both collaboratively and antagonistically with these white gangs. This same racial disparity also applied to researchers in the field of gang studies, with all the influential research and studies being conducted by white male academics (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022). Obviously, and sadly, the lack of research and literature on gangs of color and by researchers of color created a severe gap in this first period of gang activity and studies. The prevalence of Black and Latina/o gangs would finally begin receiving critically needed attention in the second period (Chin, 1996; Klein, 1971; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991; Vigil 1988)—though research would continue as a thoroughly white and male domain.

Second Period: Mid-Twentieth Century

The period of gangs and gang research occurring in the mid-twentieth century was detailed in the following sections.

Gangs

Similar to the first period of gangs and gang research, the second period was marked by mass movements of ethnic and racial groups—immigration of Latina/os (specifically from Mexico to the Western United States and Puerto Rico to the Northeast) and migration of African-Americans from the South (and for some of those already living in the North and Upper Midwest) to the North, Upper Midwest, and the rapidly populating West (Howell, 2012). Causes of these movements in the post-war boom era were largely economic, with industrialization in the North and Upper Midwest, and industrialization and agriculture in the West (Howell & Griffiths, 2019). The Civil Rights movement in the latter half of this second period would also have a profound effect on migration (especially to California) and the development of street gangs, partly resulting from the dissolution of civil rights groups such as the Black Panthers (Howell, 2012; Vigil & Yun, 2002). Asian gangs certainly existed during this period (Lee, 2016) but Asian gangs and gang members rarely appeared in the literature. Their presence would not effectively emerge until the third period of gangs and gang research (late 20th century and on).

This second period of gangs and gang research was distinct from the first in several ways. The ethnic makeup of gangs had grown more diverse and conflict between gangs often took on a racial aspect (Freng & Taylor, 2013; Vigil, 1988; Vigil & Yun, 2002). This often resulted from the settling of Black and Brown populations in urban areas previously occupied mostly by White residents and the “less than hospitable” reception they received (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996;

Freng & Taylor, 2013; Howell & Griffiths, 2019). Second, the levels of gang-related violence increased, with researchers coming to view gangs as inextricably linked with violence (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998; Klein, 1995). Concurrently, society would increasingly view gang members as existing outside of normal society (Klein, 1995) (one contemporary article described a gang as the "*monstrous Other*" [Gormally, 2015]) and becoming more open to punitive responses to gangs and violence (Enns, 2014). As discussed earlier, the racially-based factors of this development were clearly evident (Enns, 2014; Hesse et al., 2016).

Finally, this middle period saw an increase in symbology and other formative elements that led to stronger structuring and hierarchies within street gangs. Reasons for this were numerous, but two predominant factors included longevity and oppressive policies. First, especially in regard to Mexican-American gangs in LA, gangs had existed for multiple generations and were firmly embedded in their communities (Aspholm, 2021; Vigil, 1988). Klein (1971) and Vigil (1988) both spoke to this community embeddedness in their studies of Chicano gangs in the East Los Angeles area of LA.

Second, the red-lining, police harassment, and other discriminatory, marginalizing and oppressive practices and policies of these rapidly diversifying cities negated the acculturation process that had reduced so much of the predominately White gang activity of ethnically European communities in the first period (Hesse et al., 2016) For example, in New York City, Irish and Italian street gangs would all but disappear—sometimes absorbed into organized crime groups or dispersed through "white flight" to suburbia (Bloch & Phillips, 2022; Freng & Taylor, 2013)—by the 1960s [Aspholm, 2021; Freng & Taylor, 2013; Klein, 1995]. In these cities, the

growing civil rights movement offered a platform for the voices and actions of communities of color to combat the overt institutional and societal racism they experienced. Advocate groups such as the Black Panthers and Brown Berets would arise within this movement (Aspholm, 2021; Howell, 2012) and riots would occur in Black and Brown communities throughout the country. The Watts Riots were an example of this, resulting from the unquestionably racist and violent actions of the LA Police Department (LAPD) (Klein, 1995). Not surprisingly, many of these civil rights-based efforts, leaders and groups were undermined or directly attacked by those in power (Alonso, 2004; Durán, 2006). As a result, some of the groups—with the Black Panthers frequently noted (Howell, 2012)—would grow disillusioned and morph into street gangs. In conjunction both with the gangs that had already developed as a result of the redlining and other marginalizing actions of the 1940s and 1950s and the emergence of racially-based prison gangs in the mid-1960s (Aspholm, 2021), the foundation was set for an explosion of gangs and violence at the start of the third period of gangs and gang research.

Theory and Research

Similar to the rise of gang-related research following the large-scale immigration of Eastern and Southern European immigrants, the next influential period of gang research—sometimes referred to as the "Golden Era" of gang study (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015)—was the mid-twentieth century. This coincided with the post-war migration of African-Americans from the South to cities in the North, Upper Midwest and, primarily, to the West; a larger influx of immigrants from Mexico; and the ensuing "white flight" of white residents from urban areas to the suburbs. This migration often led to the implementation of "red-lining" policies and other

structural and social practices that heavily marginalized non-white residents (Alonso, 2004; Aspholm, 2021; Gebo, 2018; Vigil, 1988).

While the Glueck and Glueck's (1953) research on youth delinquency was carried out in Boston, Chicago (and New York City to an extent) remained at the forefront of studies specifically related to gangs. Amongst the foremost names was that of Albert Cohen, the author of *Delinquent Boys: The Culture of the Gang* (1955)—the most often-cited text in gang research (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015). Cohen (1955) worked under the prevailing theories regarding gangs and criminality of that day—namely the Mertonian theory of anomie (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007) which argued "that society exists in a condition of equilibrium so long as people's goals and the means for attaining those goals are compatible. A condition of anomie or normlessness occurs if the goals and means get out of balance" (Cavender, 2010, p. 3). While still heavily influenced by the Chicago School's focus on social disorganization theory and the impact of the more local institutional and social structural factors (Howell & Griffiths, 2019), Cohen's (1955) adaptation of Mertonian theory to gangs and delinquency looked at the lack of access to the "American Dream" and its promise of economic stability and success (Cavender, 2010). Cohen (1955) referred to this as the concept of "Status Frustration," explained by Roach & Gursslin (1965) in their critique of Cohen's (1955) work:

> Motivated to attain success values, lower class persons are blocked in their ambitions by socially-structured barriers. They perceive that legitimate access to high status position is restricted by external forces beyond their control. The combination of frustration due to thwarted ambition and a sense of injustice leads to deviant adaptation. (p. 502)

Still based on the idea of social and institutional structures, as well as the high rates of residential mobility and displacement of residents in "socially disorganized" communities and neighborhoods, the second period of gang research incorporated a broader, less localized view of factors leading to the development and activity of gangs. This period also continued seeing gang violence as a group phenomenon reacting to external forces and societal promises of a middle-class life (Klein, 1971), and research focused much more attention toward the "malicious" quality of gangs (Hayden, 2004; Klein, 1995) as was highlighted by another seminal work of this period—Lewis Yablonsky's aptly titled *The Violent Gang* (1962). After defining three types of gangs (delinquent, violent and social), Yablonsky (1962) stated: "The violent gang was the most persistent and problematic for society" (1962, as cited in Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). This view of gang members as violent individuals not only prompted the growth of stigmatization and fearmongering in media and society regarding gangs (Esbensen & Carson, 2012; Vigil, 1988), it also worked to further separate gang members from general society (Klein, 1995). The fact that it coincided with the growth of African-American and Latina/o gangs was a foreboding sign for future policy and law enforcement approaches to addressing gangs and gang violence.

The *Golden Era* of gang research was labelled as such due to its combination of research and theory development alongside engagement with gang-related programming and services—often referred to as "action research" (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Malcolm Klein's (1971) research and ensuing book *The Street Gang and Street Worker* is an often-cited source from this period (though his 1995 book *The American Street Gang* was more frequently cited [Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015]). Heavily focused on this programmatic work of addressing gangs and violence, Klein (1971) believed that providing services to a gang ultimately fostered a stronger sense of

identity and cohesion within the gang (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007)—or, to use his words, "far from resocializing gang members and turning them away from criminality, gang workers had unwittingly increased gang cohesiveness, which in turn led to more crimes by gang members" (Klein, 1995, p. 11). The overall tone of Klein's (1971) work was marked by a less-than-flattering view of gang members (his description of gang activity was essentially *in*activity [Roks, 2022]) and an emphasis on the need for heavy-handed suppression tactics by law enforcement to break up the cohesion of the gangs (Hayden, 2004).

Klein's (1971) theoretical foundations can be traced back to both Thrasher (1927) and Cohen (1955), notably in his belief that gangs were more often reacting to external factors than driven by some internal set of codes or beliefs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Spindler & Bouchard, 2011). While there were several more important gang researchers doing work in this closing stretch of the second period of gang research, Klein's (1971) research and publications were highlighted mostly to mark a transition point from previous gang research toward the third period of gang research—or the period of "big research" as described by Pyrooz & Mitchell (2015). The main characteristics of this transition included: a non-monolithic approach to studying gangs and gang violence (Klein, 1995); increased focus on the individual gang member (as opposed to the group precept that had framed much of the previous research) (Klein, 1971); an exploration of the racial dynamics within and between gangs (Vigil, 1988); promotion of law enforcement's role in reducing gangs and gang violence (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007) (which possessed an uncomfortable hint at the "Tough on Crime" era that would soon arrive and which Klein [1995] would later admit had the same cohesive effect upon gangs [Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007]); more research on "the progression of gang members into adulthood" (Fleisher,

2002); inclusion of female gang members and associates (Miller, 2002); and the fact that Klein's (1971) research took place in LA, which would dominate the world of gangs beginning in the third period and earn LA the title of the "Gang Capital" of the United States (Banks, 2011; Hesse et al., 2016).

While Klein's perceptions and descriptions regarding gang life and gang members could be off-putting and worth skepticism ("I've had it with gangs" [Klein, 1971]), *Street Gangs and Street Workers* undoubtedly represented several of the precursive elements that would lead to the explosion of gangs and violence a decade later, as well as a marked shift in gang studies (Pyrooz and Mitchell, 2015).

Third Period: Late 20th Century

The period of gangs and gang research beginning in the late 20th century was detailed in the following sections.

Gangs

The delineation of the second and third periods in gang research was fairly clear in the literature (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007). For the gangs themselves, this was mostly true as well, with the 1980s and 1990s marking a new level of gang membership, prevalence and violence in cities across the country (Hesse et al., 2016). But the 1970s were an important time in terms of setting the stage for those ensuing decades. LA would see the formation of the Crips and Bloods gangs and cliques (Alonso, 2004; Hesse et al., 2016), whereas, in Chicago, gangs such as the Black Stone Rangers and Gangster Disciples would establish themselves as "supergangs" (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022). Reasons for these developments included the decline of industrialization and living wage jobs for workers of color (Howell & Griffiths, 2019); the

disillusionment following the end of the civil rights era (Aspholm, 2021); the return of soldiers from the Vietnam War (Barrios, 2003); and the embeddedness of existing gangs within their communities (Vigil, 1988)—much of this resulting from the ongoing (but less obvious) redlining and other forms of racialized marginalization and oppression of communities of color (Howell, 2012). With the foundation set, the 1980s would see an explosion of gang membership, activity, and violence that was previously unfathomable.

The rapid rise and vast expansion of gang membership and activity of the 1980s was predominately fueled by the introduction of the drug crack cocaine (Aspholm, 2021; Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991) and "Tough on Crime" suppression policies enacted in cities throughout the United States (Howell & Moore, 2010). The money that resulted from the distribution of crack cocaine (and other drugs derived from cocaine [Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991]) led to gangs' procurement of increasingly more dangerous firearms and a dramatic rise in gang-related violence and death (Basheer & Hoag, 2014). Concurrently, as Klein (1995) would come to acknowledge, the suppressive tactics of law enforcement agencies to combat gangs and gang activity also added to the cohesion and violence of gangs through their abusive, suppressive, frequently fatal tactics (Klein, 1995), and widespread incarceration (Lopez-Aguado, 2016; Sharkey, 2018) that only served to create new gang members and harden existing ones (Aspholm, 2021).

Costanza and Helms (2012) wrote that "by 1993, violent crime victimization and offending rates had reached an all-time peak for young men" (p. 280). A view of gang statistics from this decade indicated just how dramatic this rise was. For African-American gangs—in LA alone—the number of gangs grew from 60 in 1978 to at least 270 by 1992 (Alonso, 2004;

Howell & Griffiths, 2019) (and it should be noted that this same period also saw the implementation of "tough on crime" suppression tactics including the utilization of civil gang injunctions [CGI] and gang labelling—practices which have been shown to have involved high levels of racial discrimination [especially toward young Black and Latino men], errant labeling of non-gang involved individuals, and disruption and suppression of entire communities (Howell et al., 2017; Lynch & Sobel, 1997; Rice, 2015). Nationally, homicides increased in a roughly similar fashion, with many cities seeing peak homicide rates in the early to mid-1990s. This was evident in the years that the three cities most commonly associated with gang crime experienced their highest rates of gang-related homicides: New York (1990) (Levitt, 2004); Chicago (1992) (Levitt, 2004); and LA (1995) (Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, 2011).

Violence was not the only element of gangs that increased. With such pervasiveness, people of all ethnicities and nationalities living in urban centers would see the formation of gangs within their communities. In LA, alongside the well-established and active African-American and Mexican-American gangs, a veritable "rainbow" (Klein, 1995) of gangs would emerge within Salvadorean, Samoan, Filipino, and Armenian communities (Hesse et al., 2016; Klein, 1995). So pervasive was the gang activity in LA that there was even a minor resurgence of White gangs, many of them emerging from the punk rock culture of Southern California and often employing the same levels of violence and territorialism as the more established Black and Latina/o gangs (Doe & DeSavia, 2016; NOFX & Alulis, 2016; Smith, 1985). Immigration would again play a role, with immigrants from the war-torn countries of Vietnam and El Salvador forming gangs within their newly established communities (Vigil & Yun, 2002).

The increase in gang activity in cities across the country would continue into the early 1990s, the historical peak of street gang activity in the United States (Levitt, 2004). There would be a general decrease in gang activity throughout both the late 1990s and late 2000s, though gang activity fluctuated until reaching another peak in 2012 with an estimated 30,700 gangs existing nationally (National Gang Center, n.d.). In the years following 2012, there was a significant decrease in gang activity and crime, with cities nation-wide being the safest in modern history (Sharkey, 2018). This downward trend was rightfully celebrated in headlines and literature across the country, with newspaper headlines reading "Chicago Crime Reached 'Historic Low' in 2014: Police" (NBC Chicago, 2015) and "Violent Crime in LA is Down. Again. The Police Chief Says It's 'One of the Safest Times in Los Angeles.'" (Yu, 2020). Though, it should be noted, that cities across the country saw a historic rise in homicides since the onset of COVID-19 in 2021, with gang-related crime driving a substantial portion of the increases in cities such as LA and Chicago (Elinson, 2021; Grimm & Schuba, 2022).

One factor frequently pointed to as having an impact on this downward trend was the funding and implementation of community-based programs addressing gangs and gang violence such as: prevention and diversion (focused on youth and young adults at risk of gang involvement [Sharkey, 2018; Van Eck et al., 2017]); intervention—also referred to as "outreach" (focused on intervening in gang violence by outreach, interruption, and service provision [Klein, 1971]); and prison reentry (Middlemass & Smiley, 2021). Many of the programs and service providers—often peer-based—within these fields had existed in various forms since the 1970s, usually with minimal funding and institutional support due to the stigma attached to working with gangs and the work being performed by former gang members ("*once a gang member,*

always a gang member" [Bubolz, 2014]). But as the evidence of their effectiveness grew—buttressed by research in the academic realm and growing advocacy and support within the political arena (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007)—local, state, and federal political entities were more willing to offer public and financial support. One example was the establishment of the GRYD Department of the LA Mayor's Office. Based on a public health approach to reducing violence, GRYD—still in operation as of the time of this study—was funded by the City of Los Angeles and involved the targeted provision of prevention and intervention services through peer-led agencies in neighborhoods throughout the city that exhibited the highest levels of gang activity (Abt, 2019; Cahill et al., 2015; Mallion & Wood, 2020).

Concurrently, new and revamped law enforcement policies and practices were increasingly been implemented to be more responsive and effective by working in tandem with community-based efforts. While law enforcement's overt historical practices of racism and oppression toward communities of color and gangs continued, their growing openness to working alongside agencies and programs was an encouraging sign (a good example being the Community Safety Partnership program between the LAPD and community-based organizations (Rice, 2012) wherein officers were paired with gang interventionists to better address gang activity).

It should be noted that, since the advent of COVID-19, gang-related activity and homicides increased significantly with cities such as Rochester and Philadelphia experiencing levels similar to those historic highs in the 1990s (Hutchinson, 2021). That being acknowledged, as research shows the positive effects of institutionally supported and community-based programmatic efforts at addressing gangs and gang violence (Sharkey, 2018; Tita &

Papachristos, 2010), a more lasting and permanent decline in gang violence could (hopefully) result.

Theory and Research

The third stage of gang study—sometimes referred to as the "Social Problems Era" with a "shift from sociology to criminology and social justice" (Pyrooz & Mitchell, 2015, p. 42)—began in the late 1970s and was marked by "intensive participant observation with gang members" (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007, p. 97) and "data gathered over many years to describe the gangs" (Spindler & Bouchard, 2011, p. 265). Put more simply, while still maintaining a critical eye on structure and environment, this period's focus turned distinctly toward the individual gang member (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Vigil, 1988). An additional evolution was the validation of "self-nomination" by gang member study participants which allowed for more robust and gang member-focused (as opposed to gang [i.e., group]-focused) longitudinal research. Often-cited studies included Vigil's (1988) narrative-based research into Mexican-American gangs in the East Los Angeles community of LA; Sánchez-Jankowski's (1991) study of gangs in Boston, LA, and New York City; Thornberry et al.'s (2003) (originally conducted in 1993) study with gang-involved and delinquent youth in Rochester, New York; and Hill et al.'s study (1999) of gang-deterrence programs in Seattle (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007). Though many more—both earlier and later—studies on gangs had been conducted and appeared frequently in the literature, this selection of important studies clustered mostly in the late 1980s to early 1990s indicated the almost exponential growth of gang studies during that period.

Pyrooz and Mitchell's (2015) overview of gang research showed that between 1986 and 1995, gang-focused publications saw a nearly ten-fold increase. Much of the reason for this

dramatic increase, according to Katz and Jackson-Jacobs (2007), was the "new mix of philanthropic, university, and federal government funding" (p. 97), an insight echoed by Pyrooz and Mitchell (2015) who pointed to "government funding as driving this interest" (p. 41). Support for gang-related research (and subsequent implementation and funding of gang reduction programs) also resulted from new conceptual thinking around gangs with a focus on the internal mechanisms at work for gang membership (Roman et al., 2021)—which itself was due in part to the widening acceptance of more qualitative research approaches (Eidson et al., 2017) (an influential example being that of Vigil [1988] and his narrative approach to a study in East Los Angeles). Another factor was the obvious failure of the "Tough on Crime" era of policing in the 1980s and 1990s (Lynch & Sobel, 1997). This period saw high levels of police abuse and misconduct, inordinately lengthy sentences handed out to (mostly Black and Latino) individuals (often increased by the use of gang labeling, CGIs, and sentencing enhancement practices that have since been proven to be highly subjective and racist [Lopez-Aguado, 2013]), devastating effects on communities of color (Lynch & Sobel, 1997), and political and media hysteria that further demonized and marginalized gang members (Durán, 2006; Hennigan & Sloane, 2013).

A major shift in this period related to the focus on the individual gang member. Whereas programs in the first and second periods often revolved around external elements (such as keeping [generally youth] gang members in school or finding a job [Glueck & Glueck, 1953]), the third period of gang research shifted the focus to the gang members themselves. The interventions, programming, and services that emerged from that individual focus sought to address the internal mechanisms (as opposed to the more external and structural elements that

were the focus of past researchers such as Thrasher [1927] and Cohen [1955]) involved in leading someone to join a gang. These prevailing elements of the third period's gang research and work provided a more nuanced and effective understanding of gang members and what drove them to a life most often filled with trauma, violence, addiction, and other debilitating, long-term consequences (Gebo, 2018; Krohn et al., 2011; Levitt & Venkatesh, 2001).

The third period of gang research also saw a massive expansion of topics addressed within studies and ensuing literature. The majority of the previous two period's research focused on White gangs and delinquency. The third period created a diverse array of topics related to gangs, including, in no particular order: gender (Esbensen et al., 1999; Medina et al., 2012; Vigil, 2008); transnational gangs (Feixa, 2022); social media (Fernández-Planells et al., 2021); hope and resilience (Albert, 2007; Gålnander, 2020; Redner-Vera, 2011; Weaver, 2016); victimization (Fox, 2013; Gagnon, 2018); American Indians (Freng et al., 2012; Hesse et al., 2016); incarceration and gangs (Mallion & Wood, 2020; Pyrooz et al., 2017); international contexts (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022; Klein, 2011b); COVID-19 (Brantingham et al., 2021); and, most importantly for this study, desistance (Giordano et al., 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). This topical expansion also included a growing diversity within the researcher ranks (Katz & Jackson-Jacobs, 2007). While the majority of research and literature was still produced by white, male academics (Atkinson-Sheppard, 2022), the slow but steady increase in voices of color and gender continued to expand the field and offer deeper insights into the world of gangs, gang members, and gang activity.

APPENDIX B:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The structure and design of the interview protocol was based on an example provided by Creswell & Creswell (2018, p. 191).

Introduction

- Interviewer introduces self and explains the purpose and focus of the study, and if needed, will offer general definitions of terms and concepts that will be the focus of the study and interview.
- Interviewer explains the purpose of the interviews and how the interviewee's responses will support the study. Interviewer will offer the option to the interviewee of utilizing a pseudonym. Interviewer will assure the interviewee that all information shared during the course of the interview will be confidential.
- Interviewer will provide a signed consent form to interviewee and explain the purpose of the form. If the form is signed and returned, the interview will move forward. If the interviewee elects not to sign the form, their participation in the study will be terminated.
- Interviewer will ask permission from interviewee to tape the interview. If given permission to record, the interview will move forward. If the interviewee does not give permission, the interviewer will ask if it is acceptable to take notes during the course of the interview. If given permission to take notes, the interview will move forward. If permission is not given, the interview will be terminated.
- Interviewee will have received a list of the Content Questions prior to the interview. At this point, the interviewer will provide a copy of the questions if needed. The interviewer

will also offer to provide any additional information regarding the content and procedure of the interview.

- Interviewer will note the names of himself and the interviewee, as well as the time, date, and location of the interview.
- Interviewer will thank the interviewee for their participation and the interview will begin.

Opening Questions

- Please provide your name, your job title, and the name of your employer.
- What brought you to the work of gangs and gang desistance?
- Why do you feel this is critical and important work?

Content Questions

- What are the most common factors that prompt an individual to join a gang? And why are these factors important to understand for developing strategies to facilitate their desistance from that gang?
- What are the most common factors that instigate the desire of a gang member to desist?
- What services, programs, and/or interventions are most effective in facilitating an individual's desistance from a gang?
- What is the impact of employment on the desistance process? And what types of employment-focused services, programs, and/or interventions are most effective in facilitating an individual's desistance from a gang?

Additional Content Questions for Interviewees Who Have Experienced Gang Desistance

- What motivated you to disengage from the gang?
- What were the challenges you experienced throughout the process and how did you work through them?
- Do you wish you had done anything differently throughout the desistance process or had other forms of support available?
- Why is it valuable to have someone with the lived experience of gang desistance providing support and services to gang desisting individuals?
- Do you believe that desisting from gangs is something that can be completed or is it an ongoing process?

Conclusion of Interview

- Interviewer will ask if the interviewee has any additional comments or questions regarding gang desistance and/or the study itself?
- Interviewer will thank the interviewee for their participation and reassure them that the content of the interview will remain confidential.
- Interview will offer to share the abstract of the finished study to the interviewee if they would like to have it when the study is completed.
- Interviewer will offer his availability via phone or email to the interviewee for any further questions or additional information that the interviewee may have.
- Interviewer will then stop recording and/or note-taking and close the interview.

APPENDIX C:

HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES CLASS SCHEDULE

HOMEBOY INDUSTRIES

CLASS SCHEDULE

January 2022

(revised 12/17/2021)

ACADEMIC			
LIFE SKILLS	SUBSTANCE ABUSE	GROUP THERAPY	
WORK READINESS	SUPPORT GROUPS	WELLNESS/THERAPEUTIC	

MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
9:30am-10:45am:	**9:30am-10:30am:**	**9:00am-11:00am:**	**9:00am-12:00pm:**	**9:00am-12:00pm:**
GOGI-Getting Out by Going In *(Classroom A)*	Morning Meditation *(Classroom A)*	Computer Skills Training *(Career Resource Center)*	Career Resource Center Open Hours *(Career Resource Center)*	Career Resource Center Open Hours *(Career Resource Center)*
9:30am-10:45am:	**9:30am-10:30am:**	**9:00am-12:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**9:00am-12:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**9:00am-3:00pm:**
The Four Agreements *(Classroom B)*	The 7 Habits *(Classroom B)*	Adult Ed High School *(Main St Learning Center)*	GED Prep *(Main St Learning Center & Zoom)*	Study Hall *(Main St Learning Center)*
9:00am-12:00pm: *enrollment required*	**9:00am-12:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**9:00am-3:00pm:**	**9:00am-3:00pm:**	**9:30am-10:30am:**
Adult Ed High School *(Main St Learning Center)*	GED Prep *(Main St Learning Center & Zoom)*	Study Hall *(Main St Learning Center)*	Study Hall *(Main St Learning Center)*	Getting to Know Yourself *(Classroom A)*
9:00am-3:00pm:	**9:00am-12:00pm:**	**9:30am-10:30am:**	**9:15am-9:50am:**	**9:30am-10:30am:**
Study Hall *(Main St Learning Center)*	Career Resource Center Open Hours *(Career Resource Center)*	Men's Group *(Classroom A)*	Yoga *(Turf)*	Homeboy Heals Recovery Group *(Classroom B)*
9:30am-10:30am:	**9:00am-3:00pm:**	**9:30am-10:30am:**	**9:30am-10:30am:**	**9:30am-10:30am:**
Cross Fit *(Turf)*	Study Hall *(Main St Learning Center)*	Women's Group *(Classroom B)*	Mindfulness Meditation *(Classroom A)*	Strongman *(Turf)*
10:00am-12:00pm:	**10:30am-12:00pm:**	**10:30am-12:00pm:**	**9:30am-11:00am:**	**10:30am-12:00pm:**
Career Resource Center Open Hours *(Career Resource Center)*	Criminals & Gang Members Anonymous *(Classrooms A & B)*	Just For Today *(Classroom A)*	Women to Women in Recovery *(Classroom B)*	Living In Balance *(Classroom A)*
11:00am-12:00pm:	**11:00am-12:00pm**	**11:00am-12:00pm:**	**10:03am-11:30am:**	**10:30am-12:00pm:** *enrollment required*
Pathways to College *(Classroom A)*	Cross Fit *(Turf)*	Cross Fit *(Turf)*	Olympic Lifting *(Turf)*	Women Over Violence (POV) *(Classroom B)*
11:00am-1:00pm: *enrollment required*	**12:00pm-1:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**11:00am-12:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**10:30am-12:00pm:**	**1:00pm-2:00pm:**
DV Batterer Intervention for Men *(Classroom B)*	Anger Management (community clients only) *(Classroom B)*	Baby Talk (1st Wed) **12/1 only** *(Group Therapy)*	Homeboy 101 *(Classroom A)*	Art Class Open Studio *(Classroom A)*
1:00pm-2:00pm:	**1:00pm-2:00pm:**	**11:00am-12:00pm:**	**11:00am-1:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**1:00pm-3:00pm:**
Alcoholics Anonymous *(Classroom A)*	Healthy Relationships *(Classroom A)*	Civic Engagement (2nd Wed) *12/8 only* *(Classroom A)*	DV Batterer Intervention for Men *(Classroom B)*	Career Resource Center Open Hours *(Career Resource Center)*
1:00pm-2:00pm: *reserved*	**1:00pm-2:00pm:**	**11:00am-12:00pm:**	**1:00pm-2:00pm:**	**1:00pm-3:00pm:**
Staff Training: Trauma Information *(Classroom B)*	Act It Out/Anger Management *(Classroom B)*	Career Resource Center Open Hours *(Career Resource Center)*	Beyond Substance Abuse *(Classroom A)*	Reserved for Staff Trainings (Solar Panel Information Session *1/14 only*) *(Classroom B)*
1:00pm-3:00pm:	**2:00pm-3:00pm:**	**11:00am-1:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**1:00pm-2:00pm:** *enrollment required*	
Job Search Support *(Career Resource Center)*	Staying Connected *(Classroom A)*	DV Batterer Intervention for Women *(Classroom B)*	Project Fatherhood *(Classroom B)*	****PLEASE NOTE** Classrooms A & B reserved for DMH training on Wednesday 1/26 from 9:30am-1:00pm and Thursday 1/27 from 9:30am-1:00pm.**
1:00pm-3:00pm:	**2:00pm-3:00pm:** *enrollment required*	**1:00pm-2:00pm:**	**1:00pm-3:00pm:**	
Drop-In Tutoring *(Main St Learning Center)*	Breakthrough Parenting *(Classroom B)*	Success Stories for Men (Solar Panel Information Session *1/5 only*) *(Classroom B)*	Job Search Support *(Career Resource Center)*	
2:00pm-3:00pm: *enrollment required*		**1:00pm-3:00pm:**	**2:00pm-3:00pm:**	
Breakthrough Parenting *(Classroom B)*		Drop-In Tutoring *(Main St Learning Center)*	Staying Connected *(Classroom A)*	
2:00pm-3:00pm:		**2:00pm-3:00pm:**	**2:00pm-3:00pm:**	
The Transformational Mindset Workshop *(Classroom A)*		Career Resource Center Open Hours *(Career Resource Center)*	Health Topics (KECK Med School) *(Classroom B)*	
		2:00pm-3:00pm:		
		Anger Management *(Classroom A)*		
		2:00pm-3:00pm:		
		Substance Abuse Group *(1st Street Site)*		

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