Disengagement from street gangs: a systematic review of the literature

Sarah Tonks and Zoe Stephenson

School of Psychology, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, United Kingdom

Many studies identify the risk factors for joining street gangs, but few explore disengagement. This article provides a systematic review of the factors which contribute to disengagement from gangs. Understanding this area is of paramount importance to developing policy and guiding practitioners working with this population, given the impact this lifestyle has on gang members and society as a whole. Seven academic databases, reference lists of relevant publications, an online search engine and a government database were used to identify relevant studies. Inclusion and exclusion criteria and quality assessment methods were employed. Data were then extracted and synthesised. Of 2515 citations, seven were found to have methodological rigour. The findings suggest there is not one definitive reason for gang exit but rather that multiple factors contribute. Variability was found in the quality scores. The limitations of this review are discussed, along with clinical implications and suggestions for future research.

Keywords: Defect; desistance; disengagement; disillusionment; exit; gang; street gang.

Introduction

In the last decade the issue of gangs has received increasing academic, political and media attention (Gormally, 2015). Within the United Kingdom (UK), cities such as Birmingham (Shropshire & McFarquhar, 2002), London (Shropshire & McFarquhar, 2002) and Manchester (Mares, 2001) have witnessed the impact that gangs can have on the local community, with members dominating neighbourhoods and engaging in escalating violence. Moreover, this violence has led to the criminal justice system, the police force and hospitals becoming stretched by the added pressure of having to deal with more cases caused by gang-related activity (Coid et al., 2013). Despite these continuing problems, there remains a long-standing debate as to what constitutes a gang. Numerous definitions and typologies have been provided (Ball & Curry, 1995; Brown, 2000; Gordon, 2000; Hallsworth & Young, 2004; Home Office,

2006), with the most widely cited definition being that of the Eurogang, which asserts that a gang is ‘any durable, street oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity’ (Weerman et al., 2009, p. 20). However, Klein and Maxson (2006) and Knox (2000) argue that gangs consist of both adult and young members. In particular, it has been reported that older street gang members are more involved in serious violence (Maxon, Gordon, & Klein, 1985) and find the allure of status more appealing (Decker & Curry, 2000) compared to their adolescent counterparts. This suggests that street gang members are not confined to just youths and that a broader scope for understanding gang activity is needed. Miller’s (1992) definition appears to fit with this notion, describing a street gang as ‘a self-formed association of peers, united by mutual interests, with identifiable leadership and internal organization, who act collectively or

Correspondence: Sarah Tonks. Email: Sarah.tonks@talk21.com

as individuals to achieve specific purposes, including the conduct of illegal activity and control of a particular territory, facility or enterprise' (p. 21). Nevertheless, Esbensen, Winfree, He, and Taylor (2001) argue that a national consensus is unlikely to be reached, as experts will inevitably find fault with each definition published. Questions are also raised as to whether or not a consensus needs to be obtained, given that individuals do not refer to themselves in this manner (Fleisher, 2000; Masiello, 2006) – rather, it is just a label applied by the Criminal Justice System in order to categorise a problem. The present review focuses on a broader definition of 'gangs' as encompassing all ages, rather than a specific youth-oriented definition, in order to undertake a wide search of the literature.

Reasons to join a gang

To understand the process of gang membership, it is first important to understand why individuals identify with and become involved in this lifestyle. Academics have tended to concentrate on engagement factors to help inform policymakers on how to prevent individuals, particularly youths, from being attracted to gang lifestyles. The reasons that motivate individuals and contribute to them becoming more susceptible to joining a gang can be identified using the idea of push and pull factors. This paradigm is used in many academic fields to explain human behaviour, including gang membership. Push factors are deemed internal and drive the individual towards membership whereas pull factors are external, i.e. the individual perceives a benefit from belonging to a gang and is pulled towards this lifestyle as a result (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Harris, Turner, Garrett, & Atkinson, 2011). However, Carson and Vecchio (2015) argue that while motivations for joining and leaving a gang can be classified by this paradigm, the factors are not necessarily the same.

Raby and Jones (2016) conducted a systematic literature review as a means of assessing the quality of the engagement research in order to determine whether or not it is possible to classify why males join street gangs. They categorise using four domains, the first being focused on 'family'. It is widely supported across the literature that a genetic predisposition to gang involvement (Beaver, DeLisi, Vaughn, & Barnes, 2009), poor parental attachment and coping skills (McDaniel, 2012), a lack of parental supervision (Pyrooz & Sweeten, 2015) and parental abuse (Thompson & Braaten-Antrim, 1998) contribute to individuals joining a gang. The second domain is identified as 'schooling', and studies have found that a lack of commitment to education (Alleyne & Wood, 2014) as well as being suspended (Farmer & Hairston, 2013) and holding hostile attitudes towards teachers (Ngai & Cheung, 2007) present an increasing risk of entering into gang membership. The third domain is classified as 'individual', with those joining a gang being more likely to have a prior history of engaging in antisocial behaviour than offenders who do not identify as street gang members (Alleyne & Wood, 2013; Melde & Esbensen, 2011). Familiarity with the drug scene (Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993), a perceived need for protection (Barnes, Boutwell, & Fox, 2012; Coid et al., 2013), poverty and a need to increase one's social status (Alleyne & Wood, 2013; Dmitrieva, Gibson, Steinberg, Piquero, & Fagan, 2014) are also deemed to be linked to the likelihood of an individual joining a gang. Psychological difficulties such as low self-esteem (Dmitrieva et al., 2014), trauma and mental health problems (Coid et al., 2013) are also identified as being associated with joining a gang. The final domain is categorised as 'peers', with the reviewed studies outlining that an increase in antisocial peers exerts a significant influence upon individuals wanting to belong to a gang (Alleyne & Wood, 2014; Weerman, Lovegrove, & Thornberry, 2015). However, these findings are only related to

males and, as such, gender is not a variable taken into account.

Historically, gangs have been viewed as male; however, there is emerging research which argues that female street gang members differ from their male counterparts in terms of their risk factors for engagement. Specifically, both Esbensen, Deschenes, and Winfree (1999) and Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, and Tobin (2003) found that female street gang members reported familial and peer influence as reasons for joining, rather than needing protection or excitement. Moreover, Weerman (2012) found that male street gang members are more involved in criminal activity and that the types of offending committed by males are classified under the judicial system as more serious. In contrast, Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen (2013), Peterson (2012) and O'Neal, Decker, Moule, and Pyrooz (2016) found little difference between male and female gang members. As such, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions owing to the variations across gender. However, whilst females and males may share common risk factors and motivations for joining a gang, there do also seem to be unique features for females in their transition into a gang and their experiences whilst in it (Klein & Maxson, 2006). Therefore, a decision has been taken not to include female-only samples within this review, as it can be argued that there may be differences in the reasons that cause males and females to choose to transition and leave a gang. However, mixed samples are included.

Disengagement

Another dynamic of the gang process is disengagement and, as detailed, less attention has been directed to this within the research. Laub, Nagin, and Sampson (1998) argue that focus has to be given to desistance, as the factors contributing to individuals making the choice to desist are not necessarily the inverse of those that caused them to become involved. Therefore, it is surprising that more focus has not been given to this area, especially as gang

membership is often viewed as a temporary status (Melde & Esbensen, 2014; Thornberry, Huizinga, & Loeber, 2004). Moreover, as gang membership reportedly mirrors the life cycle of criminal behaviour (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011), it is assumed that the pattern of onset, immersion and desistance is comparable to that of joining, maintaining and leaving a gang.

Sanchez-Jankowski's (1991) early study on gang disengagement hypothesises six possible ways that individuals can leave their gang: mature, die, go to prison, gain employment, join another gang or leave as a result of the gang disbanding. Within the general desistance literature, Maruna (2001) argues that disengagement cannot be solely categorised as a single pivotal turning point. Therefore, it can be argued that leaving a gang is a more complex process than being linked to one single event.

Maruna (2000) identifies three broad theoretical perspectives to describe the process of desistance: maturational, sociogenic and narrative. The maturational process hypothesises that criminality reduces during an individual's life because of physical, mental and biological changes that take place due to the ageing process. Essentially, this means that an individual is likely to grow out of crime (Rutherford, 1992). However, Bushway, Piquero, Broidy, Cauffman, and Mazerole (2001) outline that whilst ageing does impact on the developmental process, age cannot account for other pathways associated with disengagement and is not in itself an explanation for change.

The sociogenic process advances from the maturational perspective by outlining that there is an association between disengaging and external circumstances, such as having a positive family role model (Carson et al., 2013; Decker, Pyrooz, & Moule, 2014), marriage (Sampson & Laub, 1993), parenthood (Fleisher & Krienert, 2004), employment (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002) and renewed faith (Giordano, 2010). However, Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) and Uggen (2000) found that employment has no effect on desistance.

Additionally, Moore (1991) concludes that marriage is often short-lived for street gang members and, as such, is not a significant factor in encouraging them to leave this lifestyle behind. Given these conflicting findings, it is again postulated that desistance is not solely attributable to external factors. Moreover, a sociogenic process fails to take into account the individuals themselves and the value that they may place on these factors, which in turn reduces their motivation to engage.

The narrative process builds on the above ideas, outlining that disengagement should be viewed as a combination of individual and structural factors wherein true insight can only be gained through the subjective perspective of the individual. This also stresses the importance of the individual's self-worth, confidence and identity as key factors that contribute to change (Burnett, 1992; Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Maruna, 2001).

Taking into account Maruna's (2000) perspective, it can be hypothesised that for individuals to disengage from offending, they must have a reflective thought process as well as an opportunity to desist in order to consider change. Furthermore, certain life events such as marriage or becoming a parent may help to strengthen this process. This links in with the push-pull paradigm cited earlier, whereby the push factor is individuals assessing internally that their current environment is unappealing, effectively pushing them away from their gangs, and the pull factor is the growing belief that there are external alternatives which are more appealing than gang life. However, it is important to highlight that Maruna's work is based on the study of a general criminal lifestyle and does not specifically relate to gang membership. Therefore, whilst there may be similarities between the risk and disengagement factors of general criminality and gang membership, there may also be important differences.

The current review

A preliminary search was conducted on 12 January 2017 using the Cochrane Database of

Systematic Reviews, PsychINFO, Medline and the Campbell Library of Systematic Reviews. No relevant systematic reviews were found. A wider online search was also completed which revealed a narrative chapter review on gang desistance (Carson & Vecchio, 2015). The conclusions drawn outline that further research in this area would be advantageous in order to expand the literature on desistance from gangs. Therefore, the aim of this review is to understand whether or not disengagement factors can be identified and summarised from a systematic review of the wider literature. In turn, understanding the mechanisms surrounding leaving a gang may help to inform policymakers and practitioners on how to strengthen an individual's resolve to remain free of being in a gang and continue on the path of desistance. It may also provide a helpful framework for future interventions and strategies for those who are still ambivalent about leaving their gang.

Method

Search strategy

Database searches were conducted to identify the extent of the available data and inform potential search parameters. The preliminary search revealed that whilst research on gangs has significantly increased in the last few decades, a number of studies are pre-1990; as such, a decision was taken not to include a date parameter in the search. Where a starting date was required by databases, the earliest date possible was chosen.

A search was undertaken on 20 January 2017 of the following electronic databases: Cochrane Library, Medline, Pilots (post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] database), ProQuest Applied Social Science Index & Abstracts (1987 onwards), ProQuest Sociological Abstracts (1952 onwards), OVID Psych INFO (1806 onwards), Science Direct and Web of Science. A decision was taken at the initial stage not to restrict the article type (journal, book review, editorial) to enable the

search to be more encompassing. However, articles were restricted to those written in English due to time constraints and the practicalities of translating full articles. It is acknowledged that this may have limited the search results.

The initial scoping exercise informed the development of the search terms utilised in the search strategy by examining the keywords that are used in relevant articles. Wild cards were also used to broaden the search and maximise the chance of collating all relevant literature:

Gang OR Gangs OR Gangster* OR
'Street gang'

AND

'Get out' OR Leav* OR Depart*
OR Exit* OR Defect* OR Desist* OR
Disillusion* OR Withdraw* OR
Terminat* OR Discontinue OR Deter*
OR Disengag* OR Push.

An electronic search for grey literature was also undertaken on 20 January 2017 using the Open Grey and Government Research databases.

The search of all electronic databases yielded 2515 articles. Duplicates were removed and the remaining articles were screened by title and abstract. They were then assessed against inclusion and exclusion criteria that are based upon the earlier literature scoping exercises and the aim of the research

question (Table 1). The overall methodological process is presented in Figure 1.

Quality assessment

The fifteen articles that remained after the application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria use either a qualitative, a cross-sectional or a mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) design. Consequently, the development of three separate quality assessment tools was required in order to appraise the methodological rigour of each article. The qualitative and cross-sectional assessment sheets are informed by the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2004), and the mixed-method assessment tool is adapted from the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Pluye et al., 2011). Each item on the scoring sheets uses a four-point scale (yes = 2, partial = 1, no = 0) that includes an option for 'can't tell'; whilst the 'can't tell' option was not factored directly into the scoring, attention was given to it in a qualitative manner.

A quality score was assigned to each article by adding the scores of each item, resulting in a total ranging from 0 to 14 for the qualitative designs, 0 to 34 for the cross-sectional designs and 0 to 28 for the mixed-method designs. These scores were then converted into percentages to give an overall quality assessment score. There is little guidance within the research to suggest an acceptable cut-off for

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Type	Criterion
Inclusion	Sample uses street gang members and/or former street gang members
Inclusion	Focuses on male-only or mixed sample
Inclusion	No age restriction (children/adolescents and/or adults)
Exclusion	Exclusively focuses on female-only sample
Exclusion	Focuses on extremist groups, organised crime, prison gangs or general antisocial/violent behaviour
Exclusion	Focuses on prevention methods before individuals join a gang
Exclusion	Focuses on types of therapy and intervention
Exclusion	Falls into the category of narrative, review, commentary or editorial

Figure 1. The study selection process.

inclusion in a systematic review. However, Kmet, Lee, and Cook (2004) as well as a number of unpublished systematic literature reviews consider good quality to be denoted by a score of 60% and over. Following this guidance, eight articles were excluded due to having an overall quality score of less than 60%.

The quality assessment tools were subjected to inter-rater reliability by giving randomly selected articles featuring each type of research design to a professional who has experience in completing systematic literature reviews. General agreement on the ratings for the selected articles was found, and any scoring

differences did not change the status of those articles that are excluded from the review. The question that caused disparity on the qualitative and mixed-method sheets was whether or not potential bias on the part of the researcher(s) had been considered in enough detail.

Data extraction

A data pro-forma was created in order to extract the relevant data from the seven studies selected for inclusion in the review. This form was designed to facilitate data synthesis and capture information relevant to the research question, which in turn would allow conclusions to be drawn from undertaking this systematic review.

Results

Description of the articles included

The seven articles included in this review are presented in Table 2, while Tables 3 and 4 detail the information that was extracted via the data synthesis process.

Descriptive overview of the results

Methodology

None of the studies use an experimental randomised control trial (RCT) design, which is considered the most robust study design (Khan, ter Riet, Popay, Nixon, & Kleijnen, 2001). Instead, five use a qualitative methodology, one uses a cross-sectional methodology and one uses a mixed methodology. Each of these methodologies has its own strengths. Qualitative research is considered to be key when wanting to explore a topic from individuals' perspectives, as it provides a complex, holistic picture of the topic being investigated and allows for detailed reports that are produced within a natural setting (Crewsell, 2003). In turn, this allows for greater insight to be gained by the researcher without the falsification of reality (De Waele & Harré, 1979). However, it is recognised that the knowledge gained from qualitative research may not be

generalisable to a wider setting, as the findings may be unique to the sample used (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Whilst cross-sectional studies are economical and ethically safe, particular criticisms of this methodology are that it does not infer causation and again that there is a lack of generalisability (Lindell & Whitney, 2001). Therefore, Khan et al. (2001) consider the cross-sectional approach weaker than the other types under consideration. However, owing to the nature of the research topic and the difficulties inherent to accessing data on this type of population, it is still important to include studies that use this method. The final study bridges the division between qualitative and quantitative research by using a mixed method. This approach offers more flexibility, as the researcher is not confined to a single method, meaning that a range of research questions can be explored (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). However, such investigations are likely to require more than one researcher, which contributes to the work being more time consuming, expensive and subject to bias.

Participants

Participant recruitment is described fully in all seven studies, and this is considered a strength within the research. However, the sampling methods vary, with five using a type of purposive sampling such as a snowball strategy (Bubolz, 2014; Decker et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2011; Munoz, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2016) and two using an opportunistic sampling method (Gormally, 2015; Rice, 2015).

When considering appropriate samples, the size should be informed primarily by the research objective, the research question and the research design (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). In relation to qualitative research, Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that data collection should cease when data saturation occurs – the point at which it is no longer considered necessary to add more participants to the study, as doing so will not yield additional perspectives or information. Other guidelines

Table 2. Research articles identified by the review.

Article	Title	Country
Bubolz (2014)	Once a gang member always a gang member? A life history study of gang desistance	US
Decker et al. (2014)	Disengagement from gangs as role transitions	US
Gormally (2015)	'I've been there, done that': A study of youth gang desistance	Scotland
Harris et al. (2011)	Understanding the psychology of gang violence: Implications for designing effective violence interventions	England
Munoz (2014)	Getting out and staying out: Exploring factors that helped Mexican American ex-gang members successfully stay out of gangs	US
O'Neal et al. (2016)	Girls, gangs and getting out: Gender differences and similarities in leaving the gang	US
Rice (2015)	A qualitative study of gang desistance in former gang members	US

are also recommended for particular subtypes of qualitative analysis. For grounded theory, for example, Morse (1994) suggests 30 to 50 interviews while Creswell (1998) only advocates 20 to 30. In contrast, for phenomenological studies, Creswell recommends 5 to 25 interviews while Morse suggests that at least 6 be conducted. Applying these principles to the five qualitative studies, only three are deemed sufficient (Bubolz, 2014; Harris et al., 2011; Munoz, 2014), although data saturation is not detailed as a reason for the sample total. The remaining two studies (Gormally, 2015; Rice, 2015) are considered to have a smaller sample size. Therefore, whilst disengagement factors have been extracted, generalisation from the findings and the robustness of the results is lowered.

O'Neal et al. (2016) use a cross-sectional design, and whilst the total sample is deemed adequate it is not equally representative of males and females. They acknowledge this, arguing that because the focus is on gender, the sample chosen includes more female former gang members than any other prior study. Decker et al. (2014) use a mixed-method approach and as such the determination of an appropriate sample size requires a broader integrative perspective. An additional question posed in the wider research-design literature is

whether it is better to have a small manageable sample for conducting in-depth qualitative analyses or to favour a larger sample size (40–200) for conducting reliable multivariate statistical analyses (Gelo, Braakman, & Benetka, 2008; Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Therefore, it would appear that the main focus of Decker et al. (2014) was to gain as wide a sample as possible, achieving 260 in total.

The cumulative sample in all seven studies is 500 street gang members. It is not possible to provide a gender breakdown on account of Decker et al. (2014) detailing their male sample in the form of a percentage and not specifically reporting female data. The participant demographics are detailed in all the studies to some extent. The most commonly cited variables are age and ethnicity, although it is important to note that Gormally (2015) provides an estimation of age and does not cite the ethnicity of her participants. The average age of the participants was over 20 years, and in descending order the proportion of participants included in the study are African American, Black Caribbean, Hispanic, Caucasian and mixed heritage. This again raises the issue of generalisability to the overall street gang member population.

Three studies consider level of education, one study details prior convictions and one

Table 3. Characteristics of the articles included in the review.

Article	Study design	Quality score (%)	Research aims, questions and hypotheses	Sample size	Focus	Findings
Bubolz (2014)	Qualitative: interviews	92.86	1. What experiences motivate individuals to leave street gangs? 2. What does it mean to be a former gang member? 3. What are the residual effects of gang identity?	30 former gang members	Community former gang members' life experiences	1. Motivations: disloyalty, lack of social support, incarceration, victimisation, violence, spirituality, parenthood. 2. Former gang members: a consensus does not exist for a definition of what constitutes a former gang member. 3. Residual effects: symbols, demeanour, world view, unresolved trauma.
Decker et al. (2014)	Mixed method	71.42	1. What is the general process undertaken to leave a gang? 2. What snags and pulls emerge? 3. How is the transition out of the gang affected by others' recognition that the individual is a former gang member?	260 former gang members	Former gang members' experiences and whether or not embeddedness is linked to desistance	1. Stages of disengagement: first doubts, anticipatory socialisation turning points such as violence or positive family roles models, post-exit validation from other law-based support mechanisms. 2. Factors supporting disengagement: positive family member, having a family, job, partner, church leaders, school, criminal justice system, service agencies. 3. Some of the pressures placed on former gang members: continued attacks

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Quality score (%)	Research aims, questions and hypotheses	Sample size	Focus	Findings
Gormally (2015)	Qualitative	64.28	To understand the process of why individuals may stop identifying with gang membership	37 15 gang members 6 youth workers 1 church worker 12 community residents 1 external agency 2 police	The desistance process in young people	from rival gang members, police harassment. Age is a central factor in aiding desistance; changes in personal focus can impact on why young people choose or have the opportunity to stop identifying with a gang; other factors include consequential thinking, responsibility such as parenthood, economic and social opportunities with peers.
Harris et al. (2011)	Qualitative	85.71	To understand the violence carried out by prisoners identified as street gang members and the psychological processes of gangs at an individual level	First phase: Gang members: 14 approached, 6 consented; second phase: 136 approached, 38 consented	Understanding what a gang is; factors motivating joining, staying in and leaving a gang	1. There are differing views about the definition of 'gang', reinforcing current research that there is no general consensus. 2. Factors motivating joining a gang: money to survive, quick and easy money or being part of a business, protection from victimisation, connectedness, sense of belonging, status and respect. 3. Factors motivating staying in a gang: gang affiliation, loyalty, force of habit, being stuck.

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Quality score (%)	Research aims, questions and hypotheses	Sample size	Focus	Findings
Munoz (2014)	Qualitative	78.57	To identify common themes amongst gang members and the process of exiting gang affiliation	8 former gang members	The internal and external factors that contribute to gang members successfully exiting their gang	4. Factors motivating leaving a gang: maturation including a 'growing up' phase, critical reflection on needing a change in life direction, new roles such as fatherhood and needing to be a good role model, forced re-evaluation i.e. being let down or abandoned. 1. Risk factors for joining a gang: neighbourhood (high crime rate, low socioeconomic status), family (abusive father, family gang members, lack of communication). 2. Potential protective factors: family (supportive mother, extended family), parental expectations (rule-setting and ethics). 3. Maintenance factors whilst in a gang: positive aspects (belonging, popularity, self-esteem), negative consequences (loss of friends, trauma). 4. Disengagement factors: Family (meaningful and

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Quality score (%)	Research aims, questions and hypotheses	Sample size	Focus	Findings
O'Neal et al. (2016)	Cross-sectional	64.70	Do gendered conditions and circumstances contribute to female gang disengagement?	143 former gang members (male and female)	Comparing the motivations, sources of assistance and consequences of gang exit across gender	positive support, partner), mortality (perception of losing life, loss of friends), outside support (counsellors, religious leaders, friends), physical removal (moving away, active service, fading out). 5. Maintenance as former gang member: family (parenthood), shifting identity (culture, having a job, gaining an education), hope (increase in self-worth). 1. No significant differences were found between females and males for reasons for leaving their gang, which include: violence perpetrated towards them or others who were important to them, police harassment, employment, starting a family, family members left the gang, gang disbanded, partner, criminal sanctions, moving areas, losing interest with gang lifestyle. 2. No significant differences were found between females and males for factors that assisted their transition out of the gang, which include: family,

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Quality score (%)	Research aims, questions and hypotheses	Sample size	Focus	Findings
Rice (2015)	Qualitative	92.85	1. What factors lead to youths' decisions to leave their gang? 2. What challenges are faced? 3. What support structures are utilised?	10 former gang members	Gang members' experiences	employment, partner, church, school, criminal justice system. 3. A statistically significant difference was found between female and male gang members' concerns about leaving the gang lifestyle behind: females were found to be more likely to worry that their family would be attacked after exiting the gang. 1. Factors leading to disengagement: sense of belonging with meaningful others such as family, a partner or a community member such as a probation worker, priest or social worker; forced separation such as prison allowed for self-reflection on whether gang life was beneficial; experiencing a traumatic event such as becoming or seeing someone else become the victim of violence prompted evaluation about whether or not to stay in the gang; leaving the neighbourhood. 2. The challenges faced by those choosing to leave

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Quality score (%)	Research aims, questions and hypotheses	Sample size	Focus	Findings
						included: fear of physical harm; grieving the losses resulting from gang life, i.e. lack of schooling, employment, ties with family; having to start over. 3. Support from family, peers or others and employment were considered key to aiding the desistance process.

study outlines whether or not the participants had children, although no rationale is given as to why these data are reported. None of the studies consider more explicit tests of intellectual functioning in order to prevent bias within the sample.

Measures

As detailed previously, there is not a general consensus on the definition of a street gang member. Six of the studies used self-nomination whereby participants answered a series of questions such as ‘Have you ever belonged to a street gang?’ in order to be included in the study. In contrast, Harris et al. (2011) focus on individuals who were detained in custody and had been identified as street gang members through file information, applying Hallsworth and Young’s (2006) definition of a gang as ‘a relatively durable predominantly street-based group of young people who see themselves (are recognised by others) as a discernible group for whom crime and violence is intrinsic to identity and practice’ (p. 4). Without substantiated evidence of gang membership or association, the participant was removed from the sample.

Quality

The quality assessment scores achieved by the seven studies reveal a disparity regarding quality. As detailed in Table 3, three studies scored between 85 and 93% (Bubolz, 2014; Harris et al., 2011; Rice, 2015), two studies scored between 71 and 78% (Decker et al., 2014; Munoz, 2014) and two studies scored between 64 and 66% (Gormally, 2015; O’Neal et al., 2016). It is important to highlight that the three studies which scored the highest were either unpublished theses (Bubolz, 2014; Rice, 2015) or classified as grey literature (Harris et al., 2011), thus strengthening the argument that a wider scope was warranted for the search stage of this literature review.

The two key weaknesses in the studies are a small sample size and the recruitment of participants being heavily weighted to specific

locations and ethnicities. The majority of the studies reviewed were undertaken in the United States (US; Bubolz, 2014; Decker et al., 2014; Munoz, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2016; Rice, 2015), and the remaining two were undertaken in Scotland (Gormally, 2015) and England (Harris et al., 2011). Furthermore, as detailed above, the majority of the participants identified as Black Caribbean, African American or Hispanic.

Overview of the findings

All seven studies detail the analytical approach that was used and all are deemed appropriate for their respective design. Three studies provide a comprehensive level of detail regarding their analytical procedures in order to allow full replication and detailed critiquing (Bubolz, 2014; Harris et al., 2011; Munoz, 2014). Some studies scored lower in this area as a result of stating that a qualitative method was carried out using computer software, and as such it is not possible to ascertain how the results are supported by the analytical processes. In turn this limits the confidence that can be attributed to the findings. Nevertheless, the findings have enabled the wider literature to be drawn together, which in turn has provided the first detailed overview of the factors involved in why individuals choose to disengage from street gangs. All the studies support the idea that the decision to leave a gang is unique to the individual and should take into account their differing experiences. Furthermore, the transition to disengagement appears to produce internal turmoil for individuals as they question their existing identities. These findings strengthen existing research that leaving a gang is a complex process and cannot be attributed to one sole reason – rather, there are overlapping themes (Decker & Lauritson, 2002; Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2010).

Table 5 reports the individual factors found within the studies which also lend support to the idea of the push and pull paradigm previously cited from the literature (Decker &

Van Winkle, 1996; Harris et al., 2011). It is important to note that the four less commonly found factors for leaving a gang – burnout, police pressure, family members leaving the gang and dissolution of the gang – are only cited in O'Neal et al. (2016), and so it is difficult to make any inferences about them. Therefore, these factors are not discussed further.

Discussion

Themes within the literature

Table 5 depicts a variety of factors that emerged from the seven studies included in this review. In order to expand on these findings, some of the factors which share a common theme are grouped together.

Significant others

Having some form of support is considered by street gang members as essential in aiding the process of transitioning out of their gang. Having an intimate relationship and getting married contributed to gang members seeing the associated consequences of what their behaviour was doing to their partners, as well as to feeling that someone cared for them (Decker et al., 2014). Therefore, having significant others in their lives led to a change in how they viewed their behaviour. Munoz (2014) also highlights that partners can offer encouragement and motivation to pursue alternative goals such as education. Thus, these findings appear to be inconsistent with Moore's (1991) conclusions that marriage is not a significant factor in encouraging gang members to leave their current lifestyle behind. However, it is still important to consider the quality of these relationships, in order to confirm a link to disengagement. Street gang members were also found to regard family members as key in their decision-making. Decker et al. (2014) report that some gang members found that, upon becoming a victim of violence, the realisation of what they were doing to their parents prompted doubts in their

minds: ‘when I got shot it really brought stress to her and what not, but the major influence was my mom prayin’ for me that I came home safe that did it’ (p. 275). Family members can also enable further opportunities to help with the disengagement process, including providing employment and accommodation (Munoz, 2014; Rice, 2015).

Six of the studies also consider that having a person outside of the family unit had helped to support gang members in making the decision to leave their gang. These individuals vary from counsellors to religious leaders who had invested their time and energy, which in turn had helped the gang members to feel important, acknowledged and valued. Moreover, talking through violence and their lifestyle without being judged gave the impression that some people were not giving up on them, prompting a desire to hope for a better future. The exception is O’Neal et al. (2016), who found that the vast majority of those to whom they spoke indicated that social service agencies had played no role in their disengagement. This is surprising given that the gang members who were interviewed were in contact with such services. Munoz (2014) and Rice (2015) also found that peers who share similar experiences can equally play a role in the disengagement process. Gang members in both studies provided qualitative accounts of how they had been given advice by current and former gang members, which in turn contributed to the realisation of the situation they were in – statements such as ‘you’re a smart kid man, you can actually do something with yourself’ and ‘he was in the cell a few down from me and he was like what are you doing with your life, so I started to think about changing’. This idea of peer guidance is also cited by Harris et al. (2011), who found that individuals who had already made the transition out of a gang expressed goals of becoming positive mentors to others in order to help them out of gang culture as well. Therefore, this strengthens the argument that both informal support (such as from a peer) and formal

support (such as from a probation officer) can help to provide support for those who are beginning to want to disengage.

Religious leaders are also highlighted as being central to helping gang members to make the decision to leave their gang. Bubolz (2014) reports that gang members shared how religious leaders had helped them to become interested in faith, and to then realise that their current lifestyle was detrimental and opposite to their newfound beliefs. Furthermore, Decker et al. (2014) report that guidance from a spiritual leader usually occurs following a crisis or trauma. Therefore, it can be inferred that both the external event and the support received in its aftermath helped with making the decision to leave. Spirituality as a factor for disengagement is also supported in the existing research on criminal desistance (Giordano, 2010). Individuals are considered to use religion as a form of emotional support, which helps to promote cognitive dissonance.

Parenthood

Five of the seven studies (85%) are consistent in acknowledging that an increase in family responsibilities facilitates gang exit. O’Neal et al. (2016) report that both female and male gang members, on learning they were to become parents, started to doubt whether the lifestyle they were leading was beneficial. As the pregnancy continued, this strengthened their resolve to desist. Parenthood is widely referenced as a factor which helps gang members to see that they have more to live for than just residing with a gang (Decker et al., 2014; Fleisher & Krienert, 2004; Hagedorn, 1994). Moreover, they believe they have a new identity as a parent which, in turn, motivates them to lead a more sustainable life trajectory (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Joe-Laidler, 2009). Therefore, it can be argued that becoming a parent means there is an increase in responsibility which contributes to a level of emotional growth and maturity. This is evident in the Decker et al. (2014), Harris et al. (2011) and Munoz (2014) studies, where gang

Table 4. Data extraction and the quality of the articles included in the review.

Article	Study design	Method of determining (former) street gang membership	Characteristics of the participants	Attrition rates, dropout rates and participant retention	Measurements and analysis used	Strengths and weaknesses
Bubolz (2014)	Qualitative: interviews	Self-nomination	$n = 30$; 29 males; median age =35 years; 20 African Americans, 6 Hispanics or Latinos, 1 Caucasian, 1 1/2 African American 1/2 Native American, 1 1/2 African American 1/2 Irish, 1 1/2 Korean 1/2 Polish; 9 no education, 4 high school diploma, 11 college experience, 1 associate degree, 5 bachelor degree; follow-up interviews were conducted with 19 members of the above sample (demographics not detailed)	Not detailed	Grounded theory	+ Analysis suited to this topic as it is a relatively under researched area. + Provides understanding and description of the participants' personal experiences. + Codes/themes were input into a software package, reducing researcher bias and subjectivity. + Recruitment process described in detail. — No information detailed on what was asked about being affiliated to a gang. — Over-represented African American sample as a result of the snowballing sampling technique used. — Limited generalisability owing to only one US state being sampled.
Decker et al. (2014)	Mixed method	Self-nomination	$n = 260$; males =86.2%; mean age =29.5 years; mean age at disengagement =23.3 years; Black =40%, Hispanic =48.8%, unspecified =11.2%; female data not evident in table	Statement suggesting less than 3% refused to participate; some declined to answer specific survey questions; no figures given	Quantitative: paired sample <i>t</i> -tests and logistical regression; Qualitative: data was coded for analysis in NVivo; not specified further	+ Relatively large sample. + Clear link between hypothesis and the literature. + The mixed-method approach facilitates obtaining a rich data set that can be corroborated with statistics, contributing to the small body of research on gang desistance. — Whilst female data is cited in the results section, this sample's characteristics are not specified. — Limited information on dropout rates. — Generalisability limited as sample is youth gangs. — Does not provide in-depth information on the analysis used, making replication difficult.
Qualitative	Self-nomination	Not discussed	Iterative	(Continued)		

Table 4. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Method of determining (former) street gang membership	Characteristics of the participants	Attrition rates, dropout rates and participant retention	Measurements and analysis used	Strengths and weaknesses
Gormally (2015)			15 gang members; 13 males; age range estimate = 14–26 years; ethnicity not reported; sample also includes agencies involved with gang members: 6 youth workers, 1 church worker, 12 community residents, 1 statutory agency, 2 community police officers			+ Incorporating community input enables a broader contribution to be made to the disengagement literature. + Highlights key findings for youth gang desistance in a rarely studied UK sample. + Provides understanding and description of participants' personal experiences. – Small sample size, reducing generalisability of findings. – Unclear if coding was subjected to reliability measures. – Demographics not clearly detailed. – Attrition rates not discussed.
Harris et al. (2011)	Qualitative	Researchers reviewed information held in a database and cross-referenced with Hallsworth and Young's (2006) gang definition; subject excluded from sample if evidence was not substantial	First phase: $n = 6$ males; mean age = 19.8 years; 3 Black British Caribbean, 3 Black British African. Second phase: $n = 38$ males; mean age = 26.4 years; median age = 23 years; 17 Black British Caribbean, 10 Black British African, 4 Black British other origin, 3 White, 2 Asian, 1 mixed White and Black Caribbean; 1 unspecified.	First phase: 7 declined, 1 transferred prisons making contact impossible; second phase: 39 declined, 13 transferred during the study, 12 could not be located, 9 were released, 5 posed safety concerns and could not be seen, 3 were inaccessible due to the prison	First phase: 7 declined, 1 transferred prisons making contact impossible; second phase: 39 declined, 13 transferred during the study, 12 could not be located, 9 were released, 5 posed safety concerns and could not be seen, 3 were inaccessible due to the prison	+ Participants were able to talk freely to create a richer data set. + Dropout and attrition rates well explained. + First sample using English sample has mean practical implications to inform Criminal Justice System and treatment interventions. – Gang members recruited using existing records, which can be misleading if not all information is included. – Limited generalisability as taken from a specific area and uses a prison sample that had been in a street gang rather than those in the community. – Lacks information regarding ethical considerations, such as how consent was gained.
Munoz (2014)	Qualitative	Self-nomination	$n = 8$ males; age range = 25–49 years; 4 Chicano, 3 Mexican, 1 Hispanic,	Some potential participants did not feel comfortable and	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	+ Clearly explained methodology and data analysis. + Rich, detailed data obtained from participants on their personal

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Method of determining (former) street gang membership	Characteristics of the participants	Attrition rates, dropout rates and participant retention	Measurements and analysis used	Strengths and weaknesses
O’Neal et al. (2016)	Cross-sectional	Court-defined: participants were from a community-based programme designed to help former and current street gang members	7 US-born, 1 Mexico-born; education range = general educational diploma to graduate school; no specifics recorded; all were fathers $n = 143$; 108 males; mean age = 30.4 years (males) and 30.3 years (females); mean age at disengagement = 24 years (males) and 21 years (females); Black males = 26%, Hispanic males = 64%, Black females = 28.5%, Hispanic females = 68.5%	chose not to participate; no further details given	7-tests and logistic regression	experiences. + Internal reliability on data set was attempted by a separate researcher in order to validate the themes produced. – Specific sample required and so not representative of the wider population. – Small sample size makes the results difficult to generalise. + Dependent and independent variables and measurement methods clearly detailed (although confounding variables not taken into consideration). + Only one statistically significant gender difference found between male and female participants, lending further support to existing research that there are more similarities than differences between female and male gang members. – Main focus is on gaining more information on female gang members, which influenced where the data set was sourced. – Sample size unequal and not representative of different community types and locations. – Dropout/attrition rate not discussed in detail. – Interview strategy was changed during the first round of interviews as a response did not fit the structured format; owing to the use of different research staff it is unclear what the qualitative component consisted of and if the same process was used by all, leaving potential for interview bias. – <i>T</i> -test scores are not clearly reported. – Cannot infer causation.
Qualitative				Not detailed		

(Continued)

Table 4. (Continued).

Article	Study design	Method of determining (former) street gang membership	Characteristics of the participants	Attrition rates, dropout rates and participant retention	Measurements and analysis used	Strengths and weaknesses
Rice (2015)		Self-nomination from an advert inviting participants	$n = 10$ males; mean age = 22 years; 5 African American, 3 Hispanic, 2 Caucasian; mean education = 11 years of schooling		Interpreted using theoretic and open codes followed by inductive reasoning	+ Clearly states the ethical issues that the researcher considered and managed. + Provides understanding and descriptions of the participants' personal experiences. + Findings lend support to expanding this field of research, proposal for a prospective longitudinal study specified. – Analysis was not subjected to reliability measures. – Sample not representative as all located in one area. – Generalisability of findings difficult due to small sample size.

Table 5. Evidence of factors for leaving a gang.

	Push factors				Pull factors			
	Criminal justice sanction	Disillusionment	Maturation	Victimisation	Job/education	Move	Parenthood	Religion
Bubolz (2014)	X	X		X			X	X
Decker et al. (2014)	X	X	X	X			X	
Gormally (2015)			X		X			X
Harris et al. (2011)	X	X	X				X	X
Munoz (2014)				X		X	X	
O'Neal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
et al. (2016)								
Rice (2015)	X	X		X		X		X
Total	5	5	4	5	2	4	5	2
								6
								4

members were found to believe that they chose to leave their gang lifestyle in order to protect their children from harm and ensure they were good role models. Finally, Bubolz (2014) outlines how gang members found that becoming a parent distracted them, as they had to care for their children which in turn meant that they spent less time with their peers.

Victimisation

Research has found that violence and victimisation can serve to either increase or decrease an individual's commitment to a gang (Decker & Lauritsen, 2002). The studies in this review found that the motivation to disengage ranged from fear of future violence (from members of either their own gang or a rival street gang) or vicarious victimisation (seeing a friend or family member injured or killed) to direct experiences with violence (being injured by members of either their own gang or a rival gang). Some considered that going through a near-death experience had provided the realisation that the rhetoric and bravado the gang lifestyle offers was not worth the sacrifice. Additionally, Decker et al. (2014) found that some chose to leave because physical injuries meant that they could no longer be efficient as a gang member. In particular, one gang member reported damaging his 'trigger finger', and as such could not use a firearm. Therefore, this suggests that rather than the experience of trauma or victimisation, he left the gang in order to avoid future harm.

Within the wider body of research, the impact of violence has resulted in individuals becoming tired of leading a chaotic lifestyle (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996) or being directly motivated to leave after witnessing a traumatic event (Moore, 1991) or becoming a victim of violence (Vecchio, 2013). Within the qualitative research studies, this is evidenced by street gang members making statements such as 'after my brother got shot, I started thinking hard about everything that was going on'. This suggests that experiencing or witnessing a violent, traumatic event can lead to

feelings of disillusionment and start the process of wanting to leave the gang lifestyle behind.

Disillusionment

Disillusionment is cited in five of the studies whereby gang members felt betrayed or abandoned by their gang when they needed them the most. Bubolz (2014) found that 27% of his sample described how the lack of social support from street gang members whilst they were in prison made them realise who was really there for them and who was not. Therefore, this perceived loyalty that had contributed to remaining in the gang had not been reciprocated, leading to feelings of abandonment. This perceived loyalty was also expected to extend to their family members being provided for – and when this did not occur, this also started to facilitate doubts about remaining in the gang. Harris et al. (2011) label this idea 'forced evaluation', as it contributes to gang members recognising that the strong bonds they had once perceived that the group afforded them were in fact weak. Finally, Rice (2015) found that disillusionment contributed to gang members re-examining their own lives, which in turn led to them wanting to find meaning and belonging from other sources such as employment, marriage and religion. Subsequently, these findings again help to strengthen the idea that disengagement from a gang is multifaceted.

Maturation

Closely related to disillusionment is the idea of 'ageing' out of a gang. Both Decker et al. (2014) and Harris et al. (2011) found that individuals considered that they had joined gangs as a result of being young; therefore, as they became older they realised that there is more to experience in life than just being in a gang. Gormally (2015) suggests that 'growing out of the gang' is the most commonly cited reason when asking professionals who work with this group. She expands on this point to consider

how gang members not only physically mature but also go through a process of symbolic maturation. This outlines how individuals mature as they take on more responsibilities, embrace opportunities and adopt new social roles. Opportunities such as seeking employment and education are cited by street gang members as supporting this symbolic maturation (Gormally, 2015; Munoz, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2016). Therefore, with young gang members there is a need to invest trust and responsibility throughout their lives in order to afford them other ways to achieve their goals, thus giving them the chance to move away from feeling the need to get what they want through gang membership.

Physical removal

All seven studies included in this review found that when ties were severed to their gang by some external circumstance, this contributed to members making the decision to leave. Examples cited include moving to a different area (Gormally, 2015; Munoz, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2016; Rice, 2015), joining the military (Munoz, 2014) and receiving a criminal sanction (Bubolz, 2014; Decker et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2011; Munoz, 2014; O'Neal et al., 2016; Rice, 2015). Particular emphasis is placed on being sent to prison as a key factor in choosing to disengage from a gang. Harris et al. (2011) conclude that those they interviewed believed there is an expectation in prison that they will experience change either through attending offending behaviour programmes or through feeling forced to evidence this change in order to progress through the prison system. However, in order to facilitate this process of change, support from family, peers and professionals is deemed key.

Self-reflection

Although this review focuses on a number of external factors that contribute to gang disengagement, it is important to acknowledge that in some of the qualitative studies gang

members were keen to highlight the impact of their own reflections. This is fundamental given that personal strength and choice play a significant part in the process of desistance (Harris et al., 2011). Rice (2015) found that, whilst in prison, being separated from their former lifestyle allowed gang members to reassess their lives, the choices they were making and the consequences of their actions. Moreover, this led to a re-evaluation of goals and priorities, and to a realisation that remaining in a gang would not support their new aspirations. Gang members also spoke about how these changes contributed to them wanting to establish a new identity free from the gang label, and how this helped them to further distance themselves from their previous lifestyle (Gormally, 2015; Harris et al., 2011; Rice, 2015).

Strengths and limitations

Bias

This is the first systematic review to explore whether or not disengagement factors for leaving a gang can be identified and summarised within the literature – as such, this review contributes to the existing gang literature. However, as this is an evolving area, it could be argued that excluding all but the most methodologically robust studies means that important research findings may not have been included. Nevertheless, by utilising a systematic approach, clarity has been provided as to why the studies have been selected, demonstrating a lack of bias (Sayers, 2007). In an attempt to reduce potential bias, multiple databases were searched, broad search terms were included, papers were hand searched for their applicability and both inclusion and exclusion criteria and quality assessments were applied. Furthermore, a decision was taken to include unpublished theses on the basis that only including published studies could skew and narrow the findings. As such, the incorporation of unpublished studies has allowed for a more comprehensive, eclectic and unbiased review (Egger, Dickerson, & Smith, 2001). Only

studies written in the English language are included, which could have led to relevant studies being excluded.

Methodological issues

Quality assessments were utilised in this review in order to maximise the inclusion of methodologically valid studies. A number of the studies included in the review recruited participants from community samples. Only Bubolz (2014), Munoz (2014) and Rice (2015) recruited participants who were not actively linked to the criminal justice system. Therefore, whilst a criminal population is realistic, the samples obtained may not be representative of the general street gang member population. It is also difficult to draw comparisons because the samples are heavily weighted by those who identified as Black Caribbean, African American or Hispanic. Therefore, it is important for future studies to sample a variety of demographics in order to make cross-cultural comparisons.

A general limitation of the majority of the studies in this review is the use of self-reporting for gang membership without conducting formal validation of the questionnaires. While this approach is considered the most reliable way of assessing whether or not an individual affiliates with a gang (Esbensen et al., 2001), it is not without challenges – particularly when wanting to generalise and make cross-cultural comparisons (Aldridge, Medina, & Ralphs, 2008). Moreover, self-nomination is also based on the perception of the individual. Therefore, the likelihood of over-reporting or under-reporting may have been observed, which would affect the findings of the research. Harris et al. (2011) chose to identify street gang members by comparing file information to an existing definition of ‘street gang’ taken from the literature. This approach may have captured individuals who themselves did not perceive that they were in a gang, as it relies on the level of evidence available and the researcher’s perception that they fit the definition.

Conclusions and recommendations

This review aimed to ascertain whether or not disengagement factors for street gang members can be synthesised from the literature. A total of seven studies were selected as a result of meeting the inclusion and exclusion criteria and scoring greater than 60% on the quality assessment forms. However, it is important to recognise that the quality of the reviewed studies varies, and the inclusion of only seven studies means that to draw firm conclusions at this stage would be premature. Additionally, a stark finding of the review is the scarcity of research investigating gang disengagement in the UK, despite previous research highlighting UK gang activity as an increasing problem (Mares, 2001; Shropshire & McFarquhar, 2002). Nevertheless, this review has enabled the wider literature to be drawn together in order to provide an overview of the factors which are considered to contribute to the decision-making process that results in street gang members disengaging.

The review illustrates how all the studies found that whilst gang membership continues to be a unique and complex phenomenon, individuals who have distanced themselves from gang life have done so because it no longer serves their needs, values or priorities. Therefore, they must have a desire to leave their gang, which may be prompted by a life-changing event or a shift in circumstances. Former gang members then require an alternative path to follow such as gaining legitimate employment or furthering their education in order to continue to maintain this process of desistance. Therefore, it is suggested that gang disengagement is not overly dissimilar to the general criminality desistance process (Maruna, 2001). Moreover, as several factors in combination are cited as resulting in gang disengagement, this strengthens the idea that disengagement should be viewed as a combination of individual and structural factors wherein true insight can only be gained through the subjective perspective of the individual, thus lending support to Maruna’s

(2000) narrative perspective. Another highlighted factor is the role that self-reflection plays in disengagement, and how through this process individuals can stop self-identifying with being a member of their gang. This new identity formation was found to be strengthened when change was recognised by others. Therefore, the support of others can play a crucial role in helping to validate the changes made by individuals, which in turn can further their motivation to desist. This also calls into question whether or not labelling individuals as gang members and former gang members is helpful. Consideration also needs to be given to individuals' access interventions, as the professionals involved can help to develop and reinforce a positive identity (Maruna, 2001).

Implications for future research

This review has been helpful for developing a better understanding of the reasons why individuals choose to disengage from street gangs. However, the studies examined are mainly based in the US with only two studies conducted in the UK. Subsequently, it is clear that there is a need for an increase in UK-based studies. Prospective longitudinal studies could offer an increased ability to validate the factors linked to disengagement, and cohort studies could identify how the disengagement factors interact and relate to other factors over time, which is key given that there is an overlap. Once this has been achieved, well-designed randomised control tests which focus on targeting interventions such as those suggested above may be helpful. All of this could lead to firmer conclusions that the gang problem is being addressed in a more comprehensive way.

Whilst more research needs to be carried out, it is also important to identify that consistent research needs to be conducted to measure gang membership. The development of a robust gang affiliation measure that could be applied to all research in this area would serve to increase confidence that researchers are selecting participants who meet the criteria of being a street gang member. At present, there

are a number of definitions which have slight variations in what they consider a street gang member to be. It is also acknowledged that the studies reviewed do not differentiate between the levels of membership in the gang. Research suggests that individuals can be core or peripheral members, current or ex-members (Esbensen et al., 2001). Exploring the differing levels of gang membership may lead to differing reasons as to why members choose to disengage, thus enabling interventions to be appropriately targeted to take account of how engrained a street gang member has become. Exploring the barriers to desistance would also provide further insight into this complex issue.

Implications for practice

The findings herein can play a useful role for both policymakers and practitioners. Given that victimisation is one of the most frequently cited reasons for leaving a gang, it could be argued that the ideal time to intervene with a gang member is shortly after an event where victimisation was witnessed or experienced, to discuss whether the gang lifestyle is really helping the individual. In turn, this may serve to create ambivalence about being in a gang. Moreover, professionals noticing signs of disillusionment when working with street gang members, either in community programmes or in prisons, could consider whether they are starting to develop a desire to leave their current lifestyle behind. Therefore, nurturing the idea of disengagement may help gang members to understand that their goals and needs can be met via other activities, which in turn may help to prevent further problems. Another key theme is having a level of responsibility, such as parenthood. Therefore, street gang members may be more willing to involve themselves in interventions to help with the desistance process at this point in their life more than at any other time. Furthermore, they may be more open to other pull factors such as employment, education or engaging in their faith as they feel a sense of responsibility towards their child. Given the above, it is

recommended that these factors are communicated to practitioners and policymakers in order to develop and enhance custodial and community initiatives to aid with the process of disengaging from a gang lifestyle.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the University of Birmingham.

Ethical standards

Declaration of conflicts of interest

Sarah Tonks has declared no conflicts of interest.

Zoe Stephenson has declared no conflicts of interest.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

References

- Aldridge, E., Medina, J., & Ralphs, R. (2008). Dangers and problems of doing gang research in the U.K. In F. Van Gemert, D. Peterson, & I.-L. Lien (Eds.), *Street gangs, migration and ethnicity* (pp. 31–46). Portland, OR: Willan.
- Alleyne, E., & Wood, J. L. (2013). Gang-related crime: The social, psychological and behavioural correlates. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, 19, 611–627. doi:10.1080/1068316X.2012.658050
- Alleyne, E., & Wood, J. L. (2014). Gang involvement: Social and environmental factors. *Crime & Delinquency*, 60(4), 547–568. doi:10.1177/001128711398029
- Ball, R. A., & Curry, G. D. (1995). The logic of definition in Criminology: Purposes and methods for defining gangs. *Criminology*, 33, 225–246. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9125.1995.tb01177.x
- Barnes, J. C., Boutwell, B. B., & Fox, K. (2012). The effect of gang membership on victimization: A behavioural genetic explanation. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 10, 227–244. doi:10.1177/1541204011429948
- Beaver, K. M., DeLisi, M., Vaughn, M. G., & Barnes, J. C. (2009). Monoamine oxidase a genotype is associated with gang membership and weapon use. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 51, 130–134. doi:10.1016/j.comppsy.2009.03.010.
- Brown, R. (2000). *Group processes dynamics within and between Groups*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bubolz, B. F. (2014). *Once a gang member always a gang member? A life history study of gang desistance*. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations (Record No 3633798).
- Burnett, R. (1992). *The dynamics of recidivism*. Oxford: Centre for Criminological Research. University of Oxford.
- Bushway, S. D., Piquero, A., Broidy, L., Cauffman, E., & Mazerole, P. (2001). An empirical framework for studying desistance as a process. *Criminology*, 39(2), 496–515. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9125.2001.tb00931.x
- Carson, D. C., Peterson, D., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2013). An examination of the effect of different operational definitions of desistance on the motivations, methods, and consequences associated with leaving the gang. *Youth Gang Desistance*, 38(4), 510–534. doi:10.1177/0734016813511634
- Carson, D. C., & Vecchio, M. J. (2015). Leaving the gang: A review and thoughts on future research. In S. H. Decker & D. C. Pyrooz (Eds.), *Handbook of gangs* (pp. 257–275). New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Coid, J. W., Ullrich, S., Keers, R., Bebbington, P., DeStavola, B. L., Kallis, C., & Donnelly, P. (2013). Gang membership, violence and psychiatric morbidity. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 170, 983–993. doi:10.1176/appi.ajp.2013.12091188
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. (2017). CASP. Retrieved from <http://www.casp-uk.net/checklists>
- Decker, S. H., & Curry, G. D. (2000). Addressing key features of gang membership: Measuring the involvement of young members. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 28, 473–482. doi:10.1016/S0047-2352(00)00063-5
- Decker, S. H., & Lauritsen, J. (2002). Leaving the Gangs. In R. Huff (Ed.), *Gangs in*

- America (pp. 103–122). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Decker, S. H., Pyrooz, D. C., & Moule, Jr., R. K. (2014). Disengagement from Gangs as Role Transitions. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24(2), 268–283. doi:10.1111/jora.12074
- Decker, S. H., & Van Winkle, B. (1996). *Life in the gang: Family, friends and violence*. New York: Cambridge.
- Descormiers, K. (2013). *From Getting into Getting out: The role of pre-gang context and group processes in analysing turning point in gang trajectories* (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations (Record No NS24118).
- de Waele, J. P., & Harré, R. (1979). Autobiography as a psychological method. In: G. P. Ginsburg (Eds.). *Emerging strategies in social psychological research* (pp. 177–224). Chichester: Wiley.
- Dmitrieva, J., Gibson, L., Steinberg, L., Piquero, A., & Fagan, J. (2014). Predictors and consequences of gang membership: Comparing gang members, gang leaders, and non-gang affiliated adjudicated youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 24, 220–234. doi:10.1111/jora.12111
- Egger, M., Dickerson, K., & Smith, G. D. (2001). Problems and limitations in conducting systematic reviews. In M. Egger, G. Smith, & D. Altman (Eds.), *Systematic reviews in healthcare: Meta-analysis in context* (pp. 69–86). London: BMJ.
- Esbensen, F.-A., Deschenes, E. P., & Winfree, L. T. Jr. (1999). Differences between gang girls and gang boys: Results from a multi-site survey. *Youth & Society*, 31, 27–53. doi:10.1177/0044118 × 99031001002
- Esbensen, F.-A., Winfree, L. T., He, H., & Taylor, T. (2001). Youth gangs and definitional issues: When is a gang a gang and why does it matter? *Crime and Delinquency*, 4, 105–130. Retrieved from http://www.streetgangs.com/academic/2001.Finngang_define.pdf
- Farmer, A. Y., & Hairston, T. (2013). Predictors of gang membership: Variations across grade levels. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 39, 530–544. doi:10.1080/01488376.2013.799112
- Farrall, S., & Bowling, B. (1999). Structuration, human development and desistance from crime. *British Journal of Criminology*, 39(2), 252–267. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxyd.bham.ac.uk>
- Fleisher, M. S. (2000). *Dead end kids: Gang girls and the boys they know*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- Fleisher, M. S., & Krienert, J. (2004). Life-course events, social networks and the emergence of violence among female gang members. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 32, 607–622. doi:10.1002/jcop.20022
- Gelo, O., Braakman, D., & Benetka, G. (2008). Quantitative and qualitative research: Beyond the debate. *Integrative Psychological & Behavioural Science*, 42, 266–290. doi:10.1007/s12124-008-9078-3
- Giordano, P. C. (2010). *Legacies of crime: A follow-up of the children of highly delinquent boys and girls*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gordon, R. (2000). Criminal business organisations, street gangs & wanna be groups: A Vancouver Perspective. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 42, 39–60.
- Gormally, S. (2015). ‘I’ve been there, done that...’: A study of youth gang desistance. *Youth Justice*, 15(2), 148–115. doi:10.1177/1473225414549679
- Gottfredson, M., & Hirschi, T. (1990). *A general theory of crime*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Hagedorn, J. M. (1994). Homeboys, dope fiends, legits, and new jacks. *Criminology*, 32, 197–219. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9125.1994.tb01152.x
- Hallsworth, S., & Young, T. (2004). *Getting real about gangs*. Criminal Justice Matters. Retrieved from: <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications/cjm/article/getting-real-about-gangs>
- Hallsworth, S., & Young, T. (2006). *Urban collectives: Gangs and other groups*. London: Metropolitan Police Service. Retrieved from www.met.police.uk/globalassets/foi-media/disclosure_2015/february_2015/specialist-crime-operations—copy-of-urban-collectives-gangs-and-other-groups-report-for-operation-cruise
- Harris, D., Turner, R., Garrett, I., & Atkinson, S. (2011). Understanding the psychology of gang violence: Implications for designing effective violence interventions. Ministry of Justice Research Series 2/11. Retrieved from www.justiceacademy.org/iShare/Library-UK/research-gang-violence.pdf

- Home Office. (2006). *Delinquent youth groups and offending behaviour: Findings from the 2004 offending crime and justice survey*. London: Home Office. Retrieved from <http://dera.ioc.ac.uk/8472/1/rdsolr1406.pdf>
- Johnson, R. B., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2004). Mixed methods research: A research paradigm whose time has come. *Educational Researcher*, 33(7), 14–26. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxid.bham.ac.uk>
- Khan, K. S., ter Riet, G., Popay, J., Nixon, J., & Kleijnen, J. (2001). In K. S. Khan, G. ter Riet, J. Glanville, A. J. Sowden, & J. Kleijnen (Eds.), *Undertaking systematic reviews of research on effectiveness, CRD's guidance for those carrying out or commissioning reviews* (2nd ed.) (pp. 10–11). Report Number 4 York; UK.
- Klein, M. W., & Maxson, C. L. (2006). *Street gang patterns and policies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kmet, L. M., Lee, R. C., & Cook, L. S. (2004). *Standard quality assessment criteria for evaluating primary research papers from a variety of fields*. Canada: Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research. Retrieved from <https://www.biomedcentral.com/content/supplementary/1471-2393-14-52-s2.pdf>
- Knox, G. W. (2000). *An introduction to gangs* (5th ed.). Peotone, IL: New Chicago School Press.
- Laub, J. H., Nagin, D. S., & Sampson, R. J. (1998). Trajectories of change in criminal offending: Good marriages and the desistance process. *American Sociological Review*, 63, 225–238.
- Lindell, M. K., & Whitney, D. J. (2001). Accounting for common method variance in cross sectional research designs. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86, 114–121. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.86.1.114
- Mares, D. (2001). Gangsats or lager louts? Working class street gangs in Manchester. In D. Harris, R. Turner, I. Garrett, & S. Atkinson (Eds.), (2011). *Understanding the Psychology of Gang Violence: Implications for Designing Effective Violence Interventions*. Ministry of Justice Research Series 2/11. Retrieved from www.justiceacademy.org/iShare/Library-UK/research-gang-violence.pdf
- Maruna, S. (2000). Desistance from crime and offender rehabilitation: A tale of two research literatures. *Offender Programs Report*, 4(1), 1–13.
- Maruna, S. (2001). *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Books.
- Masiello, C. (2006). Labelling and deviance: Fraternities and gangs. *Honours College Theses*. Paper 36. Retrieved from http://digitalcommons.pace.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1036&context=honorscollege_theses
- Maxon, C. L., Gordon, M. A., & Klein, M. W. (1985). Differences between gang and non-gang homicides. *Criminology*, 23, 209–222. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9125.1985.tb00334.x
- McDaniel, D. D. (2012). Risk and protective factors associated with gang affiliation among high-risk youth: A public health approach. *Journal of the International Society for Child and Adolescent Injury Prevention*, 18, 253–258. doi:10.1136/injuryprev-2011-040083
- Melde, C., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2011). Gang membership as a turning point in the life course. *Criminology*, 49, 513–552. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9125.2011.00227.x
- Melde, C., & Esbensen, F.-A. (2014). The relative impact of gang status transitions: Identifying the mechanisms of change in delinquency. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 51(3), 349–376. doi:10.1177/002242781350705
- Miller, W. B. (1992). *Crime by youth gangs and groups in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. NCJ 156221. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/app/abstractdb/AbstractDBDetails.aspx?id=156221>
- Moloney, M., MacKenzie, K., Hunt, G., & Joe-Laidler, K. (2009). The path and promise of fatherhood for gang members. *British Journal of Criminology*, 49(3), 305–325. doi:10.1093/bjc/azp003
- Moore, J. (1991). *Going down to the barrio*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Morse, J. M. (1994). Designing funded qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 220–235). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Munoz, A. R. (2014). *Getting out and staying out: Exploring factors that helped Mexican American ex-gang members successfully stay out of gangs*. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations (Record No 3620280).
- Ngai, N., & Cheung, C. (2007). Cognitive and social influences on gang involvement among

- delinquents in three Chinese cities. *Adolescence*, 42, 381–403. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17849942>
- O'Neal, E. N., Decker, S. H., Moule, Jr., R. K., & Pyrooz, D. C. (2016). Girls, gangs, and getting out: Gender differences and similarities in Leaving the Gang. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 14(1), 43–60. doi:10.1177/1541204014551426
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Collins, K. M. (2007). A typology of mixed methods sampling designs in social science research. *The Qualitative Report*, 12(2), 281–316. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol12/iss2/9>
- Peterson, D. (2012). Girlfriends, gun-holders, and ghetto-rats? Moving beyond narrow views of girls in gangs. In S. Miller, L.D. Leve, & P. K. Kering (Eds.), *Delinquent girls: Contexts, relationships, and adaptations* (pp. 71–84). New York, NY: Springer.
- Pluye, P., Robert, E., Cargo, M., Bartlett, G., O'Cathain, A., Griffiths, F. ... Rousseau, M. C. (2011). Proposal: A mixed methods appraisal tool for systematic mixed studies reviews. Retrieved from <http://mixedmethod-sappraisaltoolpublic.pbworks.com>
- Pyrooz, D. C., & Decker, S. H. (2011). Motives and methods for leaving the gang. Understanding the process of gang desistance. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 39, 417–425. doi:10.1016/j.jcrimjus.2011.07.001
- Pyrooz, D. C., Decker, S. H., & Webb, V. J. (2010). The ties that bind: Desistance from gangs. *Crime and Delinquency*, 60(4), 491–516. doi:10.1177/0011128710372191
- Pyrooz, D. C., & Sweeten, G. (2015). Gang membership between ages 5 and 17 years in the United States. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 56, 414–419. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.11.018
- Raby, C., & Jones, F. (2016). Identifying risks for male street gang affiliation: A systematic review and narrative synthesis. *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 27(5), 601–644. doi:10.1080/14789949.2016.1195005
- Rice, C. (2015). *A qualitative study of gang desistance in former gang members*. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). Available from ProQuest Dissertations (Record No 3641300).
- Rutherford, A. (1992). *Growing out of crime: The New Era*. Winchester: Waterside Press.
- Sampson, R. J., & Laub, J. H. (1993). *Crime in the making: Pathways and turning points through life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sanchez-Jankowski, M. (1991). *Islands in the street: Gangs and American urban society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sayers, A. (2007). Tips and tricks in performing a systematic review. *The British Journal of General Practice*, 57, 425. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2151802/pdf/bjpg57-759.pdf>
- Shropshire, S., & McFarquhar, M. (2002). *Developing multi-agency strategies to address the street gang culture and reduce gun violence among young people*. Briefing No.4. Manchester: Steve Shropshire and M.McFarquhar Consultancy Group.
- Thompson, K. M., & Braaten-Antrim, R. (1998). Youth maltreatment and gang involvement. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 13, 328–345. doi:10.1177/088626098013003002
- Thornberry, T. P., Huizinga, D., & Loeber, R. (2004). The causes and correlates studies: Findings and policy implications. *Juvenile Justice*, 9(1), 3–19. Retrieved from <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/203555.pdf>
- Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., & Chard-Wierschem, D. (1993). The role of juvenile gangs in facilitating delinquent behaviour. *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 30, 55–87. doi:10.1177/0022427893030001005
- Thornberry, T. P., Krohn, M. D., Lizotte, A. J., Smith, C. A., & Tobin, K. (2003). *Gangs and delinquency in developmental perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Uggen, C. (2000). Work as a turning point in the life course of criminals: A duration model of age, employment and recidivism. *American Sociological Review*, 67, 529–546. Retrieved from http://users.cla.umn.edu/~uggen/Uggen_asr_00.pdf
- Vecchio, J. M. (2013). Once bitten, thrice wise: The varying effects of victimisation on routine activities and risk management. *Deviant Behaviour*, 34, 168–190.
- Weerman, F. M. (2012). Are the correlates and effects of gang membership sex-specific? Troublesome youth groups and delinquency among Dutch Girls. In F.-A. Esbensen & C. Maxson (Eds.), *Youth gangs in international perspective: Results from the Eurogang programme of research* (pp. 271–287). New York, NY: Springer.
- Weerman, F. M., Lovegrove, P. J., & Thornberry, T. (2015). Gang membership transitions and its consequences: Exploring changes related to

- joining and leaving gangs in two countries. *European Journal of Criminology*, 12, 70–91. doi:10.1177/1477370814539070
- Weerman, F. M., Maxson, C. L., Esbensen, F.-A., Aldridge, J. M., Medina, J., & van Gemert, F. (2009). *Eurogang program manual: Background, development, and use of the Eurogang instruments in multi-method comparative research*. Retrieved from <https://www.umsl.edu/ccj/Eurogang/EurogangManual.pdf>
- Yoshikawa, H., Weisner, T. S., Kalil, A., & Way, N. (2008). Mixing qualitative and quantitative research in developmental science: Uses and methodological choices. *Developmental Psychology*, 44, 344–354. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.44.2.344