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Leaving the Gang: A Review and Thoughts on Future Research

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Leaving the gang: A review and thoughts on future research

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Introduction

Over the past several decades researchers have built a significant amount of knowledge regarding gangs and gang members (see Chapter 2, this volume). This work spans a large number of cities (e.g., Chicago, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, New York City, and St. Louis), academic disciplines (e.g., anthropology, sociology, psychology, and criminology), and methodologies (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches). These studies have helped to inform researchers and policy makers as to why youth join gangs (see Chapter 14, this volume) and what happens to them while they are involved (Decker, Melde, and Pyrooz 2013); however, much less is known about youth who leave gangs. This is partly due to the myth, driven by popular media – such as *West Side Story* – and early gang research, that membership is a lifelong commitment and it is not possible to leave the gang (Bolden 2012; Brenneman 2012; Decker 1996; Krohn and Thornberry 2008; Pyrooz 2014; Ward 2013).

Some ethnographic research has, however, identified the presence of ex-gang members (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Horowitz 1983; Moore 1991; Padilla 1992; Quicker 1983; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Short and Strodbeck 1965; Thrasher 1927/1963; Vigil 1988). Additionally, research that makes use of longitudinal data from Denver, Pittsburgh, Rochester, Seattle, and other multisite samples (i.e., the G.R.E.A.T. evaluation, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, and Pathways to Desistance study) has found that youth typically remain in a gang for only a short period of time (Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Hill, Lui, and Hawkins 2001; Melde and Esbensen 2014; Pyrooz 2014; Thornberry, Huizinga, and Loeber 2004; Thornberry et al. 2003). More specifically, these findings indicate that the majority of youth are gang-involved for less than one year (48% to 69%) and rarely for more than two years (17% to 48%).

These research findings indicate that, for most, gang membership is a temporary status, which has resulted in an increase in gang desistance research across many cities and methodologies. This is an important topical area within gang research because understanding the desistance processes of gang youth should greatly improve gang intervention strategies. While studies examining gang leaving remain few in number, knowledge on this area has grown substantially and the current chapter provides an assessment and discussion of this body of research.

We first discuss the issues associated with defining gang desistance. We then turn our focus to the theoretical perspectives most frequently employed to explain the motivations for leaving the gang. Third, we review and discuss research on the motives, methods, and consequences of gang leaving as well as how they vary across demographics and gang characteristics. Barriers to gang desistance, such as enduring ties with gang peers, are discussed in the fourth section. We conclude with recommendations for policy as well as future research on gang desistance.

Defining gang desistance

The relative lack of research investigating gang desistance may be due, in part, to the difficulties associated with defining desistance. These issues are expected given the conceptual and operational debates surrounding the identification of active gang members (Ball and Curry 1995; Curry and Decker 1997; Esbensen et al. 2001; Matsuda, Esbensen, and Carson 2012) as well as desistance from offending and substance use (Bushway et al. 2001; Maruna 2001). Thinking about operational definitions, researchers often define gang desisters as those youth who self-identified as a gang member at one time point (onset of membership) but no longer identify as a member at a later point (termination of membership) (Carson, Peterson, and

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Esbensen 2013; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Decker et al. 2014; Melde and Esbensen 2011, 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2010; Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013). This operationalization of gang desisters is often referred to as de-identification (Krohn and Thornberry 2008; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013), but research on the cessation of offending behaviors asserts that desistance is more of a process and that simply de-identifying is not enough. In other words, de-identification is the event and disengagement is the process (Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). Of course, desistance from gangs differs from desisting from crime in that the gang is a state while committing a crime is an act (Kissner and Pyrooz 2009; Maruna 2001). That said, gang desistance may be best defined as the process of disengagement or the "declining probability of gang membership" (Pyrooz and Decker 2011).

It is the process of desistance that causes problems when conceptually defining gang leaving. One of the major issues involves the presence of lingering ties to the gang as well as continued involvement in criminal activity. While an individual may de-identify as a gang member, this act does not require desistance from criminal activity or the severing of social and/or emotional ties to the gang (Deane, Bracken, and Morrissette 2007; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Van Winkle 1996). In other words, while an individual may no longer view him/herself as a gang member, they may continue to participate in criminal activities, such as vandalism or illicit substance use, either by themselves or with other peers. They may also participate in these behaviors within the gang context despite no longer self-identifying active membership; this could include social ties such as continuing to wear the former gang's colors, flashing gang signs or sets, as well as continuing to socialize with and participate in substance use and/or other criminal behavior with their former gang peers. In addition, ex-gang members

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may continue to hold emotional ties to their gang; this may include the former member responding if the gang is disrespected by a rival gang member as well as feeling a need to personally retaliate if a former member was hurt. Regardless of de-identification, the routine activities of ex-gang youth may remain largely the same due to external factors such as residing in the same neighborhood as gang friends or the fact that some of these same peers may be relatives or were friends prior to joining the gang. Research importantly demonstrates, however, that as the length of time since de-identification grows, there is a significant reduction in both social and emotional ties to the gang (Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013).

To aid understanding of the process of gang desistance, typologies of self-reported ex-gang members have been proposed (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Decker and Lauritsen (2002) categorized former members based on the presence of emotional ties to the gang and continued involvement in criminal activity. They argued that ex-gang members who relocated or discussed attachment to new families or jobs were among those with no lingering ties to the gang or to criminal activities and could, therefore, be most easily classified as desisted (Decker and Lauritsen 2002). Pyrooz and Decker (2011) further differentiated between active gang members, those socially tied to the gang, older gang members, and true desisters. Specific to gang desisters, their typology included: 1) individuals who have not left their gang and are still participating in crime are current gang members; 2) individuals who have de-identified membership, but still participate in crime are considered socially and emotionally tied to the gang; 3) older members who still assert status in in the gang (i.e., have not de-identified), but are no longer involved in criminal activity with the gang; and 4) true desisters who state that they have left the gang and no longer engage in criminal behavior

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with former gang peers. These typologies are useful post-hoc classifications which illustrate the role of barriers, such as enduring ties, in the desistance process. While little specific research has been completed on these typologies, some support has been demonstrated by work that examines the role of enduring ties in gang leaving (Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). Research completed on the facilitating and lingering effects of gang membership on risk factors and offending patterns may also indicate that gang desisters are retaining ties to their gang (Melde and Esbensen 2014; Thornberry et al. 1993).

While these categorizations help to clarify definitions of gang desistance, they also serve to illustrate the difficulties in discerning when an ex-gang member, in fact, becomes an ex-gang member. It is important for researchers to remain mindful of these issues when conducting research on leaving the gang. An individual with enduring ties to the gang and/or criminal behavior is likely to experience varying motivations, methods, and consequences associated with the process of leaving. Furthermore, consistent definitions across studies and methodologies would result in more accurate comparisons of the issues and processes surrounding gang desistance.

Theoretical perspectives on leaving the gang

As with desistance from general offending, leaving the gang is often examined in light of the age-crime curve. Similarly, gang membership mirrors the life-cycle of criminal behavior, with the pattern of onset, persistence, and desistance being compared to joining, active membership, and leaving (Esbensen et al. 2001; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Thornberry et al. 2003). Due to the overlap between desistance from gang membership and desistance from offending, similar theoretical perspectives are frequently applied to both (Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). While an in-depth discussion of these perspectives is outside the scope of the

current chapter (see Bushway and Paternoster 2013; Laub and Sampson 2003; Maruna 2001), it focuses on how these theoretical perspectives play a role in gang leaving. The gang leaving process, like desistance from delinquency and offending, can begin with doubts internal to the individual, such as cognitive shifts in thinking and/or maturational processes. These internal doubts often change decision making processes, which can create changes in external environments, such as entering into more prosocial roles (Bushway and Paternoster 2013).

The internal desistance process may come in the form of maturational reform and/or cognitive transformations. Maturational reform, according to the age-crime curve, should account for a substantial portion of the desistance process (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). That is, gang youth will eventually age out of the gang similar to the way many offenders age out of criminal behavior. That is not to say that they have grown too old to participate, but the desire to be involved in the gang has faded over time. This is often accompanied by cognitive transformations, or shifts in thought, that lead individuals away from criminal behaviors and criminal networks (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Warr 1993). Giordano and colleagues (2002) posit that in order for cognitive transformations to occur the individual must: 1) be open to change; 2) experience the presence and importance of prosocial opportunities or "hooks for change"; 3) recognize their new identity or "self" as being different from the prior identity; and 4) change the way they view their old behaviors and groups. Importantly, each of these things must occur for an individual to completely desist from criminal behaviors or a criminal group.

Cognitive transformations can play an important role in the continuity and change in individual behavior and associations across multiple stages of the life-course. Just as gang membership is fleeting experience, adolescent peer groups and interpersonal associations are

generally "dynamic and predictably unreliable" (Cairns and Cairns 1994)and can be strongly influenced by physical proximity (Cairns and Cairns 1994; Warr 1996, 2002). Consequently, opportunities for maintaining established and fostering new friendships shift over time and are influenced by changes in a person's daily activities and interactions (e.g., residential moves, extra-curricular involvement, as well as school transitions and classroom changes). As individual goals, needs, and social characteristics (e.g., physical maturity and attractiveness, popularity, and academic and athletic achievement) evolve, cognitive transformations develop and necessitate that established peer groups adapt, reshuffle, or dissipate (Cairns and Cairns 1994). Coupled with the finding that adolescents are routinely involved in multiple friendship groups at once (Reiss 1986; Sarnecki 1986; Warr 1996, 2002), those who experience cognitive transformations may make a conscious decision to distance themselves from and cut ties to delinquent peers and criminal groups (Giordano, 2010; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002).

Once the process of shifting identities begins, individuals also gain access and become more open to external turning points (e.g., marriage, parenthood, meaningful fulltime employment, and victimization) that may serve as an impetus for gang desistance. Sampson and Laub's (1993; Laub and Sampson 2003) age-graded theory of informal social control posits the importance of social bonds, routine activities, and human agency in explaining continuity and change in individual criminal behavior over time (Laub and Sampson 2001; Laub, Sampson, and Sweeten 2008). The perspective places particular emphasis on the role of turning points, or "hooks for change" (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002), and their influence on informal social control and structured activities. These events have the potential to redirect or modify trajectories based on their nature, severity, and duration (Elder 1985; Sampson and Laub 1993,

2005). Sampson and Laub (2005) argued that turning points operate through four distinct

mechanisms which provide new situations that: 1) "knife off" the past from the present; 2)

provide supervision and monitoring as well as new opportunities of social support and growth; 3)

change and structure routine activities; and 4) provide the opportunity for identity transformation

(see also Laub and Sampson 2003).

While the age-graded (i.e., accessible and/or permissible at certain ages) turning points

discussed by Sampson and Laub (1990, 1993, 2005) may not be as applicable to youth gang

members (e.g., military service, employment, parenthood, marriage), these turning points still

represent opportunities for increased prosocial bonds, increased supervision of and structuring of

daily activities, as well as cognitive identity transformation. Therefore, while a youth gang

member may not experience these age-graded hooks for change, they may experience other

turning points that serve a similar purpose. For example, becoming involved in prosocial

activities or clubs may bring about similar changes. In addition, recent research has further

broadened the conceptualization of turning points to include the influence of other deleterious

life experiences such as direct and vicarious violent victimization (Jacques and Wright 2008;

Vecchio 2013). This broadened conceptualization importantly allows the application of the

theoretical framework to the many adolescents who left their gang before attaining access to the

aforementioned age-graded events. Not only do turning points provide the necessary

mechanisms for change in behavior, but individuals routinely recognize the salience of turning

points and identify them as the "causal force" behind their change in behavior (Sampson and

Laub 2005). Others argue, however, that the informal social control mechanisms actually work

via peer group relationships (Warr 1993, 1996, 1998). In other words, employment and marriage

result in less time spent with the gang and, thus, insulate the individual from opportunities to

interact with the former gang fellows and other forces which facilitate criminal activities (Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013).

Overall, these theories suggest that individuals must possess the necessary agency, opportunities, and thought processes (e.g., disillusionment, maturation, violence fatigue) in order for a desire to change to subsequently occur (Bushway and Paternoster 2013; Veysey, Martinez, and Christian 2013). Life events, however, can importantly provide both "hooks for change" within prosocial institutions and act as the "causal force" through which mechanisms for change operate. Given the notable similarities between the stimuli and mechanisms of desistance from gang membership and criminal offending, motivations for abrupt leaving as well as incrementally decreasing gang embeddedness, then, should operate in a manner consistent with these perspectives (see also Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013).

Motives, methods and consequences of leaving the gang

Motives

While motivations for joining and leaving a gang can both be classified as push and pull factors, this is not to say they are the same. Push factors for gang desistance can be considered internal to the member or the gang and serve to push an individual out of gang life (Bjorgo 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Push factors have the potential to "facilitate or hasten" the desistance process because they paint the gang environment as unappealing (Decker and Pyrooz 2011). These push factors are largely consistent with developmental theories and theories of cognitive shift because they typically occur within the individual.

On the other hand, pulls away from the gang are external to the individual. Pulls are most consistent with turning points associated with the life-course perspective and often operate as "hooks for change" because they present active members with more appealing alternatives to

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gang life. As suggested by theories of desistance, push or pull factors are often intertwined and

there may be no single event or motivation that results in leaving the gang. In other words, the

typical ex-gang member experienced multiple motivations for leaving which coalesce to initiate

the disengagement process. Through the accumulation of push and pull factors, gang members

become increasingly aware of the problems and adverse experiences associated with sustained

affiliation (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Vigil 1988).

The most common push factor discussed by ex-gang members can be characterized as

disillusionment. Carson and associates (2013) operationalized motivations for leaving such as "I

just felt like it" and "It wasn't what I thought it was going to be" as disillusionment. They found

that 42 to 55 percent of former gang youth claimed disillusionment as a motive for leaving their

gang. Similarly, Pyrooz and Decker (2011) found that the modal category for motivations for

leaving included comments such as, "I got tired of the gang lifestyle." In qualitative research,

disillusionment is often characterized by statements such as "it wasn't my type of life" (Decker

and Lauritsen 2002) or "I didn't know what I really wanted to do. I just wanted to start by

getting out" (Padilla 1992). Many gang members are thought to become disillusioned by the

inner-workings of the gang or have a perception that the violence has gone too far (Bjorgo 2002;

Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014). Feelings of disillusionment can also arise when individuals

perceive that their gang is not supportive enough (i.e., not visiting in jail/prison or protecting one

another from rival gang threats) or when they believe they are being taken advantage of by their

gang peers (Bjorgo 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Hagedorn 1994; Padilla 1992;

Thrasher 1927/1963; Vigil 1988).

Other commonly found motivations for desistance underscore the maturational process

experienced by gang members (Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014;

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Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Hagedorn 1994; Klein 1971; Spergel 1995; Thrasher 1927/1963; Vigil 1988). Though closely related to disillusionment, the maturational process is a distinct motivation that is associated with aging-out of crime in general. Decker and Pyrooz (2011) found that 73 percent of the gang desisters in their sample reported "growing out of the gang lifestyle." Maturation processes can occur when gang members no longer feel a need for the excitement they once associated with gang life and seek a calmer existence (Bjorgo 2002) as well as with a recognition of the long-term consequences of gang membership (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Spergel 1995).

Disillusionment and maturation are closely intertwined pushes away from gang membership and represent the first doubts about gang membership (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014). That said, the violence associated with gang membership is also thought to generate feelings of disillusionment and foster "growing out of the gang." The number of ex-gang members who discuss the role of violence in their decision to leave the gang varies greatly – from 16 to 67 percent (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Violent motivations range from fear of future violence and vicarious victimization (i.e., victimization of a friend, family member, or gang fellow) to direct experiences with violence (e.g., getting beaten up, stabbed, and shot or shot at). The accumulation of violent experiences may result in violence or "battle" fatigue (Bjorgo 2002; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Spergel 1995; Vigil 1988) and others are directly motivated by "particularly traumatic events" (Moore 1991) or specific violent turning points (Jacques and Wright, 2008; Vecchio, 2013).[i]

While the aforementioned factors may be sufficient to push youth away from their gang, research also suggests the importance of pulls which may operate independently or in tandem with push factors. The role of pull factors, such as official sanctions and police contact, is discussed with some regularity in prior research, with anywhere between 20 and 40 percent reporting criminal justice involvement as a reason for leaving (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Hagedorn 1994; Horowitz 1983; Moore 1991; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Spergel 1995; Vigil 1988). Pull factors may also appear in the form of encouragement from teachers, parents, or other influential adults to leave the gang (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Padilla 1992; Vigil 1988). Moreover, spirituality and religious conversion has been found to be associated with leaving the gang, but is typically accompanied with a crisis or trauma (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Giordano 2010; Spergel 1995).

Other pull factors are often categorized as turning points in the life course or "hooks for change" (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Sampson and Laub 1993). Among these is meaningful employment, which has also been associated with disillusionment and maturational processes (Bjorgo 2002; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Hagedorn 1994; Moore 1991; Padilla 1992; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Spergel 1995; Vigil 1988). Research indicates that between 27 and 61 percent of desisters left the gang because of the responsibilities associated with sustained employment (Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Moore 1991).

Romantic relationships, such as marriages, have also been demonstrated to reduce involvement in criminal offending (Sampson and Laub 1993). Just as with desistance from general criminal behavior, meaningful romantic relationships have been identified as a pull away

from the gang (Bjorgo 2002; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Hagedorn 1994; Horowitz 1983; Moore 1991; Thrasher 1927/1963; Vigil 1988). It is important to note, however, that the role of romantic relationships may vary based on age of the desister. Given age-graded access to the institution, slightly older individuals may discuss the role of marriage in their decision to leave the gang while younger desisters may reference the positive influence of a conventional girlfriend or boyfriend. Also, the quality of these relationships matters. Romantic relationships do not always go smoothly for ex-gang members. Moore (1991) found that the marriages in her Hispanic sample did not typically last and many men had been married on more than one occasion. Furthermore, marital discord can act as a lure back into the gang (Moore, 1991).

Related to the salience of romantic relationships is the importance of parenthood in the leaving process. Between 19 and 63 percent of desisters, both male and female, named family responsibilities such as parenthood as a motivation for distancing themselves from the gang life (Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Fleisher and Krienert 2004; Hagedorn 1994; Moore 1991; Varriale 2008). Moloney and colleagues (2009; 2010) argue that this life event is often the impetus for the change in cognitive identity that precedes a desire to leave the gang and obtain legitimate employment for both males and females. The relationship between parenthood and legitimate employment is especially common for male gang youth (Bjorgo 2002; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Moloney et al. 2009; Moore 1991; Padilla 1992; Vigil 1988).

Less commonly found motivations for leaving the gang include having moved to a new neighborhood, city, or school (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Hagedorn 1994; Padilla 1992; Spergel 1995; Vigil 1988) as well as the dissolution of their gang group (Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Horowitz 1983; Quicker 1999;

Spergel 1995; Thrasher 1927/1963; Vigil 1988). Quantitative accounts have found that 9 to 23

percent of gang desisters cited moving to a new neighborhood or school as a motivation for

leaving the gang (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Pyrooz 2011). Though

relatively uncommon, gang dissolution has been found across a variety of prior research. Seven

percent of desisters identified by Decker and Pyrooz (2011) cited leaving because the "gang fell

apart." That said, the reasons surrounding gang dissolution are likely consistent with other

motivations for leaving the gang (i.e., member mobility, internal strife, violence, police

suppression techniques, and maturation).

While sometimes occurring independently, it is more frequently the case that push and

pull factors work in tandem during the desistance process. Gang youth most commonly become

disillusioned by their involvement in the gang, possibly due to maturation or violence fatigue,

and experience a cognitive shift that creates a desire to leave the gang. These feelings of

disillusionment are often accompanied by significant life events or "hooks for change" outside of

the gang. No doubt a number of intertwining factors play into the decision to begin the

desistance process from the gang and, given this, it is unlikely that this progression occurs

overnight. We now turn our attention to how youth leave gangs.

Methods

While the motivations for leaving explain *why* individuals become ex-gang members,

they are not unrelated from *how* individuals leave their gangs. How individuals leave their gang

typically comes in the form of hostile/active or non-hostile/passive exits (Carson, Peterson, and

Esbensen 2013; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Active exit strategies are generally consistent with

the media portrayals of "blood in, blood out" and are often perpetuated through gang lore

(Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Klein 1971). These involve formal or symbolic acts such as

getting beaten or jumped out of the gang (similar to initiation), being forced to commit a crime, killing one's mother, or through death (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Vigil 1988). Evidence of hostile exit methods is more rarely found in research; typically only 8 to 25 percent of ex-gang members are found to leave in this manner (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Padilla 1992; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Vigil 1988). That said, some research indicates that current gang members promote the gang myth that the only way to leave the gang is through some hostile leaving process (Decker and Lauritsen 2002). Even individuals who have left the gang tend to perpetuate this belief by stating that an "active" exit is the *typical* way to leave the gang, but that it did not apply in their case, stating it "happens, but just not for me" (Decker and Pyrooz 2011).

As opposed to an active leaving processes, the literature more commonly describes passive or non-hostile methods associated with leaving the gang, typically occurring for 50 to 90 percent of gang desisters (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Quicker 1999). Passive methods generally fall into two different categories. First, the knifing-off process is characterized by cutting all ties to the gang, often by moving to a new city, neighborhood, or school (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Decker and Van Winkle 1996). Second, simply drifting away from gang life is common in both quantitative and qualitative research. This is characterized by statements such as "I just walked away" or "I just left" (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Quicker 1999; Vigil 1988). In fact, approximately 40 to 60 percent of gang desisters with passive exit methods

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reported that they "just left" or drifted away from their gang (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Van Winkle 1996).

Overall, these findings indicate that individuals typically are able to walk away from their gangs without experiencing an active or hostile exit process. While the motivations and methods of gang desistance play a large role in the disengagement process, also of concern are the consequences of leaving the gang.[ii]

Consequences

The consequences of gang desistance, or what happens to youth when they leave the gang, are arguably the least understood portion of the desistance process. This is unfortunate because fear of consequences can often act as a barrier in the disengagement process. Consequences can occur because ex-gang members may still be viewed as belonging to their gang by those outside of the gang, such as rival gang members, police, and people in their community (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Moloney et al. 2010; Padilla 1992). This sustained identification as gang-involved can lead to continued questioning and harassment by police officers as well as fear of violence from rival gangs. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) reported that 74 percent of their sample of ex-gang members reported that they were still viewed as gang members by the police, which may result in being stopped or questioned by police, arrested, and being listed in a database of gang members. This sustained application of the gang label is an important barrier, particularly in the context of labeling theory. It may be that being labeled a gang member will reinforce the individuals gang values, thus pulling them back into the gang (Becker 1963; Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera 2006; Caspi, Bem, and Elder 1989).

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Also, rival gangs are not likely to forgive nor to forget prior trespasses simply because an individual de-identified as a gang member. Decker and Van Winkle (1996: 263) suggested that past antagonisms may "have the effect of drawing the 'former' member back into the gang or lead the ex-member to depend on the gang for protection." For instance, ex-gang members often report that a friend or family member was violently victimized at the hands of their former gang or a rival gang (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Pyrooz 2011).

Other less commonly identified consequences include experiencing threats (15%) or losing gang friends (11%) (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013). While some research suggests that harassment and threats of violence have a strong impact on individuals attempting to leave their gang (Bjorgo 2009), other research indicates that these threats may not be taken seriously by former gang members (Decker and Van Winkle 1996). While in a gang many youth report feeling familial ties to their gang, which can hinder their desistance process. Losing their gang friends, therefore, begins to feel more like walking away from their family and, in some cases, their heritage (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Horowitz 1983; Padilla 1992; Vigil 1988). Losing gang friends may feel like a loss of social capital to desisted youth as well (Moule Jr., Decker, and Pyrooz 2013). That said, losing gang friends may also be a positive consequence as desisted youth report less involvement with delinquent peers (Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013), but still more than their non-gang counterparts (Melde and Esbensen 2014).

While the limited amount of prior research has identified detrimental effects associated with leaving the gang, many ex-gang members report that there were no consequences. Carson and associates (2013) found that between 42 and 57 percent of youth reported that they did not experience any negative consequences upon gang desistance. While some individuals who do not experience consequences may not have fully desisted and/or have enduring ties to the gang, it

may also be that their motivations for leaving the gang are understood or supported by their gang peers (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Padilla 1992). In other words, the gang may see the underlying logic in why the individual is leaving the gang and not penalize the person.

It is also arguable that desisters may experience positive consequences. In line with the literature on desistance from offending, these consequences could come in the form of a more positive sense of self, increased commitment to family and/or education, and involvement in prosocial activities and groups. Some research has indicated that gang members report experiencing increased respect from legitimate individuals (i.e., outside of the street and the gang) (Padilla 1992). The validations and confirmations that one is no longer a gang member help in the maintenance process as well (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014).

Overall, the most common disengagement process involves becoming disillusioned with gang life, drifting away from the gang in a passive or non-hostile manner, and experiencing no adverse consequences. While this is the most frequently reported path out of gang life, it is far from the only conduit for desistance. Many gang youth still experience hostile exits (i.e., being jumped or beaten out of their gang) and face continued harassment from police and rival gang members. It is also possible that the two divergent paths may be a result of the motivations and situations surrounding why youth decide to leave their gangs. Ex-gang members who leave for reasons associated with violence or battle fatigue, for example, may be more likely to experience hostile exits and negative consequences after leaving their gang. Pyrooz and Decker (2011) found that 30 percent of desisters who experienced a push motive, such as violence, were likely to also experience an active or hostile method of leaving the gang. Conversely, violent incidents and may also hasten maturation reform (Vigil 1988); youth who leave due to disillusionment or

maturation are often able to simply avoid interactions and drift away from their gang without fanfare or consequences (Quicker 1983, 1999; Vigil 1988). This is particularly true when maturation is combined with a pull motive such as legitimate employment, marriage/dating relationship, and/or parenthood (Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Quicker 1999).

Variations in motives, methods, and consequences

 Somewhat less examined is how the motives, methods, and consequences vary across demographics (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity, and age), gang embeddedness, and levels of offending and victimization. Only a few studies have made direct comparisons across these variables using the same sample; unfortunately, most comparisons have been made across different research samples.

 Prior research demonstrates that the female gang experience differs from that of males (Esbensen and Deschenes 1998; Esbensen et al. 2010; Miller 2001; Miller and Brunson 2000; Miller and Decker 2001; Peterson 2012). Chief among these differences is that females join and exit gangs at a younger age (Esbensen and Huizinga 1993; Thornberry et al. 1993). Despite this, the motivations, methods, and consequences of gang desistance remain similar to across gender (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Moore 1991; Peterson 2012; Quicker 1999). Carson and colleagues (2013) compared males and females and found that both frequently reported feelings of disillusionment, passive exit strategies, and a lack of consequences in their disengagement processes. One notable exception is the effect of family commitments, such as marriage and parenthood. Female desisters were more likely to be living with their spouse and were more likely than males to report parenthood as a desistance motivation (Hagedorn 1994; Moloney et al. 2010; Moloney et al. 2009; Moore 1991). Prior research has found that 71 percent of mothers

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desisted from their gang, while 50 percent of fathers maintained some form of gang involvement (Moloney et al. 2010; Moloney et al. 2009).

Studies comparing desistance processes across race/ethnicity have been particularly limited, but suggest that there are few, if any, differences. Carson and associates (2013) found that youth of all races and ethnicities still most frequently reported feelings of disillusionment and passive exit strategies. Qualitative literature, focusing primarily on Hispanic or African-American samples, typically report consistency in desistance motivations, particularly emphasizing the role of violence and maturation (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Hagedorn 1994; Hagedorn and Devitt 1999; Horowitz 1983; Vigil 1988). In terms of the methods of gang desistance, Vigil's (1988) work suggests that Chicano gangs are likely to experience hostile exit rituals, but other research suggests more passive rituals are present regardless of ethnicity or race (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Quicker 1983). Furthermore, Hispanic gang desisters were more likely to experience violent consequences compared with other leavers (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013). Although few differences across race/ethnicity are found for gang leaving, there is evidence to suggest that the methods and consequences associated with leaving may vary, with violence playing a greater role for some groups.

Importantly, prior research demonstrates that some motivations for leaving the gang can vary by age. For example, external pulls such as marriage, military involvement, and job/family responsibilities are likely to be more relevant as a gang member approaches adulthood (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Moore 1991; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). In addition, Vigil (1988) finds that older gang members are likely to name official sanctions such as imprisonment as a reason for quitting the gang lifestyle. In a direct comparison, Carson and associates (2013) found that older youth were more likely to report violent motivations and active methods of gang desistance.

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An individual's level of embeddedness with the gang also plays an important role in the desistance process. Embeddedness refers to the immersion in deviant criminal networks and involvement in criminal acts, particularly at the expense of prosocial networks (Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013). A gang youth's level of embeddedness is typically classified as "core" or "peripheral." Level or amount of embeddedness often varies with time and across individual gang members and has been found to affect the disengagement process leading to longer time periods in a gang (Horowitz 1983; Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). Peripheral members (or fringe members) are among those that experience intermittent membership and simply drift in and out of gang life (Bolden 2012; Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013; Spergel 1995). In addition, they are likely to have an easier path out of the gang and are more likely to experience non-hostile exits (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Horowitz 1983; Moore 1991; Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013; Spergel 1995; Vigil 1988). This is expected given that peripheral gang youth are less involved with antisocial peers, unstructured activities, and offending and victimization than their more embedded fellows, which makes it less challenging for them to disengage from gang life (Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). Other research, however, finds that peripheral members frequently name violence as a motivation for leaving the gang, while core members report feelings of disillusionment (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013).

While desistance processes may vary by demographic characteristics and level of gang embeddedness, it is reasonable to expect they may also vary based on participation in offending and experiences with victimization. Gang members, then, who participate in higher levels of violence and experience greater victimization, are likely to have different desistance processes than those involved in lower levels of both. Highly victimized individuals might, for instance, be

more likely to report violent motivations for leaving the gang. Studies comparing the motives, methods, and consequences of gang membership across individual offending and victimization provide mixed results. Some research indicates that youth with high rates offending and victimization also reported violent motivations as well as hostile methods of desistance (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013) while others find that there is no variation across these variables (Pyrooz and Decker 2011).

Enduring ties and barriers in the desistance process

While individuals often experience many interrelated reasons for leaving their gang, there are often factors that serve as barriers to desistance. One of the most prolific hindrances to desistance is the presence of enduring ties to the gang. As mentioned above, these can come in the form of emotional or social ties and may inhibit youths' ability to de-identify as a gang member and/or attenuate their involvement in criminal activities. Furthermore, persisting ties may be the impetus of several consequences associated with leaving the gang, such as continued gang harassment and victimization (Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2010).

The continuing presence of ties to the gang, particularly social ties, may be due to the fact that living in the community and/or attending school puts these individuals in proximate contact with their former gang (Brunson and Miller 2009; Curry, Decker, and Egley Jr. 2002; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Spergel 1995). It may also be that gradually severing gang ties is part of the disengagement process and, thus, a natural step towards gang desistance. In fact, the number of persisting ties decreases the longer the youth has been away from the gang (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2010). Specifically, Pyrooz and associates (2010) found that two years of gang desistance resulted in a 50 percent reduction in gang ties. Regardless, the presence of continued social ties to the gang may affect the turning

points that are often related to the decision to leave the gang. Even after marriage, research shows that some ex-gang members still hang around with peers from their neighborhood (Moloney et al. 2009; Moore 1991). In addition, continued involvement with the gang created problems for both male and female gang parents (Moloney et al. 2010; Moloney et al. 2009).

Many of the consequences associated with leaving the gang may act as barriers to desistance as well. These consequences may come in the form of realistic concerns or perceived threats based on gang lore. Sustained identification as a gang member can lead to fear of violence from rival gangs or to continued harassment from police officers. This fear of violence and/or official sanctions, then, may both motive and inhibit gang desistance (Bjorgo 2009; Decker and Pyrooz 2011; Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Spergel 1995) – with members believing that neither rival gangs nor the police will recognize their new non-member status. For others, the risk and fear of violence from rival gangs may lead to maintaining ties to the gang even after de-identification. In addition, the inability to attain meaningful employment is a major concern for gang members. This may be especially true for desisters who have visible gang tattoos and are still maintaining a style of dress commonly associated with gang membership. Vigil (1988) noted the importance of the "cholo" style to the identity of gang members and found that when leaving the gang, individuals try to conform to more conventional styles. A limited employability may lead desisters to retain involvement with the gang for monetary gain (e.g., selling drugs). Moloney and colleagues (2009) found that many fathers maintained involvement in the gang so they could provide for their children.

The impact of gang desistance literature on policy

Gang desistance literature plays an important role in policy formation and has implications for policy makers and practitioners. Most gang researchers agree that

understanding the mechanisms surrounding leaving the gang will help to lower rates of offending

and victimization as well as reduce the consequences and costs of imprisonment (Clear, Rose,

and Ryder 2001; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2010). In addition, decreasing the time that

individuals spend in gangs may reduce the long-term consequences associated with gang

involvement (Peterson 2012; Thornberry et al. 2003). The following discussion provides an

overview of how the gang desistance literature has informed policy. While some of these issues

are applicable to all youth, it is important to note that there is some variation in availability based

on age.

        Gang desisters have identified a number of motivating factors that impact their decision

to leave the gang. As noted above, many of these factors arise in conjunction with feelings of

disillusionment and/or maturational reform. These findings highlight an opportune time to

intervene in the lives of gang youth. According to the gang response pyramid, prevention is

important for the majority of the population and youth at-risk for gang membership (Wyrick

2006). Intervention is appropriate for youth who are active gang members, those in the early

stages of membership, or at a point where they can pulled out of the gang (Decker 2008).

Desistance research can provide policy makers information on the best points when youth can be

pulled from the gang. It is at these points that where practitioners associated with outreach

programs and trauma intervention programs may make the greater difference in the lives of a

gang member.

        A number of ex-gang members report motivations for leaving their gang that are based in

violence (i.e., fear and perceptions of violence as well as vicarious and direct victimization).

While some forms of violence can serve to increase group solidarity (i.e., associated with gang

rituals and lore), there does seem to be an upper limit to the amount of violence gang youth are

willing to tolerate. This has led to the identification of violent incidents as a key intervention point for gang youth (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Peterson 2012). When practitioners come into contact with gang youth via a direct or vicarious violent incident, this may be an ideal time to discuss the continued costs of gang membership. Such a discussion may serve to create or foster feelings of disillusionment and maturational reform. Furthermore, intervention strategies should be implemented as temporally close as possible to the violent event so that the gang cannot cast it in a more favorable light (thus, increasing solidarity) (Decker and Van Winkle 1996).

Another key intervention point is parenthood. While this does not imply that we should encourage unplanned pregnancy, it still recognized as an important turning point both for involvement in gangs and criminal behavior. For instance, Moloney and colleagues (2009) argue that gang members who were once uninterested in treatment or interventions may change their mind after becoming a parent. Parenthood can create feelings of maturational reform as well as increase the likelihood of wanting to attain legitimate employment or return to school. In fact, parenthood provides an opportune moment for the very role transitions that create and maintain desistance (Moloney et al. 2010; Moloney et al. 2009). To be sure, we are not encouraging teen pregnancy, but argue that the advent of parenthood may serve as an opportunity for practitioners to discuss the adverse impact of the gang on the lives of these individuals and their newly formed families (Fleisher and Krienert 2004). Practitioners, then, would benefit from promoting family commitments and other turning points (i.e., meaningful employment) when in contact with gang-involved individuals (Decker and Pyrooz 2011).

Overall, these intervention points indicate the importance of discussing the costs and benefits of gang membership. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) found that gang members

frequently stated that discussing the pros and cons of membership would have helped to prevent their gang joining. This tactic could also be employed to encourage gang desistance. If, for instance, a practitioner comes into contact with a gang youth, this may serve as the perfect opportunity to discuss the costs and benefits of their continued involvement. Also, when intervening with gang members, it is likely that assessing the readiness of the youth to leave the gang will make interventions more successful (McGloin 2005; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2010; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). Therefore, practitioners are encouraged to take into account an individual's level of gang embeddedness before attempting an interventionist approach.

This discussion of the motivations for gang desistance also demonstrates the need for practitioners from different arenas to coordinate their efforts. When an intervention opportunity arises, it would be highly useful for schools, police, social services, and neighborhood workers to communicate and coordinate their efforts to help gang youth desist. Strategies for prevention and intervention are likely to be more effective when practitioners from varying arenas work together to intervene in the lives of gang youth (Bjorgo 2002).

Avenues for future research

While much has been learned about gang desistance, this literature is still in its infancy. There remains a great deal to learn about the many aspects of the process of gang disengagement. This final section provides a brief overview of some of these avenues for future research and makes suggestions to gang desistance researchers.

Research to date has identified a variety of motivations, methods, and consequences associated with gang desistance. However, considerably less is known about the extent to which these motivations may vary across gang characteristics and demographics. In order to fully

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understand the desistance process, researchers should expand their investigations to include variations across gang types (e.g., Maxson and Klein 1995), gang embeddedness, as well as length of time spent in the gang. Future desistance research would also benefit from further understanding of how these motivations vary across gender, race and ethnicity (particularly across country of origin within the Hispanic ethnicity), and age.

Extended knowledge on how the motives, methods, and consequences of leaving are interrelated is another important avenue for future research. For instance, increased understanding of the temporal ordering of push and pull factors leading to gang desistance is particularly important. Does a violent event spur feelings of disillusionment or is an accumulation of violent events necessary? Do feelings of maturational reform result in the desire for legitimate employment and increased school commitment? Is there a cumulative effect of the various pushes and pulls and is there a tipping point, or upper limit, associated with leaving the gang (Moloney et al. 2009; Vigil 1988)? Researchers should also examine if certain motivations for leaving the gang are associated with passive versus active methods. Furthermore, are they related to experiencing consequences when leaving the gang? These interrelationships may also vary based on gang characteristics and demographics, as discussed above. It may be that youth who leave through passive means and experience no consequences have continued social and emotional ties to the gang or that they were never really embedded in the gang. Given the increase in violent offending and victimization experienced during membership, it is important for criminologists to further understand the role of violence in the disengagement process. For instance, how does the role of violence work with disillusionment and maturational reform? Given the range of youth who discuss violent motivations and variations in the violent

experiences (i.e., fear and perceptions of risk as well as vicarious and direct violence), there are still many topics to pursue in this avenue of research.

In terms of suggestions for research practice, we encourage researchers to pay careful attention to how they define and operationalize desistance. Operationalizations may have an effect on the desistance processes (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013) and there are many difficulties in defining when an ex-gang member is, in fact, an ex-gang member (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011). Furthermore, close attention should be paid to the presence of enduring ties and continued involvement in criminal activities as they may indicate the varying stages of progression along the path to desistance.

Also, we encourage researchers to rely less on criminal justice channels (e.g., police, courts, probation, and social service agencies) in the sampling process when examining gang desistance. A number of studies have focused on youths and adults who were interviewed and contacted due to their involvement in a criminal justice system or street outreach programs (Deane, Bracken, and Morrissette 2007; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule Jr. 2014; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2010; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013), while informative and beneficial (i.e., presence of high-risk youth and large sample of gang desisters), these samples have limitations. These individuals are likely to be more heavily involved with law-breaking and may not be representative of all gang members or desisters (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Moore 1991; Wright et al. 1992). As Sweeten and colleagues (2013:491) stated, "there is nothing inherently criminal about being a gang member." In addition, interviews conducted outside of law enforcement and social service agencies allow researchers to take advantage of observations of neighborhoods and may help to increase the validity of the interview responses (Decker and Lauritsen 2002).

Conclusion

While gang desistance research has only recently gained ground in criminology, it is important to remember what has been learned. Gang membership is a temporary phenomenon for the vast majority of individuals; with membership generally lasting one year or less. Disengaging from gang life is a process in which individuals typically become disillusioned with gang life or experience feelings of maturation – often hastened along by violent and prosocial turning points. They then begin to search out opportunities external to gang life and typically drift away from their gang friends. Importantly, this desistance process generally occurs with little fanfare or consequences and, notably, without a violent jumping out ceremony. That said, the period of gang involvement is still fraught with violence and, even after exiting the gang, these youth may experience more risk factors and higher offending rates than non-gang youth (Melde and Esbensen 2014) Though primary prevention efforts remain of key importance, the chapter underscores the importance of intervention efforts in the lives of gang youth. It is important that gang youth are not treated as a lost cause, because even modest reductions in the duration of membership can have immediate as well as long-term benefits for the youth and the community.

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[i] The frequency in which violence is discussed as a motivation may be surprising given that prior research on violence and gangs finds that violence serves to increase the solidarity and cohesion of the gang (Decker 1996; Hagedorn 1988; Klein 1971; Padilla 1992; Vigil 1988). Decker and Van Winkle (1996) argue these divergent findings might be due origin of the violence. Violent motivations which are given for leaving often involve external or inter-gang threats (i.e., outside of the gang). This type of violence seems to be more "real" and salient to members and tends to facilitate a sense of disillusionment and violence fatigue. Internal or intra-gang violence, such as violence associated with gang group functions (i.e., initiation and exit rituals) and mythic violence (i.e., the glorification of violent stories), intensify the bonds of membership (Decker and Van Winkle 1996).

[ii] The consequences of gang membership are vast and have been discussed multiple times in prior research; however, this discussion focuses only what happens to desisters once they have left the gang.