

Responding to Girls in Gangs

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Introduction

From 2012 to 2015, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) conducted research in California to examine the individual, family, and community factors involved in girls' experiences with and desistance from gangs and gang-related crime. The goals of NCCD's study included identifying girls' reasons for joining gangs, their experiences and activities related to gang involvement, and their motivations and strategies for transitioning away from gangs. This executive summary presents key findings from NCCD's interviews with 114 gang-involved girls. It also provides recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and others who are interested in improving outcomes for gang-involved girls.

Methods

This study had two phases of data collection: (1) individual interviews with key stakeholders (including former gang members, outreach workers, and researchers), and (2) individual interviews with gang-involved girls and young women. A small advisory board composed of individuals with expertise in gang outreach and in intervention work with girls worked closely with NCCD researchers to guide the study's research and recruitment methods.

NCCD developed two instruments for data collection. For stakeholder interviews, NCCD created a qualitative, semistructured interview guide to collect information about participants' personal experiences with gang desistance (for those who were formerly gang involved) and the impact this has on their work with girls; knowledge gained through working with girls about factors affecting desistance; and best practices in engaging with and intervening in the lives of gang-involved girls. For interviews with girls, NCCD developed an instrument to gather quantitative and qualitative

data through scale-based survey items and open-ended questions that assessed girls' life experiences, involvement in gangs and gang-related activities, and desistance efforts. Most items were based on published scales that were modified by the advisory board, as needed, to be appropriate for gang-involved girls; others were semistructured questions created for this study.

Understanding that terms such as "gang" and "gang member" may carry stigma and are often used as negative labels, particularly in low-income communities of color, NCCD worked closely with the advisory board to implement research methods designed to accurately and sensitively capture girls' experiences. This approach included coordinating with key stakeholders, advisory board members, and other community partners to help identify girls who were interested in participating in the study; it also focused on asking girls open-ended interview questions about their gang membership and involvement, which allowed them to define their lived experiences in their own words.



Findings

The findings reported here are based on interviews with 114 gang-involved girls and young women; the sample size (or n size) for individual items may vary. As these findings describe the experience of a specific group of interview participants and was not designed to be a representative sample, these data cannot necessarily be generalized to the larger population of gang-involved girls.

Findings are presented in two main sections. The first section presents highlights from the quantitative data, including a profile of interview participants and information about their experiences while involved in gangs. The second section focuses on qualitative data to contextualize the quantitative findings and includes an examination of why and how girls join or become associated with gangs, their role(s) in gangs, and why and how they leave gangs.

Characteristics of Interview Participants

Location: Participants were interviewed in eight California cities: Hayward, Los Angeles, Oakland, Richmond, Salinas, San Francisco, San Jose, and San Leandro. The largest percentages of participants were interviewed in Los Angeles (33%), San Jose (25%), and San Francisco (18%). Participants did not necessarily live in the city in which their interviews took place. For confidentiality purposes, interviewees were not asked in what city they lived or were involved in gang activity.

Age: Participants ranged in age from 14 to 25 years. Participants' median age was 18 years. About half the participants (48%) were between the ages of 17 and 19.

Race/Ethnicity: Participants identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino (44%), Black/African American

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(36%), Mixed Race (14%), Native American (3%), Pacific Islander (2%), or White (1%).

Country of Origin: Most participants reported being born in either the United States (88%) or Mexico (11%). About two thirds (68%) had at least one parent born in the United States, and more than one third (36%) reported having at least one parent born in Mexico.

Sexual Orientation: When asked about sexual orientation, about 71% of participants identified as straight and 29% as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning (LGBTQ).

Romantic Relationships: Three quarters (75%) of participants reported being in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview. Most (82%) participants reported dating a gang member at the time of the interview or in the past.

Pregnancy and Parenting: About two fifths (39%) of participants were pregnant and/or were parents at the time of the interview. For those participants with children, the majority (87%) reported that all or some of their children live with them.



Education and Employment: Nearly three quarters (73%) of participants were in school, doing job training, and/or working at the time of the interview. More than half (54%) were attending school, and more than one third (36%) were in job-training programs. While the majority (81%) said they had worked at some point in time, less than half (43%) were working when interviewed.

Justice Involvement: Participants demonstrated significant involvement with the justice system. At some point in their lives, nearly three quarters (72%) had been arrested, half (50%) had been on probation, and about half (52%) had been in detention or placement.

Justice and Gang Involvement of Participants' Families: Almost every participant reported that at least one person in her family had previous justice and/or gang involvement. Most (96%) participants had at least one family member who had been arrested, and 92% had at least one family member who had been in jail or prison. Additionally, 87% of participants had at least one gang-involved family member.¹

Gang Membership and Activity Level

Interview participants were asked about their gang membership status and activity level. Regarding membership status, each participant was asked if she considered herself an associate of a gang, a gang member, or neither. The study used the following definitions for membership, developed in consultation with stakeholder interviewees and based on previous research (Carlie, 2002; Howell & Griffiths, 2015).

- **Associates:** Refers to girls who do not consider themselves to be official gang members, but do participate in gang activities. For some gangs, "associate" girls are rarely considered official members. As a result, girls may associate with and participate in the activities of a gang, but they may not formally be initiated and therefore do not identify as gang involved. Associates may be friends of or romantically involved with gang members. Associates, in general, are able to fade into and out of gang activities and to decide how deeply they want to be involved.²
- **Gang members:** Refers to girls who consider themselves to be officially part of a gang. Some of these girls are legacies, meaning they have family members who were part of the same gang. This category also includes girls who are formally initiated into a gang.

About two thirds (67%) of participants identified as an "associate," and about one quarter (28%) as a "gang member." A small percentage (5%) did not identify as a gang member or an associate; however, they were involved with gang activity or knew gang members in their neighborhood and were thus considered "at risk" for gang involvement.

¹ The terms "family" and "family member" can include biological family, legal family, extended family, and close friends.

² Although NCCD's interview instrument used the term "associate," NCCD researchers learned during the interview process that girls who consider themselves an associate may choose to refer to themselves as an "affiliate" instead.

Interview participants also were asked if they considered themselves active or inactive in their gang at the time of the interview. This approach, recommended by the advisory board, was used instead of specifically asking participants if they had left their gang. According to the advisory board, some girls may never fully be able to leave the gang but can stop being active in it. “Active” or “inactive” were defined not necessarily in the sense of having left a gang, but by considering such factors as time (amount of time spent with gang-involved peers), location (whether the participant’s primary focus is on activities at home or in the streets), and degree of interaction (level of engagement with gang-involved peers), an approach consistent with similar research (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004).

According to the study’s advisory board, some girls may never fully be able to leave the gang but can stop being active in it.

The study’s definitions for gang activity level are summarized below.

- **Active:** Refers to girls who were not attempting to leave the gang. These girls were continuing to spend time with the gang and “putting in work” (e.g., engaging in activities that a gang might ask an individual to do, such as fighting rival gang members or participating in criminal activity with or on behalf of the gang).
- **Inactive:** Refers to girls who were staying away from gang activity. This includes

those who were slowly attempting to leave their gang and those who had completely disengaged with gang members and gang activity.

Most interview participants (85%) stated that they were inactive at the time of the interview, while 15% reported being actively involved in a gang. As many participants were interviewed through intervention and street outreach programs, this may be a contributing factor to why a large proportion of the study sample considered themselves inactive.

Augmenting these statistics, the qualitative data indicate that participants’ gang membership status and activity level tended to be fluid and nuanced. For example, in some cases a participant who identified as an associate could demonstrate similar behaviors as those who considered themselves members.

Crime/Delinquency, Aggression, and Substance Use

The study used several measures to examine interview participants’ self-reported levels of risk behavior, including criminal behavior, gang-related activities, aggression, and substance use. Analysis of these data included examining differences by participants’ self-identified gang membership status and activity level; when statistically significant, these differences are reported here.

Delinquency, Crime, and Gang-Related Activities

Interview participants’ delinquency during two time periods (in the past year, in their lifetime) was assessed with a self-reported delinquency scale adapted from the National Youth Survey (Elliott & Ageton, 1980; Elliott, Ageton, & Huizinga, 1985). Table 1 displays the items with the highest means for all respondents.

NCCD's analysis included classifying lifetime responses into one of five offense-type subscales—person, property, public order, service,³ and status offenses—and examining the relationship between delinquency and gang involvement. Public order and person offenses were statistically significant related to gang membership; participants who self-identified as gang members reported committing these types of offenses more often than those who identified as associates/at risk.⁴

Participants were asked if they engaged in various activities as part of their gang. Overall, the most common activities were being asked, being forced, or volunteering to commit a violent act (72%); to deal drugs (66%); and to carry or hide a gun (61%). A statistically significant higher percentage of participants who identified as gang members reported that they had been asked, had been forced, or had volunteered to carry or hide a gun (79%) than associate/at risk participants (51%).⁵

Aggression

Participants' self-reported aggressive behavior was measured with a scale adapted from the multidimensional peer-victimization scale (Mynard & Joseph, 2000). Table 1 shows the items with the highest means for all respondents.

NCCD used four subscales (physical aggression, verbal aggression, attacks on property, and social manipulation) to examine differences by gang membership and activity level. Participants who identified as active had higher scores on the attacks on property subscale ($M = 2.4$) and the physical aggression subscale ($M = 2.4$) than did inactive participants ($M = 1.8$ and $M = 1.9$, respectively); both are statistically significant differences.⁶

Table 1: Self-Reported Delinquent and Aggressive Behavior

Item	Mean	N
Delinquent Activities, Lifetime (scale of 1–4)		
Purposely damaged or destroyed property (belonging to parents, school, local businesses, etc.)	2.8	100
Knowingly bought, sold, or held stolen goods (or tried to do any of these things)	2.7	101
Avoided paying for things (movies, bus/subway rides, food, etc.)	2.7	101
Been involved in gang fights	2.7	100
Stolen (or tried to steal) something worth more than \$50	2.7	101
Aggressive Behavior, Last Year (scale of 1–5)		
Called someone names	3.2	108
Swore at someone	3.2	108
Refused to talk to someone	2.9	108
Made fun of someone for some reason	2.4	107
Talked about someone behind his/her back	2.3	108

Substance Use

Participants were asked to describe their level of use of a range of substances, over the course of their lifetime and during the previous month. Substance use was prevalent, but there was not a statistically significant relationship to gang membership or activity level. For the most commonly used substances, see Table 2.

³ Person offenses include simple assault and aggravated assault. Examples of public order offenses include public drunkenness and disorderly conduct. Conducting illegal sales or services, such as selling drugs, are examples of service offenses.

⁴ Self-identified gang members reported committing person offenses more often during their lifetime ($M = 2.3$) than those who identified as associates or at risk ($M = 1.8$), $t(99) = -3.37$, $p < .05$. Members ($M = 2.4$) also reported lifetime higher levels of public order offenses than associate/at-risk participants ($M = 1.9$), $t(99) = -3.18$, $p < .05$.

⁵ $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 7.02$, $p = .01$

⁶ $t(99) = -2.02$, $p = .05$ for both.

Table 2: Self-Reported Substance Use

Item	Lifetime (Used one or more times)		Previous Month (Used one or more times)	
	% "Yes"	N	% "Yes"	N
Marijuana	96%	110	67%	105
Alcohol (wine, hard liquor)	85%	110	61%	93
Beer	58%	108	61%	64
Hallucinogens	32%	108	8%	36
Cocaine	29%	109	22%	32

Victimization and Trauma

The study used several measures to examine self-reported levels of victimization and trauma, including violence and victimization, sexual exploitation, and loss of significant relationships. See Table 3.

Violence and Victimization

The study examined types of violence that interview participants experienced through gang involvement. Overall, 86% of participants witnessed violence and nearly half (49%) had a violent act committed against them as part of a gang, both of which were statistically significant related to gang membership. A higher percentage of participants who identified as gang members witnessed violence (100%) and were victims of violence (72%) compared with associate/at risk participants (81% and 40%, respectively).⁷

Sexual Exploitation

The study explored whether participants were victims of sexual exploitation and abuse in their

gang. A small percentage (2%) reported being sexed into their gang. A larger percentage (14%) reported being asked or forced by their gang-involved partner or gang to have sex with gang members and/or non-gang affiliated individuals. Of this group, about half had been asked to do so for money.

Loss of Relationships

Participants were asked if they had lost any important relationships (including partner/spouse, family members, friends, etc.) during the past year due to death, incarceration, breakup, moving, or any other reason. In all, 84% said they had experienced the loss of one or more relationships. Of participants who reported lost relationships, 76% said at least one loss was due to death and 46% said at least one was due to incarceration; many girls experienced losses for both reasons. A higher percentage of inactive participants reported losses due to death compared with active participants; the difference was not significant, however.

Table 3: Self-Reported Experiences of Victimization and Trauma

Experience	% "Yes"	N
Witnessed violence as part of gang	86%	112
Lost important relationship(s) due to death, incarceration, breakup, moving, etc. (past year)	84%	103
Had violent act committed against them as part of gang	49%	114
Asked or forced by gang-involved partner or gang to have sex with gang members and/or non-gang affiliated individuals	14%	112
Sexed into gang	2%	114

⁷ Witnessed violence: $\chi^2(1, N = 100) = 6.33, p < .01$; victim of violence: $\chi^2(1, N = 102) = 8.87, p < .01$

Social Supports

Participants' types of social support were assessed using several measures. This included a modified version of the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (Norbeck, Lindsey, & Carrieri, 1981) for participants to describe significant people in their life. Participants who self-identified as inactive had more social supports ($M = 5.7$) than those who were active ($M = 4.3$), a statistically significant difference.⁸

Overall, about two thirds of participants reported having a best friend (68%) and having a mentor either inside or outside of their family (66%). Nearly three quarters (73%) of inactive participants reported having a best friend compared to 25% of active participants, a statistically significant difference.⁹ In addition, a higher percentage of inactive participants said they had a mentor (46% outside of the family and 55% within the family) compared with active participants (25% and 36%, respectively); however, these differences were not significant.

Joining Gangs

Analysis of the study's qualitative data showed that interview participants' situations in various life domains, including those of family, neighborhood, and peers, had an impact on their involvement in gang activities. Additionally, participants' motivations for joining or being involved with a gang are often a result of multiple factors and may not reflect an active choice to pursue gang involvement.

How Do Girls Join Gangs?

The question of joining a gang was not applicable to all participants and was dependent on such factors as the type of gang that participants were part of, participants' relationships with gang



members, and how participants interpreted the concept of joining. For some, "joining a gang" implied participating in a formal initiation activity, which most said they had not done.

In contrast to participating in formal initiation activities, some participants said that because they had been around gang members since they were born, they did not necessarily "join" the gang. One said that because her family was gang involved, she was automatically part of the gang and did not have to participate in an initiation activity. However, the majority of participants could provide reasons that led to their joining and/or participating in gangs. In many cases, joining was not a one-time decision or incident, but rather consisted of gradual steps and was due to a variety of factors.

Why Do Girls Join Gangs?

Family Members' Gang Involvement

Family history and family influences emerged as critical factors in shaping participants' gang involvement. As noted earlier, 87% of participants reported having at least one gang-involved family

⁸ $t(95) = 2.09, p = .04$

⁹ Chi-square significant at the $< .05$ level

member. Some participants with gang-involved families felt they did not have a choice in whether to be part of a gang or labeled as a gang member. One participant said, "It was my family, I wouldn't have said no."

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Neighborhood/Environment

Family influences appeared to operate in tandem with participants' geographic proximity to gangs. Some participants said they became associated with a gang due to where they lived. This included geographic locations such as neighborhoods and physical spaces like apartment buildings. One participant described the experience she had living in her apartment complex. "We all grew up in the same apartments," she said. "It would always just be, like, the little kids gathering up, which later grew up to become an actual gang or clique or something."

Belonging and Acceptance

The data indicate a relationship between participants' desire for belonging and attachment and their involvement in a gang. Participants often described their gang as providing a sense of family and a place where they felt accepted. "Things were just bad at home and I was trying to find people in

the same situation I was in. They don't judge. We all come from nothing," one said.

Gang-Involved Peers and Romantic Partners

Peers influenced participants' gang involvement. Some joined because their friends or romantic partners were in a gang. As noted earlier, most participants (82%) had dated a gang member, either prior to or while participating in a gang. Some said that in order to keep their partners, they decided to participate in or were forced to join the gang. Others said that as they began to date a gang member, they became friends with and began to associate with other members of the gang.

Girls' Roles in Gangs

The qualitative data provide insight about interview participants' roles in their gang. When asked to describe their role in their gang, participants' most frequent initial response was that they did not have a specified role. However, many subsequently provided information about tasks they performed and activities they conducted either in or for their gang, while a small group reiterated that they did not have a role.

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Auxiliary Role

Of the participants who said they had a specific role in their gang, some expressed having an auxiliary role such as being the “lookout,” “run[ning] minor things,” or being a “helper.” A number of participants stated that their role was to do “what needs to be done,” which included such activities as breaking into cars; petty theft; holding weapons, money, or drugs; or selling marijuana.

Fighter Role

Another common role was “fighter.” According to participants, the role of a fighter had two purposes. One was to fight rival female gang members, or “have the homies’ back.” Another was to assist the gang leaders in disciplining fellow “little sisters” of their gang. As one participant noted, “I made sure the little sisters stay loyal.”

Leadership Role

A small group stated that their role was to be a leader, which was described as being a “female general,” “in charge of the other girls,” or “getting other girls to do things.” Serving as a female leader included communicating directives with other women in the gang and recruiting potential new little sisters who would be committed to the gang.

Exiting the Gang

Why and How Do Girls Leave Gangs?

The study asked interview participants who identified as inactive in a gang about why and how they became inactive. The qualitative data indicate that being inactive looks different for each individual and encompasses a wide range of experiences. Some participants described being “jumped out” or “put off” the gang in order to leave; however, the majority did not report needing to take any formal or exceptional steps to exit their gang. Instead, inactivity was typically a gradual process of continuously rejecting gang activity. As with much of the study data, the reasons participants gave for desistance from gang activity

are interconnected and not mutually exclusive.

Pregnancy/Parenting

The most common motive that prompted participants’ gang inactivity was a major life transition, such as becoming pregnant or articulating the desire to parent their children differently. One participant noted, “When I found out I was pregnant, I had no other choice. It was either being in a gang and not taking care of my kid, or taking care of my kid and just live life a different way. Go to school, actually do something with my life.”

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Maturing Out/Desire for a Better Lifestyle

Another common reason for becoming inactive was because gang involvement was no longer a lifestyle that participants desired, often due to maturing out of it. The notion of maturing out of gang activity took different forms. Some participants noted that as they progressed into adulthood, the motivation to be an active gang member began to dissipate. “There’s no glory in it once you get older,” one said.

Others reported growing weary of what gang activity entailed, such as being vigilant about personal safety, losing too many family members to gang violence, and wanting to be a role model for younger siblings. Some stated that as they

matured they wanted to pursue different options, such as finishing high school, going to college, finding legitimate employment, and living a drug-free life.

Fear of Incarceration and Re-Traumatization

For participants who have been justice involved, another reason some stated for inactivity was a fear of incarceration, which could lead to re-traumatization.¹⁰ Additionally, the prospect of having another blemish on their criminal justice record or, if incarcerated, having limited or no opportunities to see their families served for some participants as a deterrent to remaining active.

Strategies Used to Leave Gangs

For many interview participants, a primary desistance strategy was to avoid direct engagement with their gang-involved peers. This could involve changing the course of conversations and altering social interactions in an effort to decrease their level of gang activity. “I just stopped hanging out. They hit me up. I don’t hit them back up,” one explained.

For participants with gang-involved family members, the ability to leave the gang appeared to be especially challenging. However, those in this situation described using similar strategies as other participants to avoid engagement. One said, “They’re always going to be there. It’s just how you act—that’s how I consider it. Like, me, I don’t throw gang signs. I don’t shout out at people. Of course it’s still in me—you know where you came from. You’re never going to forget where you came from.”

A small number of participants reported having to perform a specific exit requirement in order to become inactive, including having to be “jumped out,” “snoop around on rival gang members,” or be involved in “some serious stuff.” An exit requirement is not always a one-time activity—

some noted they were asked to do numerous activities as part of leaving the gang. “It was never enough. We were like their puppets—do their dirty work, but they were never going to let you go,” a participant said.

Participants’ Strengths

The interview participants were individuals with a multitude of skills, passions, and assets. The study also specifically asked participants to identify some of their strengths.

“I can get up after mistakes,” a participant said. “I wouldn’t let another person go through this. It takes a strong person to go through [it]. When I learned how to do better, I did.”

The most commonly named asset was being strong and resilient. One participant said that her strength was an ability to rebound from problems or setbacks. “I can get up after mistakes,” she said. “I wouldn’t let another person go through this. It takes a strong person to go through [it]. When I learned how to do better, I did.” The second most frequent response was having interpersonal skills, which included being “communicative” and “outgoing.”

Intelligence was another frequent response, with girls describing themselves as “quick and smart” and “brilliant.” Finally, another common strength voiced by participants was independence. One said, “I don’t ask for help; I do things myself.”

¹⁰ For example, while incarcerated, girls may be subject to the use of restraints or isolation or other practices that can re-traumatize girls who are already vulnerable (Hennessey, Ford, Mahoney, Ko, & Siegfried, 2004).

Recommendations

Many interview participants have connected with service providers, mentors, and other programs and individuals who are committed to helping gang-involved girls. In order to translate the study findings into practice, the study team developed several recommendations designed to further support organizations and individuals who work with gang-involved girls.

Using Intentional Language

When developing and providing services, it is important to consider how girls self-identify in terms of gang involvement. Unless used by young people themselves, terms such as “gang” and “gang member” should be avoided. These may not be terms that girls would choose to describe themselves or their behavior, even though they are often imposed on them by law enforcement, researchers, or community members. Furthermore, as this study and previous research has found, the

Girls in gangs have experienced many types of marginalization, and these experiences should be taken into consideration when developing and providing services for them. Services should consider the intersectional linkages among participants’ race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other factors.

lines for gang inclusion and activity are frequently inexact, especially for those who consider themselves associates or affiliates (Bolden, 2012).

Many girls who may not identify as gang members are in fact gang involved and need services. Interview participants were more open to the terms “affiliate” and “associate” than “gang member.” Factors to consider for outreach and programming include using flexible and respectful terminology, understanding the wide range of girls’ experiences with gangs, and involving individuals who have had personal experience with gangs and are well positioned to understand girls’ situations.

Placing Intersectionality at the Forefront

Girls in gangs have experienced many types of marginalization, and these experiences should be taken into consideration when developing and providing services for them. Most participants in this study were young women of color, and some also identified as LGBTQ. Effective and tailored services should consider the intersectional linkages among participants’ race/ethnicity, gender, class, citizenship status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and other factors. This can include understanding and acknowledging how these defining characteristics influence the choices, viewpoints, and experiences of young women involved in gangs.

Understanding Girls’ Entrenched Lives

The study found that many interview participants were entrenched in a lifestyle where gang involvement was prevalent. Participants tended to join or come in contact with a gang due to family and peer influences, which is consistent

with previous research (O’Neal, Decker, Moule, & Pyrooz, 2014; Walker-Barnes & Mason, 2001). Most participants reported having at least one gang-involved family member; most also reported dating a gang member. These data suggest that participants’ circumstances make it difficult for them to completely desist from gang activity, let alone avoid involvement in the first place. As girls transition out of their gang, they need assistance and support in addressing relationships with their gang-involved family members, friends, and neighborhood.

Additionally, system-level factors such as underresourced neighborhoods and schools, biased policing, and others that can perpetuate gang involvement also must be acknowledged. Local, state, and federal policies that provide expanded options for vulnerable populations and communities should be proposed and implemented; this includes funding more mental health, recreational, job training, and employment opportunities. Policies should also consider the use of the gang label and the impact this labeling has on girls’ experiences with law enforcement and the justice system.



Providing Tailored Services for Girls

The majority of inactive participants decided to exit their gang because they were pregnant or parenting, consistent with other research that suggests that young women primarily choose gang desistance due to having a child or “settling down” (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; O’Neal et al., 2014), although this finding varies across the literature (Varriale, 2008). The information from NCCD’s study indicates the need for specific services, such as ones that support young women to be the parents they strive to be, and includes resources and programming related to education, employment, and housing. Pre- and postnatal care, daycare assistance, and parenting classes and support are also critical services. Additionally, as girls transition from gangs, they continue to experience high levels of trauma and may struggle with addiction issues, further demonstrating the need to offer a range of tailored services and supports to young women exiting gangs. Moreover, these resources should continue to be provided while young women keep moving into adulthood.

Building on Girls’ Strengths

Interview participants reported having a range of strengths, including resiliency, interpersonal skills, intelligence, and independence. These self-reported traits were borne out in the stakeholder interviews and the researchers’ interactions with the participants. They are impressive and important skills and traits for anyone to possess, all the more so given these girls’ circumstances and environments. Service providers and others interested in helping girls can use asset-based frameworks, such as positive youth development (Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula, 2016; Development Services Group, 2014), to recognize and build on girls’ strengths and skills when developing and implementing programs or services.

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Social Supports of Gang-Involved Girls and Young Women

Introduction

From 2012 to 2015, the National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) conducted research in California to examine the individual, family, and community factors involved in girls' experiences with and desistance from gangs and gang-related crime. The goals of NCCD's study included identifying girls' reasons for joining gangs, their experiences and activities related to gang involvement, and their motivations and strategies for transitioning away from gangs.¹

This study had two phases of data collection: (1) qualitative, semi-structured individual interviews with key stakeholders (including outreach workers, former gang members, and researchers); and (2) individual interviews with gang-involved girls

and young women. NCCD's community partners, including key stakeholders and an advisory board convened for this study, referred girls and young women for potential study participation. NCCD researchers developed an instrument for interviewing girls that included scale-based survey items and open-ended questions.² Interview participants received a stipend to thank them for sharing their time and expertise.

The findings reported in this brief draw on data from interviews with 114 gang-involved girls and young women, with a focus on interview participants' social supports; the sample size (or n size) for individual items may vary. Much of this information is based on the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (Norbeck, Lindsey, & Carrieri, 1981), a validated instrument that examines factors related to social support. In collaboration with this study's advisory board, NCCD researchers modified this questionnaire to be appropriate for interview participants.

Characteristics of Interview Participants

Interview Location: NCCD researchers conducted interviews with gang-involved girls and young women in eight California cities. About three-quarters of the interviews (76%) occurred in either Los Angeles (33%), San Jose (25%), or San Francisco (18%).³

Age: Interview participants ranged in age from 14 to 25 years, with a median age of 18.



Race/Ethnicity: Participants identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino (44%), Black/African American (36%), Mixed Race (14%), Native American (3%), Pacific Islander (2%), or White (1%).

Sexual Orientation: When asked about sexual orientation, about three-quarters (71%) of participants identified as straight, and about one-third (29%) identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning.

Romantic Relationships: Three-quarters (74%) of participants reported being in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview. Most participants (82%) reported dating a gang member, either at the time of the interview or in the past.

Pregnancy and Parenting: About two-fifths of participants (39%) were pregnant and/or were parents at the time of the interview.

Education and Employment: Nearly three-quarters of participants (73%) were attending school, participating in job training, and/or working at the time of the interview.

Justice Involvement: At some point in their lives, nearly three-quarters of participants (72%) had been arrested, half (50%) had been on probation, and about half (52%) had been in detention or placement.

Gang Membership and Activity Level: At the time of the interview, about two-thirds of participants (67%) identified as an associate of a gang and about one-quarter (28%) identified as a gang member.⁴ Most participants (85%) reported being inactive in a gang; 15% were actively involved.

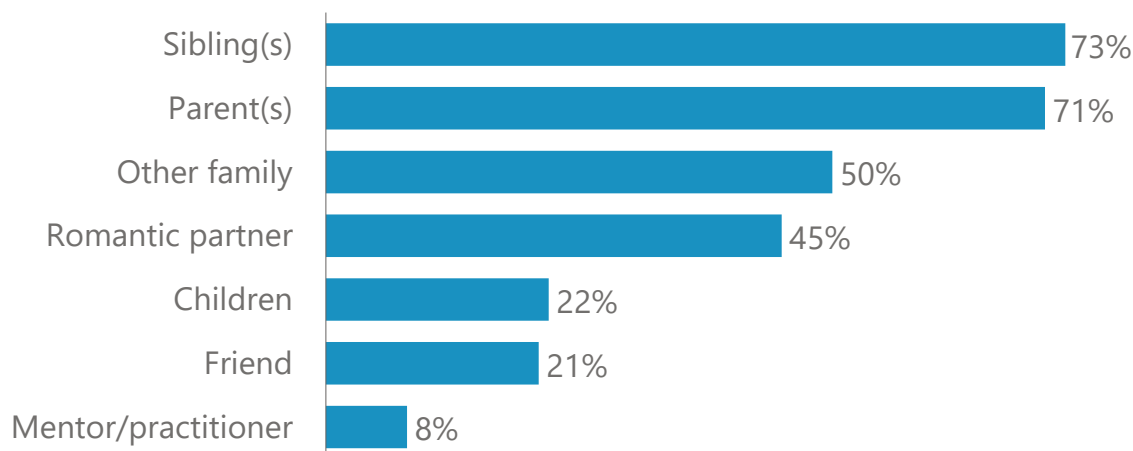
Justice and Gang Involvement of Participants' Families: Most participants (96%) reported having at least one family member who had been arrested, and 92% had at least one family member who had been in jail or prison. Most (87%) had at least one gang-involved family member.⁵

Who Are Your Social Supports?

NCCD researchers asked interview participants to name significant people in their life who provided social support or who were important to them. Participants, who were able to list up to 10 different types of people or relationships, identified having an average of 5.6 social supports.

The majority of participants (61%) described five or more individuals or groups who provided support to them. Of these individuals or groups, the ones reported most frequently were sibling(s) and parent(s). See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Sources of Social Support



Do You Have a Best Friend?

NCCD researchers asked interview participants if they had a best friend and, if they did have one, about the length, frequency of contact, and quality of this relationship. About two-thirds of participants (68%) reported having a best friend. Of participants with a best friend, about half (49%) have known this person for more than five years, and about three-quarters (76%) have daily contact with their best friend.

Of those participants with a best friend, most felt they could turn to this person for help, trust

them with private information, talk to them about becoming inactive in a gang, and feel respected or admired and liked or loved by them. See Table 1.

Do You Have a Mentor?

NCCD researchers asked interview participants whether they had a mentor, either within or outside of their family. For mentors within participants' family, interviewers described this as being a parent or someone else inside the family. For mentors outside of participants' family, interviewers stated this could include a neighbor, teacher, outreach worker, coach, or minister.

Two-thirds of participants (66%) reported having a mentor; of these, some had a mentor both inside and outside of their family. See Table 2. Of those with a mentor outside of their family, participants described these roles as including prevention and intervention organization staff, such as case managers and outreach workers (41%); a pastor or priest (14%); and teachers, counselors, and other school personnel (14%) (not shown).

Table 1: Support Provided by Best Friend

"How much..."	% "Quite a bit/ a great deal"	N
Does your best friend usually help if you need a ride to the doctor or some other immediate help?	93%	71
Can you trust your best friend with stories/secrets about your personal life?	87%	71
Would your best friend help you if you were confined to bed for a couple of weeks?	86%	71
Could you talk to your best friend about becoming inactive?	86%	65
Does your best friend make you feel respected or admired?	83%	71
Does your best friend make you feel liked or loved?	80%	71
Does your best friend agree with or support your actions or thoughts?	74%	70

Table 2: Support Provided by Mentor

	% "Yes"	N
Presence of Mentor		
Has a mentor	66%	104
Number of Mentors		
Has one mentor (within the family or outside the family)	39%	104
Has two mentors (within the family and outside the family)	27%	104
Status of Mentors		
Has a mentor within the family	51%	102
Has a mentor outside the family	44%	103

Do You Have a Romantic Partner?

Three-quarters of participants (75%) reported being in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview. Of this group, about one-third (36%) were living with their partner and most (87%) reported feeling “quite a bit” or “extremely” close to their partner.

Have You Lost Important Relationships?

NCCD researchers asked participants if they had lost any important relationships (including partner/spouse, family members, friends, etc.) during the past year due to death, incarceration, breakup, moving, or any other reason. In all, most (84%) reported that they had experienced the loss of one or more relationships during this timeframe. Of those who described reasons for these losses, about three-quarters (76%) stated that at least one loss was due to death, and close to half (46%) stated at least one was due to incarceration.

Who Would You Go To For Help or Advice With a Problem?

NCCD researchers asked participants to indicate, from a list of types of people, whether or not they would seek help or advice from this person if they were experiencing a problem. About three-quarters (77%) reported they would go to a partner, about two-thirds (63%) would go to a friend, and more than half would go to a parent (57%) or other relative/family member (57%) for advice or help. See Figure 2.

Who Would You Go To For Help Becoming Inactive?

NCCD researchers asked participants to indicate, from a list of types of people, whether or not they would go to this person for help or advice if they decided to become inactive in their gang. The most commonly identified individuals included partner (54%), parent (41%), and friend (40%). See Figure 3.

Figure 2: Who Would You Go To For Advice or Help With a Problem?

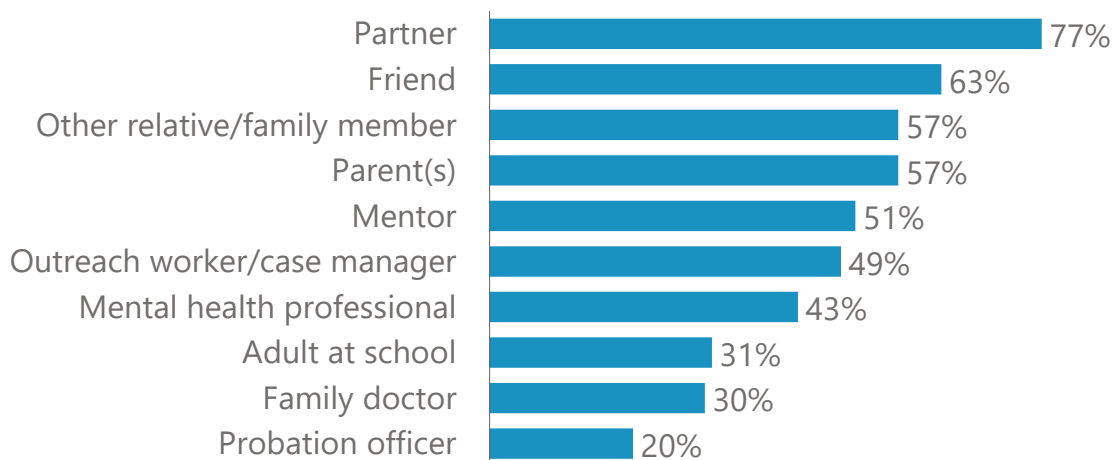
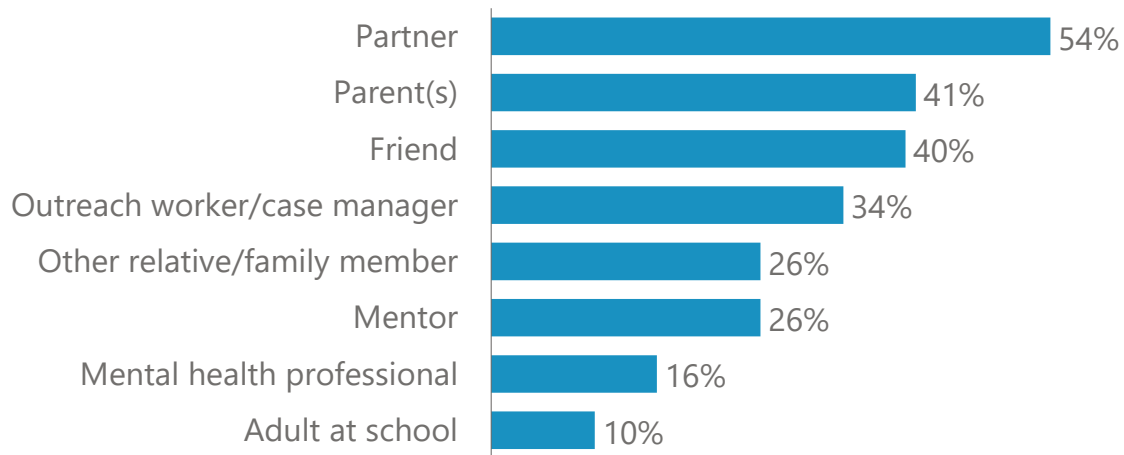


Figure 3: Who Would You Go To For Help Becoming Inactive?



Interview Participants With Limited Social Support

A subset of participants had limited social support. More than one-third of all participants (39%) reported that they had fewer than five significant people in their life who provided social support or who were important to them. Of this group, when asked if they had a mentor, best friend, or romantic partner, close to half (41%) reported having one or none of these.

Discussion

Most interview participants reported having a robust spectrum of social support, but a subset had limited support. See Table 3 for a summary. Although data described in this brief are self-reported, research has found that this method of data collection with youth tends to generate sufficient reliability on a range of measures relating to delinquency, substance use, emotions, and other areas (Brener, Kann, McManus, Kinchen, Sundberg, & Gross, 2002; Nock, Wedig, Holmberg, & Hooley, 2008; Thornberry & Krohn, 2000).

Participants identified an average of 5.6 people who provided social support or who were important to them; sources of support frequently included their family members—such as sibling(s)

or parent(s)—and romantic partner. For providing advice or help with a problem, participants' sources of support typically included partner, friend, and/or parent. About two-thirds of participants reported having a best friend; a similar proportion reported having a mentor.

Despite this range of support, participants also reported experiencing the loss of important relationships in the past year. Most participants had at least one such loss, with primary reasons for these losses including death and incarceration.

Table 3: Summary of Interview Participants' Social Supports

	% "Yes"	N
Has lost important relationship(s) in the past year	84%	103
Has romantic partner	75%	107
Has best friend	68%	105
Has mentor	66%	104
Has five or more significant people who provide social support or who are important to them	61%	104



Moreover, a subset of participants had limited social support. More than one-third of participants reported having fewer than five significant people in their life. Of this group, when asked if they had a mentor, best friend, or romantic partner, close to half reported having one or none of these.

In addition to the importance of support from family, partners, and friends, practitioners emerged as a source of support for some interview participants. About half stated they would turn to a mentor, outreach worker/case manager, and/or mental health professional for advice or help with a problem. Some participants also stated they would approach outreach workers/case managers and mentors for advice about becoming inactive in their gang.

This information suggests that outreach workers, case managers, mental health professionals,

mentors, and others can play an important role in serving as formal and informal sources of social support for gang-involved girls. For example, as girls transition out of their gang, they need assistance and support in addressing relationships with their gang-involved family members, friends, and neighborhood. Furthermore, and in line with the findings of previous research (Simon, Ritter, & Mahendra, 2013), these findings suggest the need for increased availability of pro-social mentors who are sufficiently supported—as well as other positive, empathetic role models—for gang-involved girls and girls at risk of involvement. The interview data also point to a need for additional research to determine how to best support girls and young women as they transition away from gang involvement.

Endnotes

¹ This research study and the subsequent dissemination of findings was supported by funding from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and The California Wellness Foundation (Cal Wellness). Created in 1992 as a private, independent foundation, Cal Wellness's mission is to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness education, and disease prevention. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the funding organizations.

² Understanding that terms such as "gang" and "gang member" may carry stigma and are often used as negative labels, particularly in low-income communities of color, NCCD worked closely with the advisory board convened for this study to implement research methods designed to accurately and sensitively capture girls' experiences. This approach included coordinating with key stakeholder interviewees, advisory board members, and other community partners to help identify girls who were interested in participating in the study; it also focused on asking girls open-ended interview questions about their gang membership and involvement, which allowed them to define their lived experiences in their own words.

³ Participants did not necessarily live in the city in which their interview took place. For confidentiality purposes, interviewees were not asked about the city in which they lived or were involved in gang activity.

⁴ The study defined "associates" as girls who do not consider themselves to be official gang members, but do participate in gang activities; "members" refers to girls who consider themselves officially part of a gang. NCCD researchers developed these definitions in consultation with stakeholder interviewees and based on previous research (Carlie, 2002; Howell and Griffiths, 2015).

⁵ The terms "family" and "family member" can include biological family, legal family, extended family, and close friends.

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