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WOMEN IN STREET GANGS

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Key Words:

ethnic groups, young women, family relationships in gangs, life in the gang, abuse, drugs and violence in gangs, children raised in gangs, alternatives to gang life and leaving the gang

Abstract:

Young women joining street gangs have become a problem in our society. It affects families, the community and the school system. It can also affect you, your family and your community. Research shows that there is an alarming share of violent crimes, especially homicides committed by gang members. I will be focusing on Latino women in street gangs and Latino women with children in street gangs. An increasing number of women are becoming affiliated with gang organizations. These women are entering street gangs at a much younger age. New generations of children are born into the gang and are reared in street gangs and eventually become adolescent and adult members of these gangs. Some gangs now include third or fourth generations. They will be at risk of repeating the same cycle that their parents have created for them. Drugs, weapons, violence and eventually death surround these young women and their children. They are witnesses to numerous killings and injuries. These women in gangs are at great risk and so is society. Research has found that factors contributing to women entering gangs are dysfunctional family life, alcohol and drug abuse, low self esteem, need for power, status and economic needs. These women feel that their needs are met in the gang opposed to their own family home. One of the primary reasons that women join these gangs is the need for a family and to be listened to, loved and cared about.

Introduction:

What would provoke women to become members of a street gang? What are the reasons that women select a lifestyle of danger, rape, and mental and physical abuse? Gang affiliation brings an uncertain future and the risk of being killed. These women not only jeopardize their own lives but also put their children and family at great risk. As stated by Leon Bing, (2001) "women once considered just trophies or troublemakers; female gang members have now become bangers in their own right" (p. 79). Bangers or gangbanger is a term used by gang members to describe themselves (Street Gang Slang/Glossary Nodate).

My topic is of interest sociologically because of the increase in violent crimes, degrading and exploitation of women, children born into gangs and what society can do to deviate young women from joining gangs. There is a wide ethnic range of women in gangs. This range encompasses African American, Latino, Asian, American Indian and women in the Hell's Angels. I have selected to narrow my social system to "women involved in street gangs." My boundaries in this research paper are single Latino women and Latino women with children. My reason for selecting single Latino women and Latino women with children is that large populations of these women are entering gangs. For the remainder of this research paper, Latino women and Latino women with children will be referred to as women in gangs.

Once a young woman is attracted to the gang, family members feel helpless in helping her. Peer pressure is strong as well as the attraction to the power that the gang provides. The gang provokes fear in people. Also of interest, are exploring the options that are available to the children being raised in a gang, such as education, counseling,

after school programs, assisted childcare so that the next generation does not repeat the cycle. I hope to conclude my research by exploring what public assistance programs, job opportunities, counseling and other options that are available for women seeking to separate from the gang environment. By examining their current family structure, environment and the factors leading women of all ages to participate in gangs will give an insight as to the attraction of their involvement in delinquency and crime.

These women are seeking to escape a dysfunctional family life, wanting to fulfill their economic needs and need for power and status. Many of these women are struggling with low self-esteem, alcohol and drug abuse and have adopted the street gang as a surrogate family (see attached Figure 1: Social Systems Model for Women in Street Gangs).

Many of the early sociologists and media portrayed gangs as "deviant" groups whose activities were considered violations of folkways, rather than clear violations of laws (Youth Gang, A Bibliography Nodate:1). Although gangs have more often than not come from decaying urban areas, there are many changes that have affected suburbs as well (Delinquent Gangs Nodate:1). Even our small towns throughout the United States are no longer safe from delinquent gangs.

Recently in San Diego, a drug bust on crack cocaine was linked to a powerful west coast gang. These gang members used threats and violence in their trade. According to federal and local authorities who announced the results of their investigation stated that "members of the gang, the West Coast Crips, bought the cocaine from a Mexican drug ring" (Taylor 2002:B1, B6). After converting the powdered form of the cocaine to crack they sold it to dealer in the southeastern neighborhoods of

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Figure 1: Social System Model for Women in Street Gangs
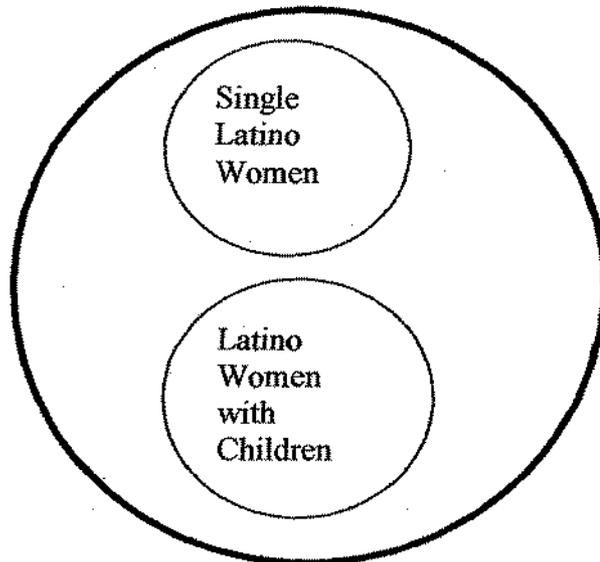
Social System: Women Involved In Street Gangs

Boundaries: Single Latino Women and Latino Women with Children

Elements: Single Latino Women
                Latino Women with Children

Relationships:

Negative	Positive
Dysfunctional Family Life	Family Counseling
Alcohol and Drug Abuse	Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation
Low Self-Esteem	Education
Need for Power and Status	Job Training
Economic Needs	Employment
Surrogate Family	Alternatives to Gang Life

External Relationships: Gang Family and Rival Gang Members

San Diego. At least 44 pounds of crack cocaine had been sold. In taped conversations by federal authorities, these gang members spoke openly about killings and a planned attack on a rival gang. Older members that are known within the gang as "OGs" (original gangsters) provided the financing for their drug enterprise. Among the arrested were Latino and African American women.

Method:

Research and information cited in this paper was derived from secondary sources. No original data was collected, nor did the author conduct research or personal interviews. Information was gathered through extensive review of academic journals in the Periodicals Section of the Malcolm Love Library at San Diego State University. Multiple Internet searches were conducted in locating additional academic journals and information. There were no books or textbooks used. Complete lists of works cited are in the reference section of my paper.

Results:

Over the years as street gangs have increased, the definition of a gang has changed. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (Wiley 1997) defines street gangs as:
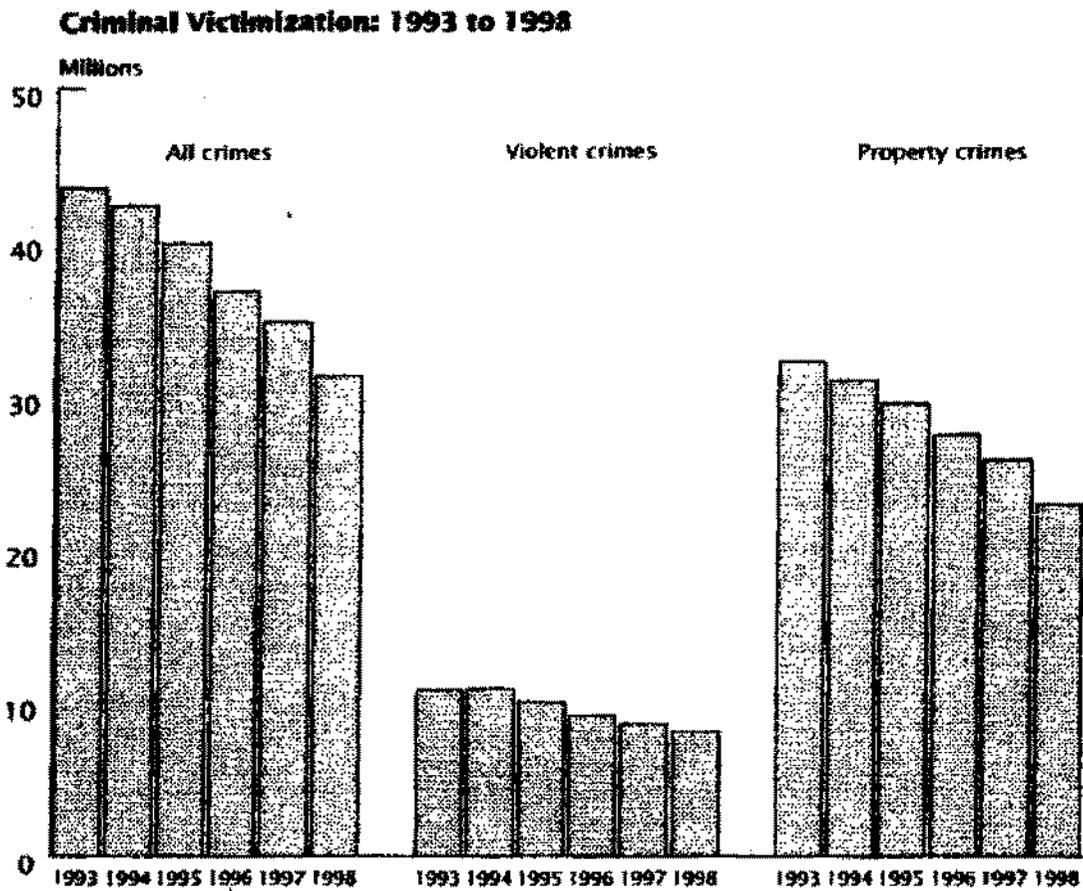
> A Violent Street Gang/Drug Enterprise as a criminal enterprise having an organizational structure, acting as a continuing criminal conspiracy, which employs violence and any other criminal activity to sustain the enterprise. However, key local law enforcement agencies prefer to use the term street gang because it includes juveniles and adults, and designates the location of gangs and most of its criminal behavior. A street gang is a group of people that form an allegiance based on various social needs and engage in acts injurious to public health and safety. Members of street gangs engage in (or have engaged in) gang focused criminal activity either individually or collectively, they create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation within the community (p. 1).

Street gangs terrorize cities and communities and have used their force to intimidate people over the years. The attached Figure 2: Criminal Victimization graph (social indicator), outlines criminal victimization from the period of 1993 to 1998. All crimes were the highest in 1993 and lowest in 1998. Violent crimes were equally high in 1993 and 1994 and the lowest was 1998. Property crimes were the highest in 1993 and again lowest in 1998 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000).

Street gangs contribute to the ongoing violence in our society. The attached Figure 3: Citywide Gang Related Crime Summary as of February 2002 outlines the various categories of crimes committed by street gangs (Berkeley University Nodate). The report was prepared by the Los Angeles Police Department and shows comparisons on month-to-month, and year-to-date, etc. These street gangs also have their own language, rules, colors and interaction within their group. They display several characteristics. Street gangs tend to develop along racial and ethnic lines. Males dominate the groups, and females are the appendages. However, females are breaking away from the male dominated groups and are starting their own all female groups.

There are various reasons why women join street gangs. These factors are outlined in the attached Figure 4: State/Process for Women in Street Gangs. These factors that persuaded women to enter the gang (processes 1-6) can be reversed to help women once they are out of the gang. Family counseling can help with the dysfunctional family life, dealing with issues within the family. Alcohol and drug rehabilitation can help women with alcohol and drug problems. Education will help women develop self-esteem giving them job training, which will lead to employment. All the positive

Figure 2: Criminal Victimization: 1993 to 1998

Criminal Victimization: 1993 to 1998

Millions

All crimes   Violent crimes   Property crimes

1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998   1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998   1993 1994 1995 1996 1997 1998

Source: Chart prepared by U.S. Census Bureau. For data, see Table 340.

Source: "U.S. Census Bureau, Statistical Abstract of the United States." 2000.
Retrieved April 8, 2002 (http://www.census.gov/prod/www/statistical-abstract-US.html).
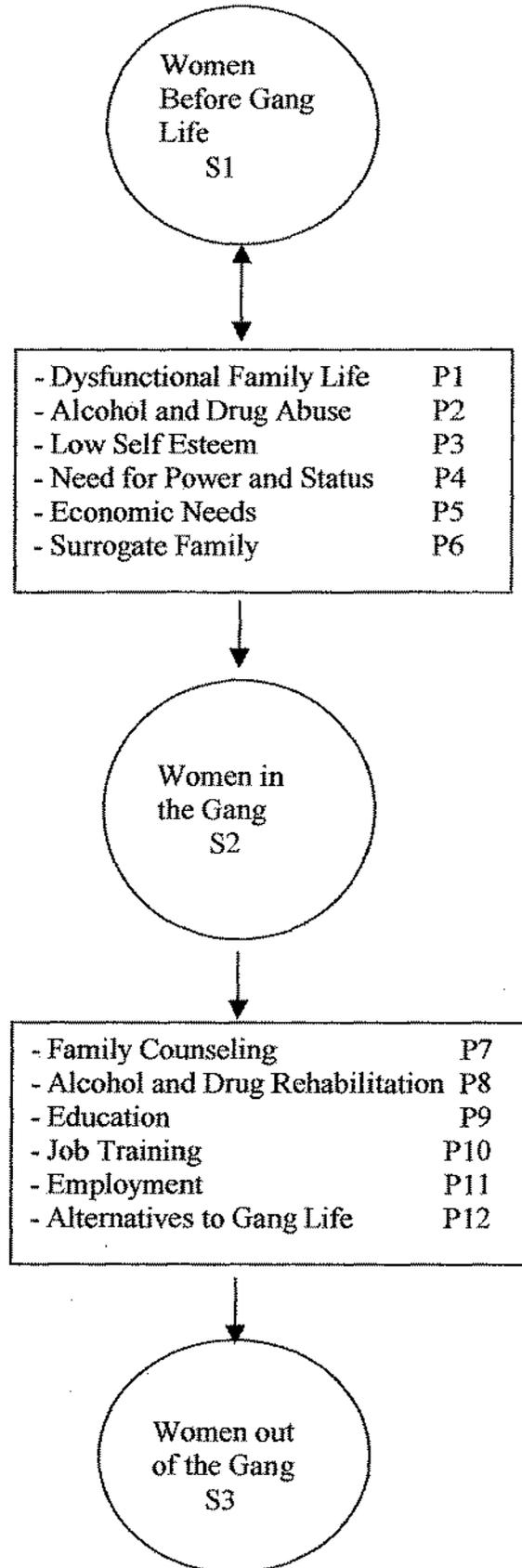
The gang crime totals were prepared by the bureau SEU units and this report was compiled by Detective Support Division.

Figure 3: Citywide Gang-Related Crime Summary

CRIME	CATEGORY	THIS MONTH	LAST MONTH	YR-TO-DATE	LAST YTD	% CHG LAST YTD	5YR TREND	% CHG TO 5YR TREND
1	Homicide	18	45	63	43	46.5	35.2	79.0
2	Attempt Homicide	71	71	142	100	42.0	90.8	56.4
3	Felony Assault	264	272	536	437	22.7	415.4	29.0
4	* Attacks on Police Officers	5	0	5	18	-72.2	21.4	-76.6
5	Robbery	221	262	483	306	57.8	469.0	3.0
6	Shots Inhabited Dwell	29	40	69	39	76.9	31.2	121.2
7	Kidnap	3	9	12	7	71.4	13.8	-13.0
8	Rape	10	10	20	7	185.7	16.2	23.5
9	Arson	0	0	0	0	0.0	0.4	-100.0
10	** Witness Intimidation	69	63	132	76	73.7	77.8	69.7
11	Extortion	0	0	0	3	-100.0	1.0	-100.0
12	Carjacking	18	18	36	13	176.9	27.0	33.3
	TOTAL	708	790	1498	1049	42.8	1199.2	24.9

Source: "Berkeley University (Index to the Internet)." Nodate. Retrieved April 4, 2002 (http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/InternetIndex).

Figure 4: State/Process for Women in Street Gangs

Women
Before Gang
Life
S1

- Dysfunctional Family Life	P1
- Alcohol and Drug Abuse	P2
- Low Self Esteem	P3
- Need for Power and Status	P4
- Economic Needs	P5
- Surrogate Family	P6

Women in
the Gang
S2

- Family Counseling	P7
- Alcohol and Drug Rehabilitation	P8
- Education	P9
- Job Training	P10
- Employment	P11
- Alternatives to Gang Life	P12

Women out
of the Gang
S3

processes can help women re-enter the mainstream of society giving them an alternative to gang life.

Women in gangs want to compete with the men in gangs; no longer satisfied with carrying their boyfriend's weapons they have taken control of their own position within the gangs. With the exception of primarily female gangs, male and female gang memberships are most likely to be oriented toward delinquent activities (Peterson, Miller, and Esbensen 2001:427). As the number of females increase within a coed group, male members will be more likely to exclude these females from the gangs primary activities, thus reducing the threat of territorial encroachment on normatively "masculine" endeavors (Peterson et al. 2001:428). Even though youth gangs have been around for many years, there has been an increase in female gang members participating in the gang warfare. The gender composition of gangs has been changing and youths are becoming involved in gangs at a much earlier age (Evans 1994:1). Girls in middle school are at a greater risk, because at this age they are more vulnerable and are coming to terms with establishing their own identify and seeking acceptance. More juveniles are becoming attracted to gangs. Figure 5: Legal Categories of Juvenile Offenders defines the different Code Sections that are used in the legal system. The codes are broken down into four categories; they are Informal Probationers, Status Offenders, Criminal Offenders and Juveniles Remanded to Superior Court (California Legislative Analyst's Office Nodate).

Women's level of violence ranges from possession and use of weapons, drugs, criminal activities, knifings, and drive by shootings and just beating up innocent people as well as each other. Other risky behavior consists of unsafe sex contributing to disease

Figure 5: Legal Categories of Juvenile Offenders

Informal Probationers *Welfare and Institutions Code Section 654* Known as "654s"	◆ Juveniles who have committed a minor offense. ◆ Probation officers have a great deal of flexibility in placing a juvenile on informal 654 probation. ◆ Juvenile can be placed on 654 probation if the officer decides that the juvenile is under the jurisdiction of the juvenile court or *is likely to be* under the jurisdiction in the future. ◆ These juveniles are often diverted into substance abuse, mental health, crisis shelters, or other services.
Status Offenders *Welfare and Institutions Code Section 601* Known as "601s"	◆ Juveniles who have committed offenses unique to a juvenile, such as truancy, curfew violation, and incorrigibility. ◆ They can be placed on formal probation but cannot be detained or incarcerated with criminal offenders.
Criminal Offenders *Welfare and Institutions Code Section 602* Known as "602s"	◆ Offenders under the age of 18 years who commit a misdemeanor or felony. ◆ Subject to the jurisdiction of a juvenile court. ◆ Can be placed on formal probation, detained before adjudication in a juvenile hall, and/or incarcerated after adjudication in a county ranch or camp or the Youth Authority. ◆ They are treated differently from adults; they are not "tried," but "adjudicated"; they are not "convicted," but rather, their "petition is sustained".
Juveniles Remanded to Superior Court *Welfare and Institutions Code Section 707* Known as "707Bs" or "remands"	◆ Juveniles determined by court as not fit for adjudication in juvenile court. ◆ Any juvenile age 16 or 17, who commits one of over 30 serious felonies, or juvenile age 14 or older, who commits murder. ◆ Tried in superior court as an adult. ◆ If convicted, is sentenced to either a Youth Authority institution or a state prison (if age 16 or over).

Source: "California Legislative Analyst's Office." No date. *Juvenile Crime Statistics, Part II.* Retrieved April 1, 2002 (www.lao.ca.gov/kkpart2.html).

and early death. In a summary by Nimmo (nodate) violence is a key feature of gang life. "Women are often initiated into gangs through "beat-ins," or through a "staged fight" (p. 1).

A gang can provide a woman with what she needs, protection and acceptance when all other relationships and means have failed her. On the other hand, the gang can also kill her. Many young girls are leaving home or they are being asked to leave. The young women who are still minors are in home environments with little or no adult supervision. A girl's immediate environment (family and peers) determines, to a large extend her life path (Wang 2000:622). Home life that is characterized by poverty, divorce, parental death, abandonment, alcoholism and frequent abuse, leaves them quick to anger, distrust and revenge (Artz 1998; Koroki and Chesney-Line 1985) (Weiler 1999:2). Gang membership and violent behavior enabled them to release their anger and in turn gaining control over their feelings. In most of my research articles, many of these women stated that a family member had sexually abused them in their childhood. In various surveys conducted (Artz, et al.1998) (Weiler 1999:2) "women jailed for crimes, compared with their male counterparts, are much more likely to report previous sexual or physical abuse, ranging from 40 percent to 70 percent of respondents."

In interviews with Puerto Rican Girls (Gold and Sanchez 2000:55), their need for love, someone to listen to them, honor and respect was so needed that the gang provided the family. Thus, the gang became a surrogate family having goals just like a family does. Women in gangs typically come from conditions of extreme poverty. It is believed that these young women join gangs to achieve a sense of power and protection. Female

gang members do occasionally prostitute for the gang, but regular prostitutes are not considered gang members (Nimmo nodate:1).

Money and power is also an incentive for women to join street gangs. In interviews with young women in street gangs, the gang served as a place where the girls could make quick money. The gang gave women the power and status that they craved. Their need for attention, status, power and financial gain was being fulfilled. Many women are breaking away from coed gangs and forming their own gangs. This gives them more control over themselves and the gang, eliminating male domination. As stated by a former gang member (Sapp-Grant 2000:2), "robbing people, grabbing their stuff, beating them up if they resisted." I did it too. I felt no boundaries. Just this mad adrenaline rush. And at the time I really liked the feeling that no one could mess with me. That I was invincible. Anything I wanted was mine. The women felt that the gang was the only place where they could have an opportunity to increase their standard of living.

Deteriorating communities are becoming a contributing factor to an increased presence of street gangs. Growing up in a community filled with violence, lack of community involvement, community concern and dilapidated neighborhoods with no way out creates an increased presence of street gangs. These neighborhoods are infested with drug dealers and guns and violence. Abandoned buildings spray painted with graffiti is a "hang out" for gang members. These urban communities offer very little economic advantages, the unemployment rates are higher, and there is limited access to medical and health care. Children growing up in a gang family suffer the consequences of their parent's actions. Many of the children born into the gang remain in the gang and

eventually become gang members themselves. Children growing up in these neighborhoods know of no other lifestyle and socialize with gang members. Mothers of these children find no time to care for their babies. Since their mother is in the street gang, it becomes the responsibility of a grandparent or other female relative to care for these children while the gang member is doing drugs and "gangbanging." In the Latino community there is a strong involvement by the female relatives in caring for these children. Even with this care, it does not shield these children, as they grow older. Due to this next generation of poverty, they become easy prey for the street gangs. When the mother does have the child or children, there is no structure or routine such as naps, school, and discipline. Just as their mothers, these small children just want to be listened to, loved and have a parent play and interact with them. Not only are these children born into poverty but also these children are growing up in an environment surrounded by drugs, sex and weapons and are being neglected. Many of these children are born to single mothers with little or no involvement by the father in their upbringing and nurturing. Educational opportunities for these young children of gang members are limited. Many of these young mothers are barely into their own adulthood. In essence, children are having children. In addition, younger siblings of older women are also finding an attraction to gang life (Bing 2001:86).

Selling and distributing illegal drugs is a source of income for the extensive arsenals of weapons that these gangs own. Most of the gang violence is concentrated at rival gang members and many times innocent bystanders are caught in the crossfire. Steven R. Wiley, Chief Violent Crimes and Major Offenders Section of the Federal Bureau of Investigation stated that "while street gangs may specialize in entrepreneurial

activities like drug dealing, their gang-related lethal violence is more likely to grow out of turf conflicts than from the entrepreneurial activity." "Drug markets indirectly influence violence by bringing rival gangs members into proximity with one another, as most street gang violence involves intergang conflicts" (Wiley 1997:2).

Close examination of the ghettos, barrios and enclaves where the majority of gang members reside reveals a disturbing reality of urban life (Evans 2002:3). Residence of the barrios and ghettos live in overcrowded houses, their wages are substandard and their neighborhoods are poorly developed. These areas are far from economic centers with limited job opportunities. Gangs feast on recruiting new members from these urban areas. As stated by Mike Davis (2002) (Evans 2002), professor of urban theory at the Southern California Institute of Architecture:

> The lives of the rich are completely separated from those of the urban underclass. No longer is there such a thing as accessible open space, but rather communities such as Beverly Hills and San Marino are increasingly restricting access to their public facilities, using baroque layers of regulations to build invisible walls. San Marino, which may be the richest, and is reputedly the most Republican (85%), city in the country, now closes it parks on weekends to exclude Latino and Asian families from adjacent communities. One plan under discussion would reopen the parks on Saturdays only to those with proof of residence (P. 4).

Society has a tendency not to want to be involved. More positive community involvement is needed. According to Pate (nodate), "there is a paucity of community-based and therapeutic alternatives for young people in general and young women in particular" (p. 4).

Gangs express cultural differences in their dress, colors, language, slang, coded words, hand signals and use of graffiti. These gangs operate as an organization and will stake out their own territory by marking it with graffiti. There are several gang organizations throughout the United States.

Two well-known gang organizations are "the Crips and the Bloods." The Crips and the Bloods depart from the norms of society. Both groups have allowed women into their gangs. The women are primarily African American, but Latino women have also joined this gang. The Bloods originally formed to defend themselves against the Crips.

The Crips originally formed in Compton, Watts and Los Angeles, California in the late 1960s. The Crips branched into the San Diego area in the early 1970s. Raymond Washington "Tookie" Williams was the founder of the gang. He is currently serving time on Death Row at San Quentin (Delinquent Gangs Nodate:1). The Crips traditionally align themselves with the Folk Nation, which is another organization. The Crips are largely centered on the west coast. They are diversified throughout California, but the majority are located in the Los Angeles area. The Crips of Los Angeles tend to wear black or blue clothing with the Oakland Raiders markings.

The Bloods originally formed by two youths by the name of Sylvester Scott and Vincent Owens (Delinquent Gangs Nodate:1). The Bloods align themselves with the People Nation and the majority has migrated to the east coast. The Bloods originally formed from a gang by the name of the "Compton Piru" gang. Piru and Bloods are synonymous. These gangs express cultural differences in their dress, colors, language, slang, coded words, hand signals and use of graffiti. The Bloods identify themselves with the color red and markings of the Cincinnati Reds. According to the attached Figure 6: Drive-By Shootings and Count of Los Angeles City Gangs and Gang Members, as of February 2002 there are 107 gangs composed of the Crips with membership totaling $13,287 and 43 gangs composed of the Blood with membership totaling 5,376. In addition, there are 204 Hispanic gangs with membership totaling 34,136. This report was

Figure 6: Drive-By Shootings and Count of Los Angeles City Gangs and Gang Members

	VICTS THIS MONTH	THIS MONTH LAST YEAR	INCIDENTS THIS MONTH	THIS MONTH LAST YEAR	% CHANGE INCIDENTS
DRIVE-BY SHOOTINGS	135	69	98	41	139.0
YTD TOTAL	261	159	184	110	67.3

Count of Los Angeles City gangs
and gang members

GANGS	NUMBER	MEMBERSHIP
Hispanic	**204**	**34,136**
Crip	107	13,287
Blood	**43**	**5,376**
Asian	32	1,766
Stoner	16	795
White	5	691
TOTALS:		**56,051**

*** Inlcudes Battery, ADW and
Attempt Murders on Police
Officers**

** Includes Terrorist Threats

Source: "Berkeley University (Index to the Internet)." Nodate. Retrieved April 4, 2002
(http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/InternetIndex).

prepared by the Los Angeles Police Department, Citywide Gang Crime Summary (Berkeley University Nodate).

Between all the gangs, it has been found that there is a difference in the weapons that men and women use. Males are two or three times more likely to carry weapons such as guns. Women prefer to carry knives (Weiler 1999:1).

Conclusion:

In concluding my research, I would like to exam the different options, as well as lack of options available to women seeking to leave a street gangs. Just as there are risks involved when they enter the street gang there are risks when a woman wants to leave her gang affiliation. When a female wants to leave her gang she is faced with the fear of physical and emotional abuse. If she has children with a gang member, the bond to the gang is stronger because of the father. Since the gang enables women to make money and gain power, leaving the gang will decrease the money that she is making within the gang.

In interviews and a study with girls and young women who finally left a gang, women commented that, "The gang was not always good, you know, people get hurt and die" (Gold, et al 2000:44). These women stated that the boyfriends or father of their children would hit them. Many went to the hospital, but would not press charges out of fear. These women had been torn between the gang and the risks that they took inside the gang and the consequences that faced them if they left the gang.

In a survey of middle school aged students, opinion on what can be done regarding the issue of gang prevention ranged from family care (53%), after school

program activities (50%), education (38%), jobs (21%), clubs (20%), and counseling (14%). According to this survey, what will work will be in the areas of parental education, extra-curricular activities, quality of our schooling, and job opportunities (Wang 2000:624-625). It is necessary to educate young girls and their parents before they are influenced to join street gangs. Community and schools need to focus on this need. We as a society need to open our eyes to prevent further generations venturing into a life of gang affiliation. These generations are our future and society needs to guide them in a positive direction.

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Appendix:

The author is currently a junior at San Diego State University focusing on a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology. She is a transfer student from Mesa Community College where she received her AA degree in Liberal Arts. Her previous job experience was as an Administrative Supervisor in mortgage banking and the legal field. She is a full time student, wife and the parent of two small girls. The author plans to re-enter the job market with a career change in working with troubled teenage girls or teaching early elementary education. Her interest in the topic of women in gangs is a possible focus in working with trouble teenage girls.