STREET GANG MEMBERSHIP IN BOSTON: A LIFE COURSE PERPSECTIVE

A dissertation presented

By

Paul F. Joyce Jr.

to
The School of Criminology and Criminal Justice

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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In the field of
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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Historically, the study of gangs and gang membership has focused on the onset and continuity of adolescent gang membership. Overall, little research has been dedicated to studying the gang member’s adult years, and the implications of gang membership over the life course. To fill this gap in knowledge, the current study integrates an examination of gangs and gang membership with the life course perspective by exploring the life experiences of 28 former gang members and two neighborhood street criminals from the late 1980’s and early 1990’s in Boston. Key to this research was an examination of the experiences of gang membership in Boston, the transitions and turning points that caused this group of serious and violent offenders to either persist in or desist from deviant and criminal behavior, and the long-term effects of gang membership. The data collection process included in-depth, one-on-one interviews, the use of life history calendars to chronicle major life events, and criminal history records. The results suggest that the experience of gang membership in Boston was similar to that of other re-emerging gang cities of the late 1980’s, in that structural turning points combined with the individual’s own human agency had a direct effect on criminal behavior, and youth gang membership had long-lasting effects over the individual’s life span. More specifically, the findings of this study differ from other studies in that marriage was not an important turning point for the subjects, and many of them were able to successfully desist from crime even in the absence of “knifing off” their pasts. Consistent with other studies, the structural turning point of work was found to be a critical component of change for the majority of the subjects. Finally, even today, almost 30 years after the re-emergence of the street gang culture in Boston, many of the men still struggle with the long-term impacts of the decisions they made when they were adolescents.
Dedication

To my loving parents, Paul and Joanne, who taught me that with hard work you can achieve all of your goals. To my children, Elizabeth, Michelle, and Ryan, whose words of encouragement never wavered. And to my wife Susan, my pillar of strength: Your guidance, advice, and faith in me gave me the will to complete this long journey – I love you.
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I. Introduction: The Importance of Studying Gang Membership over the Life Course

The negative impact of the street gang culture in urban settings can be devastating. The police are still regarded as the primary responders to gangs and gang violence, but this problem far exceeds their capacity. The presence of and violent criminal activities associated with street gangs affect the workings of city agencies and criminal justice agencies, business, public health, and medical organizations, and—at the neighborhood level—families, schools, and the vast majority of youth who are not gang involved.

As a former police officer in the City of Boston, I have seen firsthand the lethal consequences of gang violence. In 1988, I was a member of a plainclothes police unit assigned to suppress the escalating gang violence that was beginning to overwhelm both the police department and the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End. Over the next two years, I witnessed the carnage that took place among African American and Hispanic youth who were involved in the street gang lifestyle. By 1990, the number of homicides reached 152, the highest ever in the city of Boston, with the vast majority of these homicides involving, all or some, combination of street gangs, crack cocaine, and illegal firearms. Boston Police Department (BPD) crime strategies were almost entirely built around repressing the high level of drug and gang crime that was occurring on a daily basis. During that time, I worked with a group of police officers and other law enforcement officers who balanced a strong initiative for fighting crime with a sense of fairness, compassion, and empathy.\(^1\) In our daily dealings with gang members at the street level, the potential for hostility and violence was ever-present and always at the forefront of our thoughts. However, there were many occasions

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\(^1\) To support this statement, see Methods section, BSGAG member “Frank,” and statement of “Joseph”
when our interactions with gang members were less tense, and even cordial, which allowed us to get to know them on a more personal basis. Having knowledge of their stories and experiences changed what was a straightforward, clearly defined picture of “us against them” into one which was more confounding and the source of conflicting emotions. I can recall many discussions with my partners in which we talked about the positive potential that existed within this group of street-tough youth and their potential ability to succeed if given the opportunity.

Since that time, the majority of my policing career was spent connected to Boston’s gang culture through enforcement, intervention, and prevention initiatives. Through these experiences I have learned that some gang members can alter the direction of their lives. I have directly observed the positive changes that can occur when gang members were willing to accept the services and mentorship support provided through prisoner reentry initiatives or took advantage of programs that offered employment opportunities and life skills training. But, even with these firsthand experiences, I still did not understand the underlying influences that led to this dramatic shift in behavior. More specifically, I could not articulate how change happened, when it happened, and what were the mechanisms that contributed to this change. Thus, from a personal perspective as well as a research perspective, there is much to learn about the lives of gang members. While it might appear that this population is beyond repair, I would suggest that the majority of current and former gang members have the potential to contribute positively to their communities. The purpose and motivation for this study is to fully explore the notion that people can change and lives can be remade.

To properly study gangs, one needs to be grounded in the historical perspective of gangs and the transformations that have taken place over time (Matza, 1999; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Short & Strodtbeck, 1974; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Whyte, 1943). Youth gangs have existed in the
United States since the late 1800’s (Curry & Decker, 1998). This time frame was marked by the significant growth of immigrant populations entering the United States and settling into major urban areas. The early street gangs were overwhelmingly represented by disadvantaged youth of Irish and Italian descent. Considered to be disorganized in structure and activities, their early gang activity consisted of small-time street crime and fighting with other gangs (1998). By the 1920’s, the next generation of gang members were only slightly more advanced than their predecessors. Still strongly represented by youth of Irish and Italian background, this variant of the gang was more committed to crime and violence, but remained unorganized and would eventually fade away, leaving no lasting imprint (p. 14).

In the 1950’s and 1960’s, two different versions of the gang culture emerged. The 1950’s was a time dominated by the middle-class value system. Problems of delinquency and crime then were perceived to be confined to the lower-class culture and gang formation and crime were hypothesized as the outcome of lower-class youth being unable to achieve their goals through legitimate means. This ideology controlled the thinking of the 1950’s and 1960’s and strongly influenced policy on crime and delinquency (Bernard, Snipes, & Gerould, 2010; Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Miller, 1958). The post-World War II years also saw the massive migration of southern blacks into northern cities searching for a better life. By the 1960’s, a new era of the gang culture began forming in major urban cities. One important change involved the demographic shift in gang populations. During this time, African Americans and Hispanics became the face of the gang culture. Their involvement in crime was more intense and widespread, and serious violence involving firearms started to become associated with gang activity. With an increase in violent crime came a heightened law enforcement response which led to more arrests, convictions, and incarcerations for gang members. Prison, rather than
functioning as a deterrent to crime for gang members, became a fertile setting for gang recruitment and the enhancement of the gang’s reputation and identity. Upon release these now older and wiser gang members returned to their neighborhoods ready to instill the gang mentality on younger generations. In cities like Los Angeles and Chicago, this resulted in creating a gang culture that would continue from generation to generation (Curry & Decker, 1998, p. 15).

The mid to late 1980’s saw the expansion of gangs nationwide. By 1992, police departments in over 85% of the nation’s 250 largest cities reported the presence of street gangs (Fagan, 1996, p. 40). The most consequential change during this time was the increasingly lethal nature of gang violence. Reasons given for this increase in violence included the widespread access to firearms, the willingness of gang members to use firearms to resolve disputes involving revenge and turf, and the viewpoint that guns were now a tool of the trade for gangs involved in the illegal crack cocaine trade. The unprecedented rise of gun violence during the mid to late 1980’s had “significant impacts on an entire generation of adolescents. The impacts [were] most seriously felt among African American youths in the nation’s inner cities” (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998, p. 179).

Today, street gangs remain a problem in cities all across the country. “In the past five years we’ve seen an 8 percent increase in number of gangs, an 11 percent increase in members and a 23 percent increase in gang-related homicides” (U.S. News & World Report, 2015, p. 1). This national increase in gangs and gang violence is taking place even as overall violent crime is declining. “Overall gangs are responsible for 16 percent of all homicides, but 25 percent in cities with a population of over 100,000” (p. 1).

Boston is not immune to the destructive nature of gang violence. In May 2010, Jaewon Martin, age 14, an honor roll student at the Timilty Middle School, was shot and killed on Parker
Street in Jamaica Plain. Less than three weeks later, Nicholas Fomby-Davis, also 14 years old, was dragged off a motor scooter at the intersection of Bowdoin Street and Olney Street in Dorchester and killed after being shot multiple times. The senseless deaths of these two adolescents were similar in that neither were involved in the gang lifestyle and both were innocent victims of ongoing gang violence that plagued their neighborhoods. Boston, like many cities across the United States, continues to struggle with the challenges of gangs and violent crime and there is nothing to suggest that this type of criminal and deviant behavior is going to diminish.

To properly study gangs, one also has to know what leads a youth to become a gang member and what happens after they enter the gang life. There are many complex factors that increase the risk that urban youth will become involved in the street gang lifestyle. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to disentangle the causal effects of any one factor. Therefore, these “risk factors” present a variety of related issues that form an intricate chain of events that generate gangs and gang membership in urban settings. These risk factors exist and co-occur at three levels: (1) the “micro” or individual level involving age, race, family, school, peers, and individual characteristics; (2) the “meso” or neighborhood level involving situational factors such as the presence of gangs, guns, and drugs; and (3) the “macro” level involving structural societal issues including poverty, social isolation, and residential instability (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, Smith, & Tobin, 2003). The result of this interplay between various levels of dysfunction is that urban youth who become involved in gangs develop behavioral trajectories that lead to increased involvement in delinquency and serious and violent offending.
Gang membership is synonymous with criminal activity, violence, and victimization (Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991; Thornberry, Krohn, Lizotte, & Chard-Wierschem, 1993). This, in turn, leads to long-term involvement in the criminal justice system. The lives of gang members tend to follow a pattern that starts with arrest and prosecution, moves to juvenile and adult supervision and juvenile and adult incarceration, and eventually reentry back into the community. This “street life cycle” then repeats itself many times over the period of gang involvement (Fleisher, 1995, p. 242).

Short- and long-term incarceration in juvenile, state, and federal facilities are very real possibilities for most gang members. Additionally, the successful transition back into the community for incarcerated gang members presents considerable challenges. Due to the dysfunctional nature of gang membership with regard to education, work, and involvement in crime, gang members are inclined to have higher recidivism rates after they are released from incarceration (Greenberg, 2007).

While lengthy incarceration is sometimes the only answer for a small percentage of gang members who are committed to violence and are a continuing threat to the entire community, most gang members do not fit into that category. The gang life for most youth will be brief and end during their adolescent years. But, gang membership can also be a criminally intense period with ramifications that can lead to negative outcomes that can carry over well after the individual has transitioned out of the gang (Krohn, Ward, Thornberry, Lizotte, & Chu, 2011).

This is the point at which the gang research wanes, resulting in an impasse of understanding and knowledge of the gang member’s life after the gang. While acknowledging the importance of past studies and their impact on the gang literature, the field has historically focused most of its attention on those in adolescence, “a period in life that is defined as ranging
from puberty to maturity,” and roughly spanning the ages of 12 through 20 years (Cullen, 2011, p. 290). Thus, the crucial time periods of childhood and adulthood have been excluded. While attention is now being given to this area of research, there are still many unanswered questions about the lives of gang members as they transition out of the gang and move into their adult years (Thornberry et al., 2003).

Elder (1994) suggests that over the past 30 years, the movement towards the life course perspective in the study of human lives signifies a dramatic shift in how scholars have viewed individual developmental change. With this shift has come a better understanding for “the long way” of thinking about the complexity of human nature and the individual’s course through life (p. 4). Furthermore, gang researchers are also starting to recognize that the life course approach will prove to be of value in filling the gaps in understanding gangs, gang members, and their behavior, particularly as it relates to desisting from the gang (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 417).

The current study advances our knowledge of the effects of gang membership on gang-involved individuals over the life course. By intertwining the research on gangs and gang membership with the life course approach to understanding human lives, important questions are answered with respect to: (1) the experiences of youth who became involved in the gang lifestyle in Boston in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s; (2) the transitions and turning points that caused gang-involved youth to either desist from or persist in criminal and deviant behavior; and (3) the long-term outcomes of gang involvement and the effect it has had on their lives.

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2 Elder’s (1994) life course approach focused on three areas. First, that “social forces” in society such as work, family, school, and other social institutions have the capability to bring about change in the individual. Second, that “developmental processes and outcomes are shaped by the social trajectory that people follow” (p. 5). Third, that decisions made by the individual may have implications that can affect later outcomes.
Strongly influenced by the work of Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003), this research is unique in its own way, in that it deals directly with 28 former Boston gang members and two neighborhood street criminals to understand their entire life experiences, expressed in their own words (see also Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001). This group is comprised of credible individuals of influence, aged 35-54, who witnessed and led the gang movement in Boston during the late 1980’s through early 1990’s. No other study to date has captured the life experiences of gang members and neighborhood street criminals this far into their life span.

Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) are considered to be innovators and leaders in the area of desistance theory. They conducted in-depth interviews with ex-offenders to better understand the interplay between desistance and persistence, and utilized a life-history narrative approach to capture the fullness of the offenders’ life experiences. At the center of their research was the influence of structural turning points in creating positive change. They also delved into the underlying components of historical context, the situational context of crime and violence, and human agency and its effect on the decisions and actions of the offender.

This research applies Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) methodology and strategy to a more contemporary group of serious and violent offenders. The focus of this study has been to reconstruct the lives of 28 former gang members and two neighborhood street criminals through retrospective interviews to better understand the street gang culture, its members, and the reasons why they join, persist in, and desist from gang involvement and criminal and deviant behavior. The results of this research have extended our knowledge and filled a void in the literature on the change and stability in criminal behavior within gang-involved individuals over the life span, an
area previously considered to be “uncharted territory in criminology and the social sciences at large” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 4).
II. Literature Review/Theoretical Organizing Framework

Gang Membership and the Life Course

Over the past 100 years, gangs and gang membership have been studied and analyzed from a wide range of perspectives including neighborhood setting, racial and ethnic make-up, socio-economic status, development and formation, and involvement in crime (Pyrooz, Decker, & Webb, 2014). Recently researchers have experienced a renewed interest in the study of gangs, gang members, “and the group processes that make gangs a distinctive group” (Decker et al., 2013, p. 369). Even with this increased interest in gangs, research traditionally has focused on the three phases of onset, continuity, and change in gang membership, with the concepts of onset and continuity receiving the vast majority of attention. The final stage of gang membership—change—has been understudied, thereby creating a gap in the literature. Klein and Maxson (2006) attest to this shortcoming in the gang literature, stating, “Surprising little research has been conducted on gang desistance and the processes of leaving gangs” (p. 154). Other scholars take a more concerning tone. “The larger implication for this lack of research is clear: although we can speculate, we do not know if gang membership truly has a negative impact over the life course” (Pyrooz & Decker, 2011, p. 422).

Today, a new trend has started to emerge in the study of gang membership—one that moves away from the established understanding of gangs that is limited to the adolescent years to one that takes a broader, more comprehensive life course perspective. Pyrooz (2014) points out that, “Rather than focusing on static categorizations of gang and non-gang individuals, a life-course approach makes prominent the pathways into and out of gangs and where they unfold in the life-course” (p. 351). The work of Hagedorn (1998b) and Decker and Lauritsen (2006), as
well as other recent efforts that combine the study of gang membership with the life course perspective, have started to yield some encouraging early findings. At the center of these new discussions on gang membership and the life course is the unexplored area of gang desistance. Clearly, there is still much to learn about the individual’s pathway in transitioning out of the gang lifestyle and what awaits him after.\(^3\) Some of the questions that have yet to be answered and require further inquiry are: (1) Is the desistance process immediate or is it a gradual course of action that over time leads the individual to disassociate himself from the gang? (2) What does leaving the gang really mean, how do we define it, and how does the gang member define it? (3) How do the criminal careers of gang members change as they desist from gang involvement? and (4) What are the most appropriate methods for studying gang membership over the life course and are new data collection processes needed to effectively analyze this population (see Decker, Melde, & Pyrooz, 2013; Krohn et al., 2011; Pyrooz, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014; Sweeten, Pyrooz, & Piquero, 2013)?

Traditional gang research has invested time and energy in understanding the individual’s life and experiences while they are gang-involved. Thrasher (1927) studied why gangs formed, who joined gangs, and the structure of gangs. Cohen (1955) investigated the subcultural aspect of gang involvement. Matza (1999) and Sykes and Matza (1957) explored the intricacies of juvenile delinquency and gang membership, and the youth’s struggle between conformity and criminality. Horowitz (1983) analyzed the complexity of Chicano life and gang membership in Chicago in

\(^3\) This study focuses solely on the life experiences of adolescent male gang members, but acknowledges that the study of female gangs is an important component of the gang literature that has historically been neglected and ignored. In particular, the work of Anne Campbell, Lisa Maher, and Jody Miller have contributed greatly to the gang literature and the literature on the introduction of crack cocaine in the mid to late 1980’s with respect to our understanding of female gangs. See Moore & Hagedorn (2006).
the 1970’s. And Thornberry (1998) identified the risk factors associated with youth becoming gang-involved. What is much less known today about gangs is how gang membership affects the trajectories, transitions, and turning points of gang-involved youth as they develop into young adulthood and adulthood. The experiences of gang membership—including violence, victimization, criminal activity, criminal justice system involvement, and especially, extended periods of incarceration—greatly complicate the gang member’s long-term outcomes. Cullen (2011) argues, “The time has come for criminologists to choose a different future. Thus, a new paradigm is needed that is rooted in life-course criminology, one that brings criminologists closer to offenders and produces scientific knowledge that is capable of improving offenders’ lives and reducing crime” (p. 287). His assessment of criminology’s focus on the gang member’s adolescent years is simple and straightforward: “It leaves out too much” (p. 306).

Gang membership is complex; our understanding of the influencing factors that initiate a youth’s entry into gangs (onset) and his increased criminal behavior while involved in the gang (persistence) is well-known and well-documented (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998b; Thrasher, 1927; Thornberry et al., 1993). Yet, we have avoided arguably the most important component of the gang trajectory: desistance and change. The majority of gang members survive their gang involvement. Additionally, the gang life covers a relatively short period of time, with “most youths leave[ing] the gang after one or two years,” (Sweeten et al., 2013, p. 471). Hence, many gang members have ended their gang careers by their middle- to late-adolescent years. With the current life span of a male in American society reaching almost eighty years of age (Roser, 2016), contemporary criminology is unable to account for the vast majority of the life span of former gang members. Exiting the gang is only the beginning of their journey in life; therefore, it is critical that future inquiry be committed to the exploration and
better understanding of the lives of former gang members as they move beyond gang membership and transition into adulthood.

Theoretical Organizing Framework

The focus of this research was to study the life experiences of Boston gang members in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. To accomplish this I utilized the life course perspective as defined by Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) in their Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory and its extension. To supplement the life course perspective, the desistance literature as formulated by Maruna (2001) and Giordano et al. (2002) was incorporated to provide differing viewpoints involving the desistance process. By combining these two areas of research to analyze the individual process of desistance and persistence, I was able to flesh out the complex factors that have influenced the lives of a group of former Boston gang members.

Elder (1994) is considered one of the leaders in the field of life course research. He believes the life course is an area of study that is unique and distinctive, allowing researchers the opportunity to have a greater understanding of the changes in the developmental processes that explain an individual’s life journey and the power of change that exists in each of us. Sampson and Laub (1993) maintain that almost all historical research in the area of social control has centered on the adolescent years or on the formal social control process of enforcement (arrest and incarceration). This limited approach has created a void in our knowledge and prevents us from fully understanding the effects of informal social control over the entire life span of the individual.

In developing their Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory, Sampson and Laub (1993) sought to fill this void by studying the implications of age and change through
categorizing the life course of individuals by age. Based on their findings, they contend that “the important institutions of informal and formal social control vary across the life span” (p. 17). They assert that the most influential social control institutions in childhood and adolescence are the family, school, peers, and the juvenile justice system. In young adulthood, the institutional importance shifts to higher education or vocational training, work, marriage, and the adult criminal justice system. Lastly, in middle adulthood, the primary social control institutions are work, marriage, parenthood, investment in the community, and the criminal justice system.

While the core of their theory is built on social control and the guiding principle that “crime and deviance result when an individual’s bond to society is weak or broken” (p. 18), they extend the idea of social control to include attachments that develop with both institutions and other individuals that enter into the adult’s life (see also Hirschi, 1969). By extending the notion of social control, Sampson and Laub (1993) believed they could better study the social phenomenon that influences continuity and change in the individual’s life.

Sampson and Laub’s (1993) theory of Age-Graded Informal Social Control goes a long way to better understanding the complex, multi-level experiences that take place in an individual’s life as it relates to the persistence in and desistance from criminal and deviant behavior. They address the issue of childhood antisocial behavior and its role in later adult crime, but they emphasize that while “change is central to our model, we specifically hypothesize that the strength of adult social bonds has a direct negative effect on adult criminal behavior” (p. 143; see also Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990).

Matza (1999) also offered this perspective by suggesting that “Those who have been granted the potentiality for freedom through the loosening of social controls but who lack the position, capacity, or inclination to become agents in their own behalf, I call drifters, and it is in this category that I place the juvenile delinquent” (p. 29).
By 2003, 10 years after the publication of *Crime in the Making: Pathways and Turning Points Through Life*, Laub and Sampson (2003) recognized that their Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory required upgrading. They identified several elements that should be added to the theory in order to produce a deeper and more thorough explanation of criminal behavior over the life course, particularly as it pertains to patterns of persistence in offending and desistance from crime. Their modified social control theory incorporated the following elements:

(1) **Human agency.** Laub and Sampson’s (2003) revised theory includes the belief that individuals can be “active participants” (p. 281) in rebuilding their lives. This inner resolve to make positive change in one’s life involves an individual “knifing off” (p. 49) past negative influences and experiences and creating a new plan for the future. Thus, within the limitations of an individual’s world, they can plan and make choices that create their own life course. This process of transformation is a methodical, transitional effort that takes place over time and is especially important in the desistance of criminal offending (Clausen, 1993).

(2) **The situational context of crime and violence.** It is crucial to understand and accept the premise that in certain social settings, adaptations occur that can alter the meaning of crime and social control. In their study of the Glueck men, it became clear to Laub and Sampson (2003) that crime and violence were “normative” behaviors in specific milieus and in specific situations. This becomes important when trying to understand an individual’s persistence in and desistance from crime, because the informal social control process, at times, encourages a criminal response rather than disapproving of it (2003; see also Black, 1983). Other researchers have suggested that there is a significant amount of overlap between offenders and victims. Lauritsen, Sampson, and Laub (1991) found that victimization patterns among youths cannot be understood apart from criminal and deviant activities. The routine activities approach also
becomes important in understanding how structural surroundings influence human conduct (Cohen & Felson, 1979; Osgood, Wilson, O’Malley, Bachman, & Johnson, 1996).

(3) Historical context. This component focuses on the strong influences faced by individuals growing up in a specific time period. For the Glueck men, their historical context included the Great Depression and the World War II era. Understanding the local culture and community and its effect on the lives of the Glueck men was important to Laub and Sampson (2003). They found that “Boston is a city of neighborhoods, and not surprisingly the local context helps us understand the processes of persistent offending and desistance from crime” (p. 57). Laub and Sampson (2003) contend that one of the most important objectives of the life course approach is to “link social history and social structure to the unfolding of human lives” (p. 33). This will also apply to the men in the current study, as their socialization in the 1980’s was a time of unprecedented urban change involving the surge in violence driven by drugs, gangs, and the proliferation of firearms (Blumstein, 1995; Braga, 2003; Hagedorn, 1998b; Sampson and Wilson, 1995).

Moloney and colleagues (2009) suggest that the life course approach to understanding human lives as put forth by Sampson and Laub (1993) was an important advancement in the field of criminology with regard to understanding the concept of desistance. They caution, however, that while Sampson and Laub’s focus on the social institutions of marriage, work, and the military were key external turning points in changing the lives of ex-offenders and has been empirically supported, there is still much work to do. They raise several important points that will require additional study in the life course perspective. First, how does the significant transformation of the social institutions of marriage, work, and the military in recent decades influence Sampson and Laub’s (1993) informal social control theory? Second, can Age-Graded
Informal Social Control Theory be successfully applied to a contemporary cohort of serious and violent gang members of African American and Hispanic descent? And, finally, beyond the external turning points for desistance, what are the internal, subjective, emotional, and cognitive needs of the individual that are required for successful change (2009)?

**Desistance Theory:** Given all of the components contained in the life course perspective, the degree of stability and change in behavior over the life span is the most difficult to comprehend (Sampson & Laub, 1993). The complex notion of change, or more specifically the desistance from criminal behavior, was also the focus of Maruna’s (2001) Liverpool Desistance Study (LDS). Maruna’s work was an empirical, comprehensive, and qualitative comparison of desisting ex-offenders and active offenders. One of the foundational aspects of his study was to understand the meaning of desistance from crime—a concept Maruna (2001) defines as “the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending” (p. 26). For Maruna (2001), this is a “maintenance” process that is a continuous “work in progress,” particularly in times when the ex-offender is dealing with personal challenges and feelings of discouragement (p. 26). He believes that for ex-offenders to “make good”—to establish a new and crime-free pathway in life—they need to: (1) create a coherent, prosocial identity for themselves; (2) account for their criminal pasts; and (3) understand and explain why they are now “not like that anymore” (p. 7).

This often difficult-to-grasp idea of desistance was also at the center of Giordano et al.’s (2002) study of serious male and female offenders in the mid-1990’s. Their theory of Cognitive Transformation is consistent with the tenets of symbolic interactionism—i.e., “the ability to focus reflectively on the self”—which is, at its core, a micro-level process (p. 1001). Giordano et al.’s (2002) theory both complements and conflicts with Sampson and Laub’s (1993) informal
social control theory. Sampson and Laub (1993) posit that regardless of an individual’s previous
criminal and deviant behavior, the trajectory of their life can be significantly influenced towards
conformity through the establishment of strong informal social control ties to work and family.
Giordano and her colleagues (2002) argue that this is an incomplete accounting of the change
process because it does not explain and emphasize the “up front” work that is done by the
individual to prepare themselves for the process of moving forward toward a different life (p.
992). They suggest that only after doing this work can the individual take advantage of the
“hooks for change,” those positive, prosocial influences external to the individual such as
marriage or work (p. 992).

Giordano et al. (2002) identified four types of cognitive transformations that prepare the
individual for true change: (1) the individual’s openness to change; (2) the individual’s exposure
to a particular hook or set of hooks for change; (3) the individual’s development of a
“replacement self”—a new, more positive identity that takes the place of the old one that must be
left behind; and (4) a cognitive shift in the way the individual views their criminal and deviant
lifestyle. When the individual no longer sees these behaviors as acceptable, they will be ready for
change (pp. 1000-1003).

While the theoretical perspectives of Sampson and Laub, (1993, 2003), Maruna, (2001),
and Giordano et al. (2002) differ in their approach to understanding the concept of desistance,
they all embrace the belief that change is possible, even for the most serious offenders in society.

The Empirical Application of Life Course Theory to Gangs: While the study of gang
desistance has been largely neglected in the field of criminology, there are some notable
exceptions. Vigil (1988) in his study of Chicano gangs in Los Angeles, found that gang members
transitioned out of the gang through a “gradual series of steps and commitments” in a process he
referred to as “succession quality” (Decker & Lauritsen, 2006, p. 61). He believed that gang cessation was a more difficult process than gang entry because it entailed walking away from friendships that had become an important part of the gang member’s life (p. 61).

Padilla’s (1992) work with Puerto Rican gangs in Chicago reached a different conclusion as to why gang members left the gang. Gang desistance in this study was found to result from a disillusionment with the gang life. “The members of the Diamonds I spoke to became aware over time of the oppressive nature of the gang and, in doing so, decided to take action toward their liberation” (p. 182). But, like Vigil’s (1988) Chicano gang members, the transition out of the gang was a painstaking effort, filled with feelings of guilt and betrayal.

Decker and Lauritsen (2006), in a follow-up study of St. Louis gang members, also explored the issue of how and why gang members leave the gang (see Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). Their analysis uncovered several interesting findings. First, for most ex-gang members in this study, the decision to end their gang life was directly related to their experiences with violence. Violence in this case was defined as threats of personal violence, being the victim of violence, or having family members threatened or targeted for violence. Second, the method of leaving proved to be straightforward, with the majority of ex-gang members quitting their gang by just walking away. Third, Decker and Lauritsen (2006) set out to deal with the issue of defining an ex-gang member. This proved to be a challenging endeavor. They found that being an ex-gang member ranged in definition from those who severed all ties to the gang, to those who held onto personal ties with certain gang members, and lastly to those who “emotionally” separated themselves from the gang, but remained involved in criminal and non-criminal activities (p. 68). Decker and Lauritsen (2006), like Vigil (1988) and Padilla (1992), also found that leaving the gang is a more intricate process than joining. Additionally, they recognized and
acknowledged the irony of their finding that the role of violence played a significant part in the
gang member leaving the gang when the gang literature has consistently found that violence acts
as a unifying factor in the structure of gangs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Klein, 1971;
Thrasher, 1927). Decker and Lauritsen (2006) concluded by stating more work needs to be done
to better understand the individual’s “motivations and decision making” for leaving the gang (p. 69).

More recently, Pyrooz and his colleagues have continued the trend of analyzing and
trying to better understand the processes by which gang members leave the gang. Their research
has covered such areas as the motives and methods for leaving the gang, the age-graded
influence on gang membership, and the social and emotional ties that bind gang members to the
gang lifestyle (Pyrooz, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014). While the interest in
the individual gang member’s transition out of the gang continues to receive attention, what is of
even greater interest is the increasing “reorientation of gang membership into a life-course
framework” (Pyrooz, 2014, p. 349).

Krohn et al.’s (2011) research on the connection between entrenched adolescent gang
membership and “long-term negative adult outcomes” advances our understanding on the effects
of gang membership over the life span (p. 993). Specifically, they sought to understand the
degree to which gang membership “sets in motion a process that results in problematic family
life and economic hardship for males in their late 20’s to early 30’s (p. 993). Using the Rochester
Youth Development Study (Browning, Thornberry, & Porter, 1999), they collected data from the
age periods of 14-18, 21-23, and 29-31. Their findings suggest that the adverse effects of gang
membership during the teenage years, which they refer to as “precocious transitions” (Krohn et
al., 2011, p. 1002) (including leaving home, cohabitation, dropping out of school, and becoming
a teenage parent) did lead ex-gang members to experiencing “more problematic home lives and
[being] financially disadvantaged at approximately 29 years of age” (p. 1016). Krohn et al.’s
(2011) analysis also indicates that these factors influenced the continued involvement in crime
and the criminal justice system for ex-gang members. They propose that their findings have
extended the research into gang membership and the life course and support this position by
declaring “to our knowledge, no study has followed former gang members past the period of
emerging adulthood to address these issues” (p. 993).

The literature on gang membership has clearly established that the gang member’s
transition from adolescence to early adulthood and adulthood is an area of criminological
research that has received little attention. While contemporary researchers have started to
embrace and apply the life course perspective as well as the desistance literature to the study of
gang membership, there is still much we do not know. Two of the more critical areas that need to
be addressed include Pyrooz and Decker’s (2011) recommendation that “future research employs
both qualitative and quantitative methods to further examine both the desistance process and the
‘post-gang’ lives of individuals” (p. 423), and Pyrooz et al.’s (2014) contention that future works
need to overcome “cross-sectional design research limitations in favor of a longitudinal
approach” (p. 509).

Scholars in the field of criminology have come to recognize the importance of continuing
to study gang membership. As suggested by Laub (2006), life course criminology “provides a
starting point for answering these and many other prominent questions facing the field” (p. 241),
including those pertaining to this understudied area. By integrating life course criminology with
the study of gang membership, we can begin to fill the void that currently exists in the gang
literature and create the opportunity to advance our knowledge by identifying the complex,
inner-workings that influence the decisions and actions of gang members as they traverse the life span from adolescence to adulthood.
III. Method of Study

Research Questions

One of the foundational goals of Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory and its revision was to “identify sources of persistence in and desistance from crime” (2003, p. 37). Their theory sought to answer to the elusive question of why some offenders continue to persist in crime over their life span while others are able to transition away from crime and move to a more conventional lifestyle. The impetus behind their work was to discover the underlying mechanisms that influenced offender decisions to persist in or desist from criminal and deviant behavior (2003, pp. 37-38). Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) tested their theory on the Depression Era Glueck men and found that external turning points involving marriage, work, and the military led many of the men to desist from crime. The current study adopts Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) methodology to determine whether these same turning points, as described by Sampson and Laub, can be successfully applied to Boston’s street gang members of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, or whether there are other mechanisms that account for their persistence in or desistance from crime.

- **Research Question 1**: What were the experiences of the youth who were involved in gangs in Boston in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s?

- **Research Question 2**: What are the turning points or events that cause gang-involved youth to either persist in or desist from criminal and deviant behavior?

- **Research Question 3**: How does being in a gang influence the trajectory of a youth’s life?
The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of the young men who were involved in the street gang culture in Boston during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. This is the time period when the street gang culture in Boston re-emerged. To accomplish this, I utilized a life course approach to explore not only the life experiences of these young men during that time period, but more importantly to examine the events in their lives that have led them to either desist from criminal and deviant behavior or continue to be involved in criminal behavior over large periods of their lives. The process of desistance and persistence in criminal behavior over the life course is the foundation of the research.

A qualitative research methodology is employed to answer central research questions. The methodologies employed are informed by the work of Scott H. Decker and Barrik Van Winkle (1996) in their studies of gangs in St. Louis, John Hagedorn (1998b) and his study of Milwaukee’s street gangs, and John H. Laub and Robert J. Sampson (2003) in their study of criminal desistance and persistence involving the Glueck men. In these studies, interviews were central to answering questions about the individual’s life experiences involving gang membership and serious and violent offending. Here, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were used with specific objectives in mind. Although the scope of the interviews was limited to certain subtopics, and key questions were developed in advance (Singleton & Straits, 1999), semi-structured interviews allowed the flexibility to “capitalize on the special knowledge, experience, or insights of the respondents” (p. 242).\(^5\)

\(^5\) While the interview is an effective technique for reaching meaningful conclusions and a deeper understanding of the topic being studied, there are limitations including the construction and implementation of the interview instrument, the lack of truthfulness by the respondents, and the interviewer-interviewee relationship (Singleton and Straits, 1999; Weiss, 1994).
Research Design

In the spirit of previous gang research (e.g., Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998b), I have utilized in-depth life history interviews to allow the men to tell their own stories in their own words. Similarly, Laub and Sampson (2003) “[believed] that life-history narratives, more than any other methodology, [would] allow [them] to capture the heterogeneity of the life course experiences and uncover the dynamic processes surrounding salient life course events, turning points, and criminal offending” (p. 66). They contend that by drawing on the ex-offenders’ own words, life-history narratives can more thoroughly highlight continuity and change in criminal and deviant behavior as individuals put together their own life course. One goal of life course research is to study how events that happen early in life can influence later outcomes (Sampson & Laub, 2003). Life-history narratives using a retrospective approach allow for the discovery of turning points that may assist in explaining important changes in behavioral trajectories over time. Subjects were asked to recall their pasts, a common way of approximating observations over time. Understanding the life course events that have influenced the thinking, decision making, and actions of Boston’s former gang members as they transitioned from adolescence, to young adulthood, and to adulthood is the driving force behind this study. The interviews were face-to-face and conducted one-on-one in private office settings (see Miller, 2001).

Selection of Subjects

One of the most important aspects of this study was to identify and recruit individuals who were most impactful and played an integral role in the re-emergence of street gangs in
Boston in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. In selecting the subjects for this study, I did not consider my data gathering process to reflect “sampling” in the statistical sense. More accurately, my data is taken from a known universe of individuals (i.e., gang members as identified by the BPD in the late 1980’s). Those who were recruited and participated in the study represent a subset of that larger universe of identified gang members, and they constitute a group of individuals who shared common experiences from which we can learn. To reach this goal, I framed the study around four areas of interest. First, I wanted to identify two individuals who could provide an historical perspective of the neighborhoods that were negatively affected by the presence of gangs during the late 1980’s. They would not be gang members; rather, they would be older by several years than the main cohort of former gang members being studied and they would have been active participants in the criminal street culture during the 1980’s. Doing this would allow me to understand some of the activities occurring in the neighborhoods prior to the re-emergence of gangs. Second, the majority of the participants would consist of those individuals who were directly involved in the re-emergence of street gangs, starting in approximately 1988. I also identified a smaller group of individuals who would have been considered “junior gang members,” individuals younger than the main cohort by several years and whose gang activity primarily took place during the 1990’s. Third, I attempted to recruit multiple gang members from at least six of the approximately 15 street gangs identified by the BPD in 1988. Additionally, I wanted to identify a minimum of one representative from at least 10 of those original gangs. This strategy is consistent with Decker and Van Winkle (1996), who interviewed gang members from a number of different gangs. In some cases it was a single member of the gang and in others, multiple members of one gang were interviewed.
Finally, of major importance was the recruitment of the most credible representatives of the street gang culture from that time. I specifically sought to identify individuals who were gang leaders and/or individuals with influence, individuals who experienced and participated in the formation of gangs, who experienced and participated in the illegal crack cocaine trade, who experienced and participated in the culture of gun violence that developed during this time (see Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998), and whose name recognition and reputation for involvement in gangs, drugs, and guns was synonymous with the gang culture and known throughout the neighborhoods as well as within law enforcement circles. These elements capture my definition of “impactful” and mirror Hagedorn’s (1998b) approach in his study of Milwaukee gang members. Hagedorn wanted to accurately portray the roots of Milwaukee’s gangs, which began in the early 1980’s. He decided that the only way to do this was to talk to those original gang leaders. Hagedorn (1998b, p. 32) then sought out and ultimately interviewed the “top dogs” of Milwaukee’s gangs—individuals of credibility who were at the center of forming the gang and/or acknowledged as gang leaders.

In 1988, the BPD identified approximately 15 street gangs with a total membership of almost 450 self-identified gang members. The vast majority of individuals involved in the street gang culture were males of African American descent, most of whom had grown up in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End. In the late 1980’s, this cohort would have been approximately between the ages of 14-24. This age range has been the focus of several other studies involving gangs and gang members (see Hagedorn, 1998b; Kennedy, Piehl, & Braga, 1996; Vigil, 1988). Today, these men are approximately between the ages of 40-50.
To identify the network of impactful individuals involved in the late 1980’s gang culture and locate potential subjects for the study, I identified three individuals to lead this effort: a former youth worker, now executive director of a youth outreach organization; another former youth worker, now community organizer; and a Boston Police detective. Based on their job-related experience, their knowledge of the neighborhoods, and their personal relationships with these men, the three individuals chosen have intimate knowledge of the street gang culture of the late 1980’s in Boston, thereby providing them with a unique and credible position from which to speak. This group will be referred to as the “Boston Street Gang Advisory Group (BSGAG or Advisory Group).” More specifically, the BSGAG members are individuals who had direct contact with street gang members during the late 1980’s through early 1990’s, either through law enforcement interaction, youth work, peer relationships, neighborhood relationships, or family relationships.

The first important task for the BSGAG was to review an informal roster of approximately 450 individuals identified in 1988 by the BPD that participated in the gang culture and identify the most impactful individuals who could be accessed as potential subjects for the study. At this point, it was important to develop a clear operational definition of a gang and gang membership. There has been considerable debate and confusion on this issue. This study used the working definition of a gang as, “An age-graded peer group that exhibits some permanence, engages in criminal activity, and has some symbolic representation of

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6 This roster of young men who were thought to have participated in the re-emergence of street gangs in Boston, as well as other information—including the names of gangs, the antecedent events that influenced the re-emergence of street gangs, and other historical data—was taken from personal notes and other information that I collected over my career as a police officer.
membership,” and gang membership was defined through a self-identification process (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 31).

To accomplish this important first step, I convened a series of meetings with Advisory Group members. During these meetings, which sometimes included only one or two members, we reviewed the roster of names in order to identify the most impactful individuals. It was important that at least several of these meetings involved all three members so they could collectively share their knowledge of Boston’s late-1980’s gang members. While face-to-face meetings were the most productive, as the data gathering process progressed, we would often communicate via email, telephone, and not always as a group. As anticipated, the knowledge of the BSGAG was in-depth, rich, and detailed. Considering the time frame of going back in time almost 27 years, this proved to be a successful retrospective exercise that reinforced my confidence that these three individuals were indeed Boston gang experts. This process lasted for almost six months (July 2014 – December 2014) and narrowed the original roster of around 450 gang members to approximately 212 potential subjects who represented the approximately 15 original street gangs.

In January 2015, Advisory Group members started to identify and do direct outreach to recruit potential subjects for the study. This was an individual effort among each of them. Each member had their own gangs and geographic areas where they had established strong personal relationships over time. These areas, for the most part, did not overlap, resulting in a balanced representation of gangs and gang members from the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End.
By January of 2016, this intensive outreach effort led to a final representative group of 28 influential gang members from the late 1980's and early 1990’s and two neighborhood street criminals with in-depth neighborhood knowledge.

My original framework focused on four goals (1) to identify two older individuals with extensive knowledge of the neighborhood, pre-gang era; (2) to have a collection of gang members directly involved in the re-emergence of gangs and a secondary, smaller number of younger, junior gang members; (3) to have representation of multiple gang members from six of the original 15 gangs and individual representation from 10 of the original gangs; and (4) to recruit the most credible and influential gang members of that time. I am confident that I have achieved these goals. The two neighborhood street criminals provided extensive knowledge of the neighborhoods prior to the re-emergence of gangs. Twenty-one individuals represent gang members directly involved in the re-emergence of gangs in the late 1980’s. Seven individuals represent the smaller group of junior gang members, younger than the main cohort by several years. Seven gangs are represented by multiple individuals and five gangs are represented by one individual. Combined, 12 of the original 15 gangs are represented (see Appendix A for a map showing these gangs’ locations). Additionally, three former gang members representing three different gangs who were not on the original list are included. These individuals and gangs had their early roots in the late 1980’s but did not fully develop until around 1990. In summary, based on the name recognition and reputations of the subjects recruited, the study includes some of the most influential gang members from the late 1980’s through 1990’s.

A unique aspect of this study requiring discussion is that I was a police officer for 31 years and spent the vast majority of my career working on the formidable problem of gangs and gang violence in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the
South End. While I am comfortable with the fact that during my career, I built a reputation of treating people in a fair and honest manner, I also understand the considerable challenge of gaining the trust of former gang members and having them share with me their life experiences. I presented my concerns to members of the Advisory Group and suggested they may be put in the position of vouching for me in order to relieve any issues that may arise regarding my credibility and motives for conducting this research. While the Advisory Group members did not seem overly concerned with this, it was important to address the issue with them (see Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 45).

**Finding and Contacting the Subjects:** The recruitment process for the study utilized both a purposive/judgmental approach combined with snowballing techniques. Maxfield and Babbie (2006) suggest that based on the research goals, it may be most appropriate to select a purposive group of respondents based on the researcher’s knowledge of the population. Snowball techniques utilize a chain referral process that typically begins with the identification of one single subject or a small number of subjects who are asked to identify others like them who might be willing to become involved in the study. Those subjects then suggest more potentials subjects. This method is quite useful when trying to reach populations that are hard to find.

Decker and Van Winkle (1996) recruited gang members in several ways including the use of a Field Ethnographer—an individual with credibility in the community, knowledge of the streets and the gang culture, and the ability to connect with gang members and recruit them into the study. In his study of gangs in Milwaukee, Hagedorn (1998b) and a former gang leader, Perry Macon, initiated their recruiting process through their relationships with some of Milwaukee’s founding leaders. Those gang leaders then assisted Hagedorn (1998b) and Macon in identifying and locating other influential gang leaders. Duran (2013), in his study of gangs in Ogden, Utah
and Denver, Colorado, recruited his subjects in a thoughtful and deliberate manner, “I individually selected each person for an interview based on that individual’s inside knowledge relating to gangs” (p. 36).

The process of locating and successfully enlisting former, impactful gang members to participate in the study yielded the following results. Twenty-four subjects for the study were directly recruited by the BSGAG and myself (see Appendix B for Snowball Sampling Chart). Six additional subjects were then recruited by either a neighborhood street criminal or former gang members. In only three cases did the recruitment of an initial subject then lead to the recommendation of additional subjects. This highlights one of the challenges of qualitative research involving active offenders or, in this case, former gang members. In Wright and colleagues’ (1992) study of active residential burglars in St. Louis he suggests that, “The most difficult aspect of using a snowball sampling technique is locating an initial contact or two” (p. 150). To overcome this obstacle, they utilized an ex-offender who had established street credibility and trust among those in the criminal world. The ex-offender and his contacts in the community proved to be of great value in connecting the authors to active residential burglars. Even with this being the case, Wright et al. (1992) state that, “Throughout the process of locating subjects, we encountered numerous difficulties and challenges” (p. 153).

In this study, I did not encounter any significant challenges in establishing the initial subjects. The BSGAG, like Wright et al.’s (1992) ex-offender, had credible reputations in the community and were trusted by the former gang members they directly recruited for the study. The group of men initially recruited fit the criteria for the study exactly as planned. But even with the strong bond that existed between the BSGAG members and the former gang members and the request that they identify others like them, the recruitment of other former gang members
by the initial subjects never really developed. In most of my early interactions with the subjects, they were guarded and I sensed feelings of doubt within them regarding their agreement to participate in the study. This was not unexpected, given my former profession as a police officer and the subject’s involvement in the gang culture. As the study progressed and we began building a rapport, those feelings of doubt faded away and our relationship grew strong. Still, I should have foreseen that it was one thing for the former gang member to agree to participate in the study and another thing for them to approach other former gang members and explain to them that they were sharing their life experiences with a former police officer. Many of the subjects in the study still lived and worked in the neighborhoods in which they grew up. Their friends and family members who had been involved in the gang culture with them were still in their lives, and the gang culture they helped form (and in many cases, still identified with) continued to be active in their neighborhoods. It was inevitable that this would create a conflicting situation for the men. Given the status they have achieved in the neighborhoods over the years, their strong street reputations, and the “secretive nature of gangs,” especially as it relates to talking to law enforcement, I should not have realistically expected extensive outreach to take place (Miller, 2001, p. 29). This unforeseen challenge would place an additional burden on the BSGAG to recruit additional credible former gang members who would represent the population interest for the study (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Singleton & Straits, 1999).

During the recruitment process there was only one individual who was directly contacted by an Advisory Group member, and with whom I actually met, who subsequently declined to participate in the study. The Advisory Group member (“Frank”) called me and stated he had
talked with this former gang member and he was willing to become involved in the study. After getting his work number, I called the man and provided him with the details of the study and his potential role. Initially, he said he would be involved stating, “I trust Frank he gave me a lot of breaks over the years, he was fair.” I gave him my cell number and told him to call me when he was ready. After almost a week of not hearing from him, and worried that perhaps spotty reception had prevented him from correctly hearing my cell phone number, I decided to go to his workplace and contact him in person. Upon arrival, it was immediately apparent that he was uncomfortable. I re-introduced myself and stated, “Frank and I are friends, I just wanted to come by and explain the study in person.” He stated that he lost my phone number and was not sure he wanted to participate. He agreed to hear more about the study before deciding whether or not he wanted to be involved. We walked outside and after I explained the study, he began to discuss his life experiences. He talked about both of his parents and how they cared for him, that there was structure in his household, and he was given a moral compass in life to follow. He talked about being a gang member and a drug dealer and going to prison. He talked about his turning point in life being when he was given an opportunity for a job, stating “I’m not sure why this white guy would support me.” He further explained that he had moved out of the city, left his friends behind and changed his ways. He was now a manager for the company and saw himself as a good leader whom people respected and followed. He then stated, “I had a moral foundation growing up that I was able to fall back on in adulthood, a lot of guys that did not make it had no foundation.” When he was done, I stated to him that his life experiences were important and that

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7 Pseudonyms are used throughout the dissertation to conceal the identities of the men in the study, gang names, streets and housing developments, individuals they refer to, and other specific references that are discussed. The names of neighborhoods and sections of neighborhoods are true and accurate (see Miller, 2001, p. 221).
I hoped he would become involved in the study. We ended up speaking for almost 30 minutes and I felt he had become more comfortable with me. I told him to think about becoming involved and if he was interested to give me a call. Before I left he made one final statement, “You know, I was raised to never speak to cops,” and that was the last time I heard from him.

**Saturation:** Selecting the right number of respondents is critical for both qualitative and quantitative research. Unfortunately, there is no clear-cut answer to the question of, “How many observations is enough?” Decker and Van Winkle (1996) conducted ethnographic interviews with 99 gang members, while Hagedorn (1998b) interviewed 47. Was the larger number of respondents necessarily better than the smaller one? In attempt to answer these questions, Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) reviewed the literature involving the guidelines for qualitative research in the health sciences. They found that the literature consistently reported that the standard by which purposive sampling sizes are determined is based upon “saturation,” or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data” (p. 59). They also pointed out that this same literature was confounding in that it provided “no description of how saturation might be determined and no practical guidelines for estimating sample sizes for purposively sampled interviews” (p. 60).

Frustrated by the inability to identify a “general, numerical guideline” for purposive sample sizes, Guest et al. (2006, p. 60) then conducted a systematic analysis of their own data from a study of 60 women involved in a healthcare and intervention program in Africa. They inspected the codes from 60 interviews, attempting to determine at which point their data reached saturation. Their findings suggested that data saturation had occurred by the time they had analyzed 12 interviews (p. 74). Based on the re-analysis of their own data, Guest et al. (2006) provide two recommendations. First, they found that the degree of structure in the
interview process plays an important role in sample size. In their study, they used a semi-structured, open-ended interview process. They indicated that interviews in which a similar set of questions are posed to the subjects will lead to data saturation faster and with fewer subjects.

Second, they indicated that researchers assume a certain degree of subject homogeneity exists in purposive sampling because subjects are, by definition, chosen according to some common criteria (pp. 75-76). Therefore, the more similar the subjects are with regard to their experiences and the topic of study, the sooner the point of saturation will be reached.

Two additional studies yielded recommendations regarding interview sample size. First, Romney and colleagues (1986) argue that “minimum sample size will depend on the cultural competence of the pool of informants used. The higher the average competence of the sample the smaller the sample needed” (p. 325). And finally, Ryan and Bernard (2004) contend that investigator experience and fatigue can determine how and when saturation is reached.

The current study incorporates the above four recommendations as follows:

- **Recommendation 1: The degree of structure in the interview process (Guest et al., 2006).** This study utilized a semi-structured interview process with a similar set of questions being posed to each of the subjects. The expansive interview instrument contained a wide-range of questions that were divided into three areas of interest: current living situation, childhood through adolescent experiences, and young adulthood through adulthood experiences. The questions were asked in the same order and all of the subjects were audio-taped and their statements transcribed for analysis.

- **Recommendation 2: Subject homogeneity (Guest et al., 2006).** All of the subjects for the study were recruited through either a purposive/judgmental or snowball technique design and they were all chosen according to common criteria. They ranged in age from
35-54 and were all males of African American or Hispanic descent (see Figure 1). All of them grew up in the disadvantaged neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End. Lastly, they all were involved in the street gang culture of the late 1980’s through early 1990’s and shared many similar life events and experiences.

![Age of Subjects](image)

*Figure 1: Age of subjects.*

- **Recommendation 3: Expertise in area of inquiry (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986).** Twenty-eight of the 30 subjects were active gang members during the late 1980’s though early 1990’s, when the gang culture re-emerged in Boston (see Figure 2 for how many years the subjects were gang-involved). As gang leaders and individuals of influence, they possessed in-depth knowledge of the introduction of crack cocaine into the illegal drug trade, the ability to access illegal firearms, and the knowledge and decision making process of gang formation and activities. Their experiences and stature in the gang culture distinguished them as experts in the re-emergence of gangs in Boston.
Figure 2: Years subjects were gang-involved.

- **Recommendation 4: Investigator experience (Ryan & Bernard, 2004).** My previous experience as a gang officer in the late 1980’s, a commander of the gang unit in the early to mid-1990’s, and a homicide investigator in the late 1990’s focusing on gang- and drug-related homicides, provided me with a strong understanding of the gang culture in Boston. Throughout the study, I monitored closely the subject selection process, the interview questions and techniques, and the consistency of themes and codes as they arose through subject interviews.

Based on these criteria, I am confident that a total of 28 former gang members and two neighborhood street criminals—while small—provided me with enough cases to yield a rich analysis of the late 1980’s through 1990’s gang culture in Boston and the process of desistance and persistence among this criminally active group of men. As Miller (2001) said of her study of
female gang members in Columbus, Ohio and St. Louis, Missouri, in which she interviewed 48 gang members: “What I lack in breadth I hope I’ve made up for in depth” (24). I believe I have accomplished this in the current study.

Instrumentation

The Pre-Interview Process: Once the men began to be identified and before the interviews took place, I envisioned that the best way to proceed would be to conduct introductory interviews with each potential subject. This would ensure the fairness, openness, and voluntary nature of the process. These pre-interview meetings were held with 24 subjects in order to (1) prepare them for the real interview by explaining the purpose of the study and their role, (2) provide them with a clear picture of the interview process, (3) address any questions or concerns they may have, (4) start to build a rapport with them, and (5) give them time to decide if they really wanted to participate. This step in the process was important, as it ensured complete transparency with the participants, eliminated any hesitancy they were feeling, and helped make them comfortable and mentally prepared to participate. The majority of pre-interview discussions took place in face-to-face meetings at several different locations in the city, including the street, while a small number were done through the less preferred way of telephone, email, and text.

All pre-interviews followed the same script:

- I shared with each subject my law enforcement background, and specifically being in the gang unit during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, commanding the gang unit during the mid-1990’s, and being in the homicide unit in the late 1990’s.
I explained my academic background and being a Ph.D. student studying criminology and justice policy, the academic guidelines regarding confidentiality and the protection of their information, and the framework for the study.

I discussed the topic of my dissertation and my interest in studying the life experiences of the young men who were involved in the gang culture in the late 1980’s through early 1990’s. I presented this as an opportunity to, “Tell your story.” I explained to them that while I was interested in the “gang experience,” I was more interested in the transitions and changes that have affected their lives from adolescence, to young adulthood, and adulthood.

I told them I was only interested in speaking to the most credible and knowledgeable of gang members from that time period and that I not only wanted to interview them, but I wanted them to help me frame the study to make sure that it accurately captures their life experiences.

At the conclusion of the interview, I told them I wanted them to critique both the interview and my performance, including the questions asked, the way they were asked, and any other thoughts they had. I explained that this would make the study stronger and more credible and would assist me in future interviews.

Finally, I thanked them again and asked them to think about and decide if they wanted to participate. My last statement to them was, “Your story is important.”

**The Interview Instrument:** The interview instrument for this study combined questions from the research of Laub and Sampson (2003), Decker and Van Winkle (1996), and Hagedorn (1998b), as well as several of my own questions to fully capture the life experiences of Boston’s late 1980’s through early 1990’s gang members. In their study of the Glueck men, Laub and
Sampson (2003) posed approximately 68 questions to the subjects. In Hagedorn’s (1998b) study of Milwaukee gang members, he asked well over 100 questions. The combining of these interview instruments resulted in an expansive questionnaire of 95 questions. The questions were structured to first establish the subject’s current living situation including family, employment, socio-economic status, and military involvement. I then took the subjects back in time to gather information involving their childhood through early adolescence experiences including neighborhood, family, and education, the experience of gang membership, criminal justice system involvement, incarceration, and violence. Finally, and most importantly, the last set of questions focused on the process of desistance. The desistance questions covered a wide-range of topics including work, family, marriage, parenthood, the death of someone close, religion, adult mentorship, prison, and human agency. This comprehensive semi-structured format provided me with the ability to fully capture the subject’s life course experiences from childhood, to adolescence, to young adulthood, and adulthood.

Life History Calendar (LHC): For their interviews, Laub and Sampson (2003) developed a modified Life History Calendar (LHC) to help the subject place major life events (e.g., marriages, divorces, residential moves, and jobs) in time.⁸ They suggest that the LHC plays a crucial role in providing a visual aid that allows the subject and researcher to “contextualize objective events. From the life history calendar, one learns the number of events and their timing, sequence, and duration,” thereby improving the quality of the retrospective data (2003, p. 67). For this study, I further modified Laub and Sampson’s (2003) LHC to better fit with a more contemporary group of former gang members.

This study sought to understand the life experiences of former gang members and neighborhood street criminals from the late 1980’s and early 1990’s from childhood through adulthood. The subjects in this study ranged in age from 35 to 54; thus the period of recall ranged from approximately 27 years to 46 years. Laub and Sampson (2003) used a period of one year as the unit of time to capture the life experiences of the Glueck men (covering a period of recall of almost 40 years). Following Laub and Sampson’s (2003) modified LHC, and because of the similar periods of recall in both studies, I also used the period of one year as the unit of time and focused on the following domains: residences, education, gang membership, gang-related arrests, supervision, convictions, incarceration, marriage, children, family, employment, and turning points (see Appendix C for Life History Calendar).

The use of the LHC proved to be advantageous in the following ways: (1) it took the men “back in time” to recall important as well as traumatic life events that they had not thought about in many years. Many of the men commented that some of these experiences were ones they were not looking forward to revisiting; (2) it created a chronology of events that provided structure for the subjects and set the foundation for a smooth transition into the interview questions that would follow; (3) it allowed me to probe and get a sense of the depth and veracity of their recollections; and (4) it started to give me a feeling of confidence that I was building a rapport with the subjects and that they were becoming comfortable with the interview process (I based this on the honesty and candor of their answers to the LHC questions). As suggested by Creswell (2007), the LHC allows the interviewer to “journal a sketch” of the subject’s life (p. 158). This sketch identifies the life course stages from childhood experiences, to adolescent experiences, and finally to adult experiences and creates a timeline of the subject’s life. From these discussions,
the subjects’ life histories were reconstructed, thus clarifying the factors that had influenced their lives.  

The Interview Process

**Location of the Interview:** Based on the strategies of Laub and Sampson (2003), Decker and Van Winkle (1996), and Hagedorn (1998b), my primary objective was to interview the subjects at a time and place that was comfortable and convenient for them. This required planning and flexibility in my approach, and often meant working around the work schedules and personal commitments of the Advisory Group members and the subjects. Even taking into account the strong and trusting relationship that existed between the BSGAG member and the subject, this was still a fragile process, where timing and opportunity could not be missed. Thus, it was critical that I be available at the time and place designated in order to conduct each one-time interview.

While Laub and Sampson’s (2003) first choice was to conduct the interview in the subject’s home, they wanted to remain open and obliging to what worked best for the men. This included meeting some of the men in locations where they felt comfortable, such as restaurants, public buildings, and even in a subject’s car. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) decided to conduct their interviews in vacant offices at the university. They did this to send a clear message to the gang members that this was an academic study and they were not connected to the police in any way. For their study, Hagedorn (1998b) and Macon conducted the interviews of gang members in their homes as well as Hagedorn’s office at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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In August of 2014, I requested and received permission from Professor John H. Laub to use both the Life History Calendar and the Interview Instrument from the study of the Glueck men. His assistance is deeply appreciated.
The 30 subject interviews for this study took place at five different locations including, two community locations in Roxbury (12 interviews), a vacant office at Northeastern University (11 interviews), a community location in the South End (four interviews), and subject workplaces (three interviews). All of these locations met the criteria of neutrality and comfort and, in the majority of cases, the relevant BSGAG member was present to make sure the setting and subject were ready for the interview. The role of the BSGAG member and the locations of the interviews were critical in the success of each interview. My initial concerns that the subjects may have second thoughts about participating proved to be unfounded. While several interviews had to be rescheduled at the last second or continued to a second interview, all 30 participants appeared at the time and place agreed upon and were ready to be interviewed.

The Interviews: Interviews began in March of 2015 and concluded in February of 2016 (see Figure 3). The thoroughness of the pre-interview process had paved the way so that the subjects were fully prepared for the interviews. In almost all of the interviews, the BSGAG member was present with the subject prior to the interview. After introductions were made and we were settled in, the BSGAG member then left the room. I opened the interview by again thanking the subject for participating in the study. My strategy for the interview process was a semi-structured one. I provided them with the steps to follow during the interview, starting with the consent form, the compensation/pseudonym form, the structure of the study, the Life History Calendar, and the interview questions. I specifically discussed with them the issue of audio-recording the interviews. I initially had serious concerns that they would not agree to this. All of the subjects had previous dealing with the criminal justice system, both at the state level as well as the federal level. The idea of “going on tape” was viewed quite negatively within their social circles and was often associated with violating the “code of the street,” which includes snitching...
and talking with law enforcement officials—or, for that matter, anyone—about the gang culture and their personal experiences (see Anderson, 1999). I explained to each subject that this study was a partnership between him and me. I asked for feedback on the framework for the study I had developed. When the interview concluded, I invited each participant to critique both the process and my performance, and to suggest questions that I should avoid in the future and questions I should add. I clarified that the issue of violence would be discussed, but only in a general manner, and that I was not interested in discussing specific situations involving violence. Finally, I explained that I did not want to be in the position of interpreting their statements and experiences; I told them that “Through me, you can make your story known” (Weiss, 1994, pp. 65-66) but that it was critical that their experiences be “expressed in their own words” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 59). I believe that this articulation of the openness and transparency of the study, and my motives to capture their stories in their own words, continued to solidify our

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**Figure 3**: Interview timeline.
growing rapport and trust and resulted in all of the subjects agreeing to be audio-taped for the interview.¹⁰

After reviewing and signing the consent form, I provided them with the compensation/pseudonym form. I explained that when we went on tape, I would be referring to them by a pseudonym—a single first name that they would choose—and that this was done to protect their identity. I then compensated them for their participation in the study. Early on in the process, it was $20.00 cash; later, on the advice of my academic advisors, it was decided that a better method of compensation would be a gift card (in this case, a $20.00 Dunkin Donuts gift card). I obtained each subject’s signature and took steps to keep this information confidential by storing it in a safe and secure location. In Decker and Van Winkle’s (1996) and Hagedorn’s (1998b) studies, gang members were paid $20.00 for participating in the research. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) suggest this is a practice “common to field research” (p. 51). They decided on this amount because they felt it was low enough that it would have no criminogenic effects (see also Duran, 2013; Harding, 2010; Miller, 2001).

Interestingly, Weiss (1994) suggests that in the majority of studies, “the reward for a respondent is the interview itself and the contribution he or she can make to the study” (p. 58). This appeared to be the case for this study. When the $20.00 cash or gift card was offered to the subjects, many of them were surprised and stated they did not want the compensation. I believe that by this point, the subjects were committed to this process and they truly felt they were

¹⁰ Throughout this study, I quote the subjects extensively and present their experiences verbatim, but there are interviews that are also edited for readability. This includes cases where subject responses for some questions are spread throughout their transcripts. In these cases, the actual answers are taken from separate quotes and simply combined. Additionally, in many of the interviews, repeated phrases or words are removed for clarity while not changing in any manner the content of the response. (see Hagedorn, 1998b; Miller, 2001)
playing an important part in a story that needed to be told. I explained to them that the gift was a token of appreciation for their involvement in the study and they did seem to appreciate this.

For the LHC, the subjects and I worked together. I took each subject through step by step, filling in the categories as the subject focused on the recalling of events. Rather than get into great detail (this would be done through the interview questions), I explained to the subjects that we would focus on “big picture” events for the calendar (e.g., incarceration over one year). This process took some time but it was worthwhile for both the subject and me, and created a smooth transition into the interview process. It was at this point that I began to realize that the men had bought into the process. Their responses to LHC categories seemed honest and forthcoming, sharing with me events that were traumatic, personal, and important to them. The majority of subjects commented positively on this aspect of the interview, with Paul in particular stating that the life history calendar was very helpful in preparing him for the interview: “Man, you came ready.”

In March of 2015, the first of 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews began. The interviews combined note taking and audio-taping. All of the subjects agreed to be audio-taped and the interviews lasted two to four hours. Table 1 shows the final list of all the subjects in this study.

Limitations

The Challenges of Interviewing Former Gang Members: I strived to make this a collaborative study and consider the BSGAG members and the men in this study to be my “key partners” (see Duran, 2013, p. 35). Unlike Hagedorn (1998b), Decker and Van Winkle (1996), Miller (2001), and Duran (2013), I encountered no logistical or personal issues with any of the
Table 1: *List of subjects.*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>ID#</th>
<th>Gang Name</th>
<th>Gang</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age Joined</th>
<th>Age Left</th>
<th>Yrs. Gang Inv.</th>
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<td>54</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Gang assoc.

Men being interviewed. They appeared to be honest and insightful in their responses. They shared experiences that were both traumatic and personal, and allowed me into areas of their lives that were deeply personal. By allowing them to tell their stories, I established a foundation for their empowerment and ownership that resulted in a powerful and unique collection of data that will contribute to the understanding of gang membership and the desistance process.
In Duran’s (2013) study of the gang cultures in Ogden, Utah and Denver, Colorado, he states, “I treated my interviewees as fellow experts and did not judge their responses. Everyone I interviewed knew that I was knowledgeable about gangs, and this helped to develop rapport by including information that only people inside the gangs knew. I actively probed to learn more about their perspective” (pp. 35-36). This statement accurately reflects my philosophy and approach to the interview process.

**The Interview Instrument:** The original instrument, which was strongly influenced in its development by Laub and Sampson (2003), Decker and Van Winkle (1996), and Hagedorn (1998b), had a total of 95 questions. During the early interviews, this quickly proved to be too cumbersome, thus the questionnaire was adjusted for a more manageable approach. A number of questions that were duplicative in some manner were combined, some were restructured to better address the topic being discussed, and some were altogether eliminated. One question in particular that was eliminated involved the discussion of the idea of respect and disrespect and its role in the gang and street culture. The question, “Can you give me an example of a time when you were disrespected and how you responded?” when posed to the subjects appeared to cause them to hesitate noticeably. I quickly realized I had put them into a precarious position. Issues of disrespect in the street and gang culture are most often handled through violent measures, with no other recourse being acceptable (Anderson, 1999). Their answer to this question was taking them into an area of inquiry that I had previously told them I was not interested in—that being individual incidents of violence. For those I asked, their answers were general and non-committal, and there was a visible level of discomfort. I did not want to in any way jeopardize all the work that had been put in to building trust with this group; therefore, the question was eliminated from the study.
Truthfulness of the Subjects: Maxfield and Babbie (2006) state that one area of concern requiring close monitoring is that over time, people can forget past experiences; they can also reinterpret past events in a selective manner, and sometimes they can lie. Laub and Sampson (2003) recognized this in their research, suggesting that it is important to understand that life-history narratives with a long retrospective window should be approached in a careful and prudent manner (see also Henry, Moffitt, Caspi, Langley, & Silva, 1994; Janson 1990). In their study of gang members in St. Louis, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) assert that, “Simply because gang members were contacted by an experienced field ethnographer respected by individuals in the neighborhood is no guarantee that they were honest with us. The issues of response validity and reliability are important, and we pay close attention to them throughout the study” (p. 27). Finally, Hagedorn (1998b), in his follow-up study of Milwaukee gang members, was also cognizant of this issue and took the steps of not interviewing “those gang members who eagerly wanted to be interviewed” (p. 175). He addressed the problem of “hype” by having lifetime friends of the respondents do the interviewing. His thinking behind this: “How can someone lie about drug dealing when the interviewer sold drugs with him” (p. 175)?

Overall, I felt confident that the former gang members who participated in the study would come into the interview with the mindset of being truthful and honest in their responses to the questions. I based this on their strong and trusting relationship with the BSGAG members and in some cases myself, the knowledge I possessed on Boston’s street gang culture, and the passage of time since being an active gang member. But I was also well aware of the concerns raised by Decker and Van Winkle (1996) and Hagedorn (1998b). Therefore, I closely monitored the responses given by the subjects. In all of the interviews I was consistent and thorough in cross-referencing their depictions of gang-related events and incidents with those of the other
subjects for accuracy and truthfulness. And when a subject described an event or incident about which I had not previously heard, I reached out to members of the BSGAG for confirmation. In this way, my assumptions proved to be true: The subject’s responses to my questions were forthright and gave no indications of embellishment.

I never felt that I was in a position of having to control gang “mythologizing” or the overblown accounts of bravado and violence and I never had to admonish the subjects by telling them I am only looking for “the real deal, no bullshit” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 49). Some of the subjects in this study were involved in some of the most serious and heinous gang crimes of the late 1980’s and 1990’s in Boston, and they talked of these past incidents in a detailed and articulate manner with a tone of remorsefulness. They also spoke of their participation and victimization in situations of violence in a straightforward manner, and some of the men, rather than aggrandizing the gang lifestyle and detailing badges of honor they accrued over time, described having spent little time in jail, hating incarceration, and never being the victim of gang violence. They talked of the strides they were making in life, as well as the struggles they were encountering, and they did not hold back when I continued to probe and inquire about their innermost thoughts. Their maturity, openness, and acceptance of the past and hopefulness about the future created in-depth discussions that covered much of their life span.

**Determining Insider and Outsider Status:** In 1972, Robert Merton authored the article “Insiders and Outsiders: A Chapter in the Sociology of Knowledge.” In it, he discusses the long-standing, often-emotional debate on the “Sociology of Knowledge” and the contention that particular groups have the exclusive or entitled ownership of certain kinds of knowledge based on “biological or social grounds,” while others who do not exhibit these traits are ill-equipped to do so (1972, p. 12). Examples of this include the idea that African American sociologists are
better positioned to study the issues of race and other African American life experiences than their white counterparts, or that female sociologists can better advance the study of women’s issues than can male sociologists. In its simplest terms, this “insider/outsider” doctrine suggests that “you have to be one in order to understand one” and that the outsider has not been “socialized in the group nor been engaged in the run of experience that makes up its life, and therefore cannot have the direct, intuitive sensitivity that alone makes empathic understanding possible” (p. 15). Merton (1972) disagrees with this distrusting intellectual perspective that polarizes academics based on race, gender, class, and cultural background and suggests that “Insiders and Outsiders in the domain of knowledge [should] unite. You have nothing to lose but your claims. You have a world of understanding to win” (p. 44).

This theme of insider and outsider status is an area of concern for Duran (2013), who studied the gang experiences of youth in the cities of Ogden, Utah and Denver, Colorado, from 1992 through 2011. Duran believes that the environment in which one grows up, as well as one’s race, age, gender, and religion, provide for a different set of experiences that allow for a unique understanding for “describing and analyzing social conditions. These varied life chances can affect the interpretations of experiences” (p. 26). He suggests that this is of particular importance in the study of gangs—an area of research currently dominated by white academics. For Duran (2013), when studying the gang culture, the only insiders are gang members and certain associates. Outsiders are considered to be “everyone else, and in particular middle- to upper-class whites” (p. 29). Duran considers himself both an insider and outsider. During adolescence he was a gang member, active in the streets of Ogden, Utah. In his late teens, he began to move away from the gang lifestyle, obtaining a legitimate job and beginning his pursuit of a doctoral degree. By his early 20’s he considered himself a “Criminal Justice Insider” due to his
occupational status of working with troubled children and later as a juvenile probation officer (p. 29). Duran’s (2013) transition from street gang member to criminal justice practitioner raised internal issues of conflict for him regarding his allegiance to the gang culture versus his being a member of a culture seen as oppressing gang members. Ultimately, he realized that, “In time, I learned that both roles were a lot more similar than depicted” (p. 29).

This leads me to the question of my status in this study. Am I an insider or an outsider? I am not African American nor am I a gang member. I have no direct experiences in facing racial or ethnic oppression or class discrimination. I have no in-depth, firsthand knowledge of African American history, African American culture, or the complex set of issues that confront the African American community. And, finally, I do not in any way profess to understand the many life challenges faced by the men in this study. In my discussions with them, I stated that while I have respectable level of knowledge regarding the gang culture in Boston since its re-emergence in 1988, it pales in comparison to theirs. While not a “Gang Insider,” I did occupy space within this world and do share a set of similar experiences with the men I am studying. In 1988, I was a member of the City Wide Anti-Crime Unit (CWACU), a plainclothes unit assigned to address issues of gangs and gang violence occurring in the city. As such, I witnessed firsthand the re-emergence of gangs in Boston. In the early 1990’s, as the gang culture grew, I was a member of the Anti-Gang Violence Unit (AGVU); and in 1993, I became the commander of the Youth Violence Strike Force (YVSF). All of these assignments focused on the issues of gangs and were concentrated in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End.

In the late 1990’s, I was assigned to the Homicide Unit and tasked with investigating unsolved gang and drug homicides that had occurred between the years of 1988 – 1997. As part
of that assignment, I spent one year researching and reviewing the investigative files of almost 300 unsolved homicides in Boston’s minority neighborhoods. Additionally, I was the liaison to the United States Attorney’s Office, which, in partnership with the Boston Police Department and other local, state, and federal agencies, was actively investigating gangs in Boston and their involvement in the illicit drug trade. My role was to interview gang members who were facing significant prison sentences in the federal system, providing them with opportunity for leniency in return for their assistance in closing unsolved homicides. Finally, in 2000, I was promoted to Superintendent and over the next 14 years, I stayed closely connected to the minority neighborhoods of Boston, working on many initiatives that addressed the challenges of gangs and gang violence.

My experiences over the previous 27 years have connected me to the men in this study in many ways, and this became apparent during the interview process. While I had planned to keep my policing background separate from my researcher position in the study, this proved to be a difficult task. On a number of occasions, subjects brought me into the conversation, asking me questions such as, “Do you remember so and so?” “What was that officer’s name?” and “Did ya’ll know that?” During one interview, Joseph went into great detail describing his experience with the federal authorities after being arrested with a gun. Joseph was ultimately offered federal probation and he described his interaction with a federal agent who was brutally honest with him regarding the consequences for moving back into crime. I asked Joseph, “Was he an ATF

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11 My attempt to not discuss my policing background as well as any policing initiatives I was involved in or aware of during the 1990’s was a deliberate decision on my part. The intent of this study was to focus on the experiences of Boston’s former gang members based on their words and recollections, especially as it relates to the turning points and events that caused them to either persist in or desist from deviant and criminal behavior. I believed that the discussion of policing would have created a distraction for the subjects, thus drawing them away from the primary goal of the study.
agent?” Joseph responded, “Yeah, he was an ATF agent.” Joseph knew his name and described him and then stated, “Can you please tell him to give me a call?” The agent that Joseph identified was someone with whom I had directly worked and knew well. Joseph wanted to thank him; he believed that the agent had played a role in helping him to change his life.

On another occasion, while interviewing Kyle, he became upset when describing the homicide of a family member. This was an investigation in which I had been actively involved, and Kyle was aware of this. It was clear that some of his anger was directed at me and the others who had investigated this homicide. After the interview ended, we spent a long time discussing this issue.

Finally, in his discussion of the crack era in Boston, John stated, “It was an era of cops and robbers, it was our job to be criminals, it was you all’s job to catch us.” I responded to John, “It was business.” And he responded, “It was business, it was like do your job, we gonna do ours.” John then went on to state, “It’s weird to say, you kind of grew up with the cops because like if I was 16, 17, and the cop is 25, 26, he’s a kid too. You’re seeing them every day so you kind of growing up with them because now I’m turning 18, you’re turning 30, we seen them cops every, every day.” John’s description of this time period and police officer-gang member relations is consistent with my recollections and experiences as a gang officer. John is correct; police officers and gang members saw and interacted with each other every day in the neighborhoods. While at times it could be dangerous and confrontational, it could also be respectful and friendly. John’s point is well taken: Police officers and gang members grew up together, with both experiencing the phenomena of crack, gangs, guns, and violence.

**Did the Interview Process Work?** The final interview question posed to the subjects was “Is there anything you want to add, maybe something I didn’t ask you that I should have?”
This question was originally intended to capture any final thoughts the subject had regarding the interview. Instead it became an opportunity for them to critique the interview process. All of the men in the study had positive reviews and for me this brought a level of satisfaction and credibility to the study. It showed that I was able to successfully connect with the subjects; this, in turn, allowed them to let their guard down and permitted me to share in their life experiences.

In my initial discussion with all of the subjects, I told them I wanted them to critique the interview process when it was over. This was done to instill a sense of ownership in the study, going beyond just a superficial interviewer–subject, one-time encounter. Below are some of the comments of the men who participated in the study.

- “I think you covered it all. You know, it’s like million thoughts going through my mind because like I said, this is like therapy to me because I don’t talk a lot. I keep a lot of shit bottled up” (David, age 46, Warrior Clan).

- “You asked everything you need to ask and you made me open my mind to lot of things, I’m going to go home and write this down, write a couple of things down so I can remember them so I’m going to put it in a little book for myself, like a little thing so I can look at it, see where I made mistakes, you asked everything you need to ask” (Anthony, age 40, BBoys).

- “I mean, I think you asked some real, real questions. Those were real questions and realistically, as we’re having the conversation, it stimulates a lot of – like you said, a lot of emotion, lot of feelings on a lot of things that have happened” (Shon, age 41, A Street Assassins).
Data Analysis

Laub and Sampson (2003) suggest that it is critical to have a data collection process that is both valid and reliable. To accomplish this in their own research, they combined life-history narratives with extensive institutional records to reconstruct the subject’s trajectories in crime, thus strengthening the validity and reliability of the narratives (see also Benson, 2002). Laub and Sampson’s (2003) approach integrated both quantitative and qualitative data. This integration took two forms. First, they collected, coded, and analyzed criminal records data from criminal histories and death records from vital statistics. Second, they combined qualitative data with an analysis of life-history narratives. They found that this conjoining of life-history narratives with quantitative approaches brought to light a deeper and more complete picture of why some men persist in offending and others desist in offending.

The primary data for the current study were qualitative in nature, coming from semi-structured life-history narrative interviews conducted with individuals who were involved in the Boston street gang culture in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Case studies were also utilized throughout the study to investigate and explore the life experiences of Boston’s former gang members. With its long and revered history, including Sutherland’s (1937) study of the professional thief and Klockars (1974) study of the professional fence, case studies distinguished themselves as a research methodology by offering detailed, chronological accounts of the events that influence the individual’s attitudes and actions. However, quantitative data were collected and analyzed as well, including demographic and social indicators, simple frequency distributions, bar graphs, tables, and the analysis of extensive institutional records such as Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) data (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Laub & Sampson, 2003).
Analysis of the qualitative data was less straightforward. Creswell (2007) maintains that the data collected in a narrative study need to be analyzed for the story the individual has to tell—a chronology of life course events, criminal offending, and turning points or epiphanies. To accomplish this, I used short quotes to highlight important perspectives of the subjects and long quotes to “provide complete answers to the questions posed” (p. 183). In addition, the modified Life History Calendar allowed subjects to “journal a sketch” of their lives (p. 158), making it possible to identify life course stages and critical turning points within the timeline of the subject’s life.

My organizing framework for managing the data was a two-step process. First, I created and organized files for each of the 30 subjects in the study. Contained in these files were the signed consent form (with true name), the signed pseudonym/compensation form (not using true name), the completed Life History Calendar, the interview questions, the interview notes, and the transcript of the audio-taped interview. Second, the transcribed interviews for the 30 subjects resulted in approximately 1,300 pages of data. Initially, I was somewhat overwhelmed in trying to make sense of the data. To manage this, I followed Agar’s (1980) advice suggesting that researchers in qualitative studies should “read the transcripts in their entirety several times. Immerse yourself in the details, trying to get a sense of the interview as a whole before breaking it into parts” (p. 103). This strategy was quite helpful to me and it started to bring order to the voluminous data set.

I came into this study wanting to understand the life experiences of Boston’s former gang members from the late 1980’s through early 1990’s. The most structured and straightforward approach to take for understanding their life experiences was to chronologically divide their lives into stages using my research questions. Thus, three primary sections were created: Research
Question 1: What were the experiences of the youth who were involved in gangs in Boston in the late 1980’s through early 1990’s? Research Question 2: What were the turning points or events that caused gang-involved youth to either persist or desist from criminal and deviant behavior? Research Question 3: How did being in a gang influence the trajectory of a youth’s life? From these three primary categories, themes and sub-themes were developed using the subject’s audio-taped responses as well as interview notes to address the specific questions being asked.

**Sorting of the Data:** For this study, I chose not to utilize computer programs for the sorting and analysis of data. This was based in part on my lack of experience in the use of software data programs and my increased comfort level in having the data in front of me and analyzing it by hand. To accomplish this, all of the interview transcripts (in written form) were uploaded onto my computer. Files were created based on the themes identified within each of the three primary categories. I then focused on one theme at a time, reviewing the transcripts of all 30 subjects, excerpting and electronically moving quotes and statements related to the theme and placed them in the file. Interview notes pertinent to that particular theme were then added to the file. This excerpt document was then printed out and used to further analyze the data. This process brought together all subject statements and quotes specific to that particular theme, thereby creating one comprehensive thematic document. Having the themes organized in this manner allowed me to more accurately compare and contrast subject responses to the theme being analyzed.

**CORI Records:** To verify the accuracy of the information in the subject’s life-history narratives and life history calendars, I requested from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security’s Department of Criminal Justice Information Services (DCJIS) the Criminal Offender Record Information (CORI) for each of the 30 subjects. Upon receiving the
criminal record information for the subjects, I found that only 18 of the subjects had complete
criminal history records. A number of CORI’s revealed either no record of criminal history or
criminal histories with significant time periods not accounted for. It was at this point that I
recalled that some of the subjects had explained to me that they had their criminal histories
expunged or sealed within recent years. More specifically, 12 of the subjects appeared to have
had all or large portions of their criminal histories expunged or sealed. Examples of subjects with
partial criminal history records include Rodney, whose first entry is in 1986 and involves several
juvenile offenses. His criminal history then jumps in time to 2007 showing a motor vehicle
offense. Reggie’s criminal history reflects the same pattern. The first entry on his record is in
1984 and 1988 for juvenile offenses and then moves to 2014 showing a misdemeanor offense. In
both cases the subjects had shared with me that their records had been sealed.

To overcome this loss in quantitative information, I returned to the subjects’ Life History
Calendars and narratives, as well as my own personal knowledge of serious and violent incidents
to fill this gap in knowledge. For the seven subjects with no criminal history records, I found that
they had provided descriptions of a wide range of serious and violent crimes in which they had
been involved and their periods of incarceration. For example, Carlos openly discussed criminal
cases starting as a juvenile and involving firearm possession, non-fatal shootings, homicides, as
well as a serious adult case. Through my own professional knowledge, I was well aware of these
crimes. In a second example, Ryan discussed serious criminal cases involving firearm possession
and non-fatal shootings as a juvenile, young adult, and adult. He also provided information on
large periods of incarceration and supervision. However, I had no personal knowledge of the
incidents he described.
I followed this same process with the five subjects with partial criminal histories and was able to fill in the missing time periods with their different crimes and periods of incarceration. My initial concern that the lack of criminal history data would limit my ability to verify their life-history narratives and life experiences appeared to be unfounded. For many, the crimes they were involved in and the time they spent incarcerated directly reflected the information they provided in the LHC’s and responses to the interview questions, and played an important role in their accounts of desistance and persistence.

To verify the life-history narratives of the 18 subjects with full criminal histories, I compared the information provided in the LHC with their criminal histories. For the vast majority, their ability to recall criminal events from their juvenile years to adulthood was quite impressive. The chronology of the LHC information and criminal history information regarding serious crimes and periods of incarceration aligned in a surprisingly accurate manner, thus adding to the credibility of their life history experiences.

Only two of the subjects, Rob and Anthony, had criminal history incidents that they did not identify in their LHC’s. Both involved arrests for firearm possession. In Rob’s case, this is consistent with his overall performance in the study. While I did not consider him to be untruthful, I did find him to be somewhat hesitant in his responses and not totally forthright about his involvement in the gang culture. In Anthony’s case, I found him to be open and candid during the interview process, so it is quite possible that his omissions were inadvertent.

Laub and Sampson (2003) collected official criminal records as part of their quantitative analysis in their study of the Glueck men. They contend that while official data are limited to only those individuals who become involved in the criminal justice system, they capture serious offenses fairly well (p. 65). They also collected self-report data through their qualitative
interviews. This form of data collection, like all data collection methods, is flawed. But it also has its strengths, including capturing valuable information that is not available through other measures, understanding the circumstances surrounding illegal behavior, identifying the age at the beginning and end of criminal activity, and tracking patterns of offending over the life course (Mosher, Miethe, & Phillips, 2001, pp. 131-132).

Building on the work of Laub and Sampson (2003) and their use of both qualitative and quantitative methods for collecting data, the current study has comprehensively captured the full life experiences of the subjects in the study. From the structured analysis and identification of the street gang population of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, to the focused recruitment of some of its most credible and influential members, to the thorough pre-interview and in-depth interview process, I am confident that I have provided an honest and forthright account of the life history experiences of a group of serious and violent offenders from their adolescent years through their adult years.
IV. Experiences of Youth who were Involved in Gangs in Boston in the Late 1980’s through the Early 1990’s: Neighborhood, Family, and Education

The literature on youth gangs has been consistent over time in its findings that youth exposure to multiple risk factors during the early adolescent years is responsible in large part for youths’ entry into the gang life. Among the many risk factors that can negatively affect a youth’s life are the domains of neighborhood, family, and education. Thrasher (1927), in his study of gangs in Chicago during the 1920’s, found that deteriorating neighborhoods and poverty, inadequate family life, and an ineffective education were “the factors that make possible the freedom which leads to ganging” (p. 339). In his study of juvenile gang delinquency in Boston in the 1950’s, Miller (1958) determined that the underlying factors of neighborhood (e.g., disorganization in the actor’s physical and social environment), family (e.g., the emotional disturbance generated by a defective mother-child relationship), and school (e.g., education overtly disvalued among lower-class youth) were some of the factors that motivated youth to join the street corner group. More recently, Thornberry (1998) concluded that youth growing up in neighborhoods inundated with drugs and low levels of neighborhood integration, living in broken homes with little supervision, and having a low commitment to school were at an increased risk of gang involvement (pp. 154-157). This chapter explores the subject’s childhood and early adolescent experiences. It is intended to bring some understanding to the role that neighborhood, family, and education played in their upbringing and eventual transition into the gang life.
Neighborhood

The street gang culture that re-emerged in Boston in the late 1980’s was concentrated primarily in the five neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End. The group of former gang members and neighborhood street criminals in this study are evenly divided by neighborhood settings. Fifteen of the subjects grew up in residential areas, while the other fifteen grew up in housing projects. Understanding the early experiences of both groups during the late 1970’s – 1980’s is important because the “places” where they grew up were critical factors that influenced the pathway of their lives. While all of the subjects would eventually merge together to become a cohort of serious and violent offenders, their stories differ in various ways. Some of those growing up in residential neighborhoods experienced healthy childhoods, whereas others were not so fortunate. As for those living in housing projects, they all experienced high levels of poverty, crime, and isolation, but they also had positive experiences that influenced their lives. This general description of the neighborhoods in which the subjects were raised creates a starting point for understanding the neighborhood changes that took place in Boston and led to the re-emergence of the street gang culture in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s.

Background: Boston’s African American population nearly doubled in a single decade, rising from some 23,000 in 1940 to over 40,000 in 1950 (O’Connor, 2001). By the 1960’s, this significant increase forced many African American families to move beyond the confines of their traditional Roxbury boundaries and establish residence along borders of the formerly all-white neighborhoods of Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, Roslindale, and Hyde Park (2001). This expansion of the African American population in Boston manifested itself particularly in the Mattapan neighborhood, which had previously been the home to New England’s largest Jewish

The Neighborhood Experiences of Gang Members in Residential Settings: The late 1970’s and 1980’s in the mixed-use neighborhoods of Mattapan, Dorchester, and Jamaica Plain was a time of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic transition—and it was in this setting that the men in the current study grew up. Three gangs in the study represent the Mattapan section of Boston: the Warrior Clan, TS12, and the Blue Hill Bombers. The Warrior Clan is unique in that its membership was drawn from youth who grew up both in a project setting and a residential setting. Kyle was raised in the M Street Projects and recalls some of the negative experiences of that time.

I lived on Wilson Street most of my life. When I first moved into the projects in 1977, it was a predominantly white neighborhood and my father’s family lived there prior to us moving there. What I can remember is that it was that time during racism and the family that lived next door to me on Touchstone Street, they tried to burn my house down. They broke into the house and tried to burn it down. I can remember times where the white guys would ride around and ride by us and call us nigger and throw beer cans at us.

Just down the street in the residential area of the Warrior Clan turf, fellow gang members Ryan and David had much different perspectives of their neighborhood. Ryan described his neighborhood as being lower-middle class: “It wasn’t a poor neighborhood.” David remembers being young when his neighborhood transitioned from white to black. As he got older and the neighborhood stabilized, neighbors became close-knit and supportive. “It was a neighborhood that embraced everyone that grew up in the neighborhood, really family oriented.”
The development of the Warrior Clan is interesting and unique in that it combined youth who grew up in poor housing project settings as well as youth who grew up in a working-class residential environment. It could reasonably be assumed that these two groups of youth growing up in close proximity to one another and coming from different socio-economic backgrounds would make for natural rivals. However, as revealed in the next chapter, the coming together of these two youth groups would soon form a powerful and feared gang that would set the stage for the development of Boston’s gang culture.

During that time of transition, Mattapan also reflected a melting pot of other ethnic groups. Bobby (TS12) remembers this time in a positive way: “I grew up in the Mattapan and Morning Street area, it was multi-cultural, a lot of different ethnic groups were represented, Haitian and Jamaicans.” Bobby, like Ryan and David, also recalls his neighborhood as being stable, sociable, and friendly. “I remember that there were a lot of homeowners, specifically on my street. Everyone knew everyone. Store owners and business owners that knew who our parents were. We used to go to the neighborhood with notes for cigarettes. They’d give it to us, knowing that it was for our parents or allow us to play the numbers with just a note from loved ones. It was just a certain level of trust. People had a certain level of pride.”

This was not the case for Darryl (BH Bombers), who spoke with mixed emotions about the negative changes that took place in his Mattapan neighborhood during the early to mid-1980’s. He describes his neighborhood as once being the home of mostly African American working- and middle-class families, but then it changed, becoming one of poverty and crime. He remembers a lot families moving out of the neighborhood and others being pushed out. “Neighbors who called the police were run out of the neighborhood.” Eventually the neighborhood would become divided with gang families separating from non-gang families. “I
remember the dividing line was a telephone pole half-way down the street and the good kids would never come past it.”

The changing neighborhood conditions in Mattapan during this time were distinctive in that some neighborhoods were seeing the flight of the white population, some the continuing influx of Caribbean immigrants who were looking to establish themselves and build a better life, and in others the transition from working- and middle-class African American families to those that were poor and disorganized (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Shaw & McKay, 1942).

In the adjacent section of North Dorchester, some of these same changes were taking place. Ziggy (AC Rollers) grew up in the business/residential area located between Bowdoin Street and Fields Corner. “When I grew up there, it was white and black, it was mainly a white neighborhood, but it started changing. Basically, whites started moving out and blacks started moving in.” Ziggy recalls his childhood years as being positive. He felt safe in his neighborhood, and while he came from a poor family, he had lower- and middle-class friends who welcomed him into their home.

At the same time, neighborhoods in other parts of North Dorchester were experiencing more serious challenges, and were starting to show signs of succumbing to the pressures of crime and resident apathy. Rodney (GHB) grew up in a mixed-use neighborhood close to Roxbury. He remembers his neighborhood as being rough with people fighting, people being robbed, and a lot of drug selling. In looking back, Rodney never felt that his neighborhood was a cohesive place. “People looked out for their own, not others.”

Del (E Street Gangsters) grew up in the Jamaica Plain/Roxbury area. During the 1980’s his neighborhood experienced two major changes. The first involved the change in the racial and
ethnic composition of the neighborhood. “It was a community that was going through a transition where you had Irish flight and Italian flight leaving the neighborhood with a strong Latino presence replacing it. The community was shifting and not knowing what that shift and what impact that was going to have on the community.”

The second change involved an economic shift that would significantly affect the community. Del recounted that he grew up in a time when the elevated train system (the EL) existed in Boston. The trains brought in plenty of shoppers for the local businesses and provided economic stability for the neighborhood. Del explained that when the elevated train system was torn down around 1987, it had a devastating effect on businesses, which began shutting down because people were no longer coming into the neighborhood. Del believed that as a result of the neighborhood losing its economic base, the door was opened for the illegal drug trade to replace the businesses, providing Latino immigrants with a way to make money.

Of all the residential neighborhoods described to this point, it would be the Grove Hall area located on the Roxbury/North Dorchester border that was the most troubled. Comprised of commercial businesses, residential homes, and apartment buildings, this neighborhood could be considered the geographic center point of the gang culture that developed in Boston during the late 1980’s. This is where Joseph (GHB) grew up. His description of the neighborhood captures the essence of full disorganization and deterioration. “It was drug infested, you would see people in the alleyways shooting dope, and when you went into the buildings you would see people in the hallways laid out from drugs and you would have to step over them.” Even though Joseph was only 12 or 13 years old, he remembers that, “For me that was life.”

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During the late 1970’s and into the 1980’s, the residential neighborhoods of Mattapan, Dorchester, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain went through different stages of racial, ethnic, and socio-economic change. Accompanying these dynamic changes in neighborhood structure were issues of crime. Crime is always a challenge in inner-city neighborhoods. By the 1980’s, neighborhood drug cultures were well established in Mattapan, Dorchester, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain. In the residential neighborhoods where Joseph, Rodney, and Del grew up, drugs, street crime, and public disorder had taken control of the neighborhood. This would prove to be disastrous in two ways.

First, from a community perspective, it would, for all intents and purposes, put out of reach the desired and sought-after goal of individuals and families being able to live in neighborhoods relatively free from the threat of crime (Pattillo, 1998; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Second, from an individual perspective, it would provide the motivation for the youth growing up in these areas to become involved in criminal and deviant behavior. Shon (A Street Assassins) exemplifies this connection between neighborhood disorganization and criminal/deviant behavior. Shon described his North Dorchester neighborhood as being filled with drugs and crime when he was growing up. When he was asked how his surroundings affected his behavior, he stated, “It taught me how to hustle, it definitely taught me how to hustle.” Hustling in this case meant selling drugs, and by age 12, Shon was working his way up the ladder of the drug trade from being lookout, then holding drugs, and finally selling drugs.

In Mattapan and the North Dorchester area of Fields Corner and Bowdoin, this process of neighborhood disorganization was not as advanced, but they too would eventually reach this same state of disorder. Ryan, David, and Bobby (TS12) all described their neighborhoods in terms of being working-class, tight-knit, and having a strong support network with other
neighborhood institutions. Yet, underlying this façade of neighborhood solidarity were the beginnings of crime and violence that would soon come to dominate these neighborhoods. Ryan, in looking back, states he was first exposed to gang lifestyle while he was still in elementary school. “There was a group of older guys, much, much older guys that called their self MSL. To me, that was the first signs of gang activity. Twenty/thirty guys all hanging together, smoking marijuana, drinking, fighting, the police being called. That’s what I saw.” David was older than Ryan by about four years and he saw even more. “The MSL guys were doing stickups, selling drugs, getting to the money. That’s what started us to gravitate to the negativity, that was the attraction.”

Bobby was nine or ten when both he and his neighborhood began to change. The same stores where neighborhood youth used to go to get cigarettes and play the numbers for their parents were now safe havens for selling drugs. “I remember being in the Sub Shop on Blue Hill Ave, when they used to have the video games in there. I used to have a goose jacket and the guys selling out the street used to keep their drugs on me in different pockets. At the end of the night they used to pay me in food stamps, never cash.”

With the loss of many working-class families, Darryl’s neighborhood was reaching the breaking point in retaining any semblance of order. “By this time I was on the streets, my friends were on the streets, parents, uncles, and aunts were on the street, so it was becoming normal for kids to be raised on the streets, there was no other way for them.”

The disorganization perspective suggests that neighborhoods consisting of mixed-use configuration and exhibiting varying conditions of socio-economic stress, change in population composition, and dilapidation are prone to the loss of neighborhood social control and the increase in youth crime and deviance (Stark, 1987). The concept of collective efficacy, on the
other hand, argues that when residents come together and establish bonds of trust and solidarity they can mediate the effects of community structure variables including the high prevalence of crime and violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Simons, Simons, Burt, Brody, & Cutrona, 2005). Key to this proposition is understanding that “neighborhoods vary in their capacity to achieve common goals” (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997, p. 919). It is well established that gangs often form from unsupervised, spontaneous play groups (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Thrasher, 1927). When the community is unable to properly supervise and control the group-level dynamics of their youth, higher levels of delinquency and crime will inevitably follow (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1942). This appears to be the case in the Mattapan and Fields Corner/Bowdoin neighborhoods, where the Warrior Clan, TS12, the Blue Hill Bombers, and the AC Rollers would soon form. The inability of the residents of those communities to muster the required levels of collective efficacy that could lead to positive change would be only one of many factors that would set in motion the re-emergence of the gang culture.

**Growing up in the Housing Project:** The 1950’s also saw the construction of a series of public housing developments in Boston’s neighborhoods to alleviate the growing population of poor and low-income families. Originally conceived to “reduce both demographic pressures and social tension,” this urban experiment, over time, resulted in the creation of “socially isolated and racially segregated projects” that were ultimately deemed to be “unmitigated disasters” (O’Connor, 2001, pp. 215-216).

For the subjects growing up in Boston’s housing projects during this time, life was more clearly defined than those of their counterparts who were raised in residential settings. The projects were the home to the city’s disadvantaged minority population. Poverty, crime, and
isolation were the prevailing state of life and varied little across the different housing projects where gangs developed. Subject narratives for those growing up in the projects followed three thematic paths including the harshness of the environment, high levels of crime, and the supervision and discipline of young people.

I Grew Up in a Rough Neighborhood: Edward (T’s Disciples) defined the distressing nature of his neighborhood in terms of poverty. “It was a rough neighborhood. A project in the 70’s was not the best place to be living. The folks weren’t doing well. It kind of looked like a scene out of the TV show Good Times in terms of just what the environment looked like. A lot of parents not working, that was the scene.”

James (37th Street) described his neighborhood in terms of being a rugged place where knowing how to protect yourself was an important component of everyday neighborhood life. “One thing you learned in 37th Street was how to survive. Growing up you learn to fight. I was tough, but not a bully. I was a good fighter, because you had to fight to earn respect.”

Cedric (LA Boys) saw the grim nature of his neighborhood through the lens of crime. “You needed to be tough to survive project life,” and “drugs and violence were a part of everyday life.”

Finally, for Tyrell (Village Gang), the physical environment where he grew up during the 1980’s brought back memories of fear. Once the home to returning war veterans and their families during the 1950’s, the Village Housing Project over the next 20 years would deteriorate to the point where it became “largely uninhabitable due to crime, a high number of dilapidated and closed units, a concentration of at-risk tenants, and a lack of basic amenities” (Institute for International Urban Development, 2008: 2). By the 1980’s it was considered to be “the most unsanitary housing project in the city” (2). Tyrell recalled, “Physically, I remember it being a lot
of tall, brick buildings that were boarded up, trash everywhere, the smell of piss in the hallways. And crime wise, it was rampant with drugs and violence. I clearly remember being scared to be in the hallways.”

There Was a Lot of Crime: With regard to crime, all of the subjects growing up in the projects during the late 1970’s through 1980’s talked about the embeddedness of crime, and specifically drugs, within their neighborhoods. Paul (37th Street) best captures the ominous nature of crime in the projects. “Lots of drugs, from the old side to the new side, tricks and pimps. Anything you thought could be hustled on the outside was inside the projects. Anything you think negative existed, it existed in the projects.”

I Was Disciplined: When the subjects were asked to describe a positive aspect of their neighborhood, they were surprisingly consistent in their responses, even though they were raised in different housing projects. Speaking about his neighborhood, Edward (T’s Disciples) stated,

Very tight knit, a lot of unity. It was a neighborhood where somebody else’s parent could hit you and your mother wouldn’t get mad because if they hit you it was probably something you was out of line for and needed to get hit for. So that part of it kind of gave an element of safety where you can let kids go out and the neighborhood would kind of watch out for them, you don’t have to, as a parent, be out there monitoring them each minute, the neighborhood would kind of look out for them.

James’ recollections are almost identical in describing this same idea of community parenting. “My parents were raising me, but other parents raised me, if you did something wrong, they were allowed to put their hands on you. Speaking for myself, my neighborhood, it was a community, we protected each other.”

Mike (Drexler Park Ballers) saw the strength of the neighborhood in its close family ties.
“It was truly about family. I remember that if you did something on one side of the projects you might have got your butt whooped from somebody’s parent on that side and by the time you got home, your mother knew about it and you got your butt whooped again. It really did happen that way.”

In the housing projects, the concept of collective efficacy reflected a much different type of community social control where adults were given the informal authority to intervene in delinquent behavior and physically discipline children who were not their own (Simons et al., 2005). Patton (2014) provides some perspective to this cultural practice. She contends that corporal punishment has strong roots in the African American culture going back to the days of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Based on the brutality of those experiences, the long-held belief among some African American parents is that physical punishment is required to offset the potential abuses of white society. Thus, in some community settings, the idea that “a good whooping” is a show of love rather that abuse comes with the hope that it will keep the child in line and safe from the wrath of the police or the prison system (Patton, 2014).

Addressing this issue from a different perspective, Jones (2007) submits that in some African American communities, the interconnectedness among residents can lead to informal kinship relationships where non-blood relatives are brought into the family structure. She suggests that in these instances, adults adopt the titles of “uncle” or “aunt” and they can actively take on the role of caregiver or disciplinarian (p. 130). Elders in the community may also come under this umbrella of extended family and they too may “accept the responsibility for disciplining children when they are not under the supervision of their parents” (pp. 130-131). Carried over into the context of the neighborhood, these cultural practices in many ways captures the African saying of, “It takes a village to raise a child.”
As stated earlier, this cohort of former gang members is evenly divided in their early experiences with regard to neighborhood environment, with 15 growing up in residential settings and 15 growing up in project settings. Their backgrounds differed to varying degrees in that some subjects were raised in working class environments while others knew only poverty. Despite their differences, all of their neighborhoods were moving in a downward direction of physical and social disorder and increasing crime. Of interest here is the fact that while drug crime was a rampant problem, gun violence had not yet entered the picture in neither the residential nor project settings. According to Rob (Warrior Clan associate), “The violence was, I mean, it wasn’t out of control. Violence I think in any urban setting is always going to be there. I think even before the ’80’s it was there. I just don’t think it was as bad as when guns came into play in the later ’80’s.” This perspective is also shared by James: “Very rarely was there gunplay when I grew up. If there was, that was like breaking news.”

The time period of the late 1970’s through early 1980’s preceded the arrival of crack cocaine and the proliferation of firearms that, within the near future, would ravage these same neighborhoods. These changes would begin in the mid-1980’s with the arrival of several national drug gangs and later with the re-emergence of street gangs.

The Change in Neighborhood Dynamics: In 1984, the BPD began monitoring the activities of two drug gangs—one from Detroit and the other from New York—that had established roots in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, and the South End. By 1985, a series of violent confrontations that appeared to be associated with these groups took place as they battled to control the drug trade and territory. The group from Detroit set up shop in Dorchester’s Village Housing Project and recruited residents into their drug distribution organization. Once in place, they took control of the projects and then expanded into parts of
Roxbury and the South End. Tyrell (Village Gang) remembers the Detroit Boys: “They had a big influence on our neighborhood. When I was growing up the “D Boys” controlled the drug trade in the Village and there was an alliance between us. That was in the mid-1980’s, but by the late 1980’s, the Detroit Boys had faded out.”

In 1986, the emergence of criminally organized Jamaican Posses in the Mattapan neighborhood were thought to be linked with high levels of firearm violence. BPD intelligence indicated that by 1987, there were 11 Posses involved in drug trafficking and other criminal activities in Boston (see Commonwealth versus Erroll Wolcott, 1990). Of greater concern was their propensity for fierce levels of retaliatory and targeted violence. According to Gus (Warrior Clan), “We kept our neighborhood safe from anyone trying to come in. When we found out that the Jamaican Posses had a house in the neighborhood they were selling out of, that was a problem. Later, they killed one of our guys, that’s when the violence started.”

Gus’ statement reflects the important role that threat plays in the origin of the gang (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996). In this case, the concept of “threat” took two forms. First, the Jamaican Posses were attempting to send a clear message that they were planning to control the area drug trade by setting up a drug house in the neighborhood. Second, by taking the life of one of their own, the Jamaican Posses’ were calling out Gus and his friends to see if and how they would respond. As we will see in the next chapter, this incident served as a defining moment for the future Warrior Clan.13

In the summer of 1987, Darryl Whiting and his crew began their takeover of the Drexler Park Housing Project. Originally from Queens, New York, Whiting was an accomplished street

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13 As Papachristos (2009) suggests, “[d]isputes often become intrinsically collective because the group regards an offense against a member as an offense against all, a sentiment that fosters in-group cohesion as a function of confronting external threats” (p. 81). See also Hughes, 1994.
criminal who was driven out of the neighborhoods of New York City by the relentless pressure of the NYPD (Kahn, 2011). Whiting saw Boston as an open territory ready to be taken. His well-organized group was involved in the sale of heroin and cocaine and carried out a number of shootings and homicides as they took control of the drug trade in the housing development.

Information gathered by the BPD suggested that Whiting and his group, also known as the “New York Boys,” had established a number of residences both inside and outside of the projects that were used to store and distribute drugs. The information also indicated that most of the drugs entering the projects originated in New York and were brought in by both New York and Boston individuals.

Whiting’s group was also associated with multiple shootings and homicides in Drexler Park. Carlos (Drexler Park Ballers) remembers Whiting coming into the neighborhood. “I was only 10 or 11, Drexler Park was known for dope (heroin). They came in with the coke and crack. That was actually the introduction into the neighborhood, so they didn’t take over. They found a space where supply and demand were at, and them being adults they fit right in.” Carlos’ deduction of the situation makes good sense. By introducing crack cocaine into the neighborhood, Whiting was creating a whole new drug market that would flourish over the next several years. Additionally, Whiting and his crew were not young kids; they were older and more representative of an adult population. Part of Whiting’s plan to control the drug trade involved taking advantage of single women with children. His scheme was to offer them drugs and/or money in return for using their apartments to run his drug operation (Kahn, 2011). In addition to controlling the interior of the projects, he also made his presence known on the streets bordering the projects and the adjacent neighborhoods, thus becoming part of the neighborhood framework and solidifying his control of the drug trade.
Over the next several years, the BPD worked in conjunction with other local, state, and federal agencies to target each of these groups for arrest and prosecution. This intensive effort resulted in numerous arrests and indictments of drug gang members and ultimately led to the dismantling of each of these criminal groups. As the presence and impact of these drug organizations declined, a void was created that would eventually be filled by a small, but violent cohort of street gang members in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End.

**Case Study: Mike.** Mike (Drexler Park Ballers) grew up in the projects in Roxbury. His story is important in that he is able to provide a thoughtful and detailed account of the dramatic changes that took place in his neighborhood during the late 1970’s and 1980’s. His words carried with them the emotions of pain, anger, and disappointment as he described the devastating events that would claim his neighborhood and its residents during that time period. His depiction of that time is significant in that it covers much of what this study seeks to explore as it relates to the roles that neighborhood, family, and education played in the re-emergence of the street gang culture in Boston. Through Mike’s narrative we come away with a better understanding of the destructive factors that led to the breakdown not only of Drexler Park, but also of many neighborhoods in Boston’s minority communities during the mid to late 1980’s (see Venkatesh, 1996).

Even though Mike grew up in a poor neighborhood with more than its share of crime and violence, there still existed a measure of informal social control and cohesion among its residents. His memories of that time describe the positive aspects of his life:

I grew up in Roxbury in Drexler Park. I didn’t know at the time, but it was a poor housing development. Growing up there, at one time it was what it was meant to be, it
was Drexler Park. It had lots of trees and greenery, and it was a very community-oriented neighborhood. Most of the people living in the projects were poor, but it was also working class. My dad worked at a pretty good job. As we got older my mom also held a job, so we were a working class family. As kids, my friends and I stayed at each other’s house, we ate over each other’s house, we had a lot of fun in the neighborhood. We didn’t realize we were poor in comparison to people in the suburbs, because there was a sense of community. I remember the summer things, hanging out late and not having to worry about somebody coming around and shooting up the neighborhood. It was a fun place to be.

In the mid-1980’s, this picture would rapidly start to change. With the arrival of Darryl Whiting, the introduction of crack cocaine, and the re-emergence of the street gang culture, the structure and functionality of the community and family would start to deteriorate. Within a short time, this milieu would come to earn the reputation as being one of the most depraved and dysfunctional neighborhoods in the entire city. Mike describes the downfall of his neighborhood:

As the ‘80’s started to evolve, it felt like that sense of community started to sort of fray a little bit, in fact a lot. That sense of family and looking after each other, knowing each other, knowing what everybody was up to, knowing their families, knowing everybody’s little sister, that stuff started to fray, society was changing. Crack was introduced and I think it had a real impact on our community as it did on a lot of other communities. The neighborhood started to change, it definitely started to change. When we were kids in the 70’s and 80’s I remember we could go to the local community center and Mr. Butler would take care of us all day. We’d eat there, we played sports there, we laugh, we joke, we stayed there all day and everybody went there. That started to dissipate. I think the
drugs played a big role in it because poverty had always been there, poverty wasn’t new, I think what was new was the decaying of whole families and I think those families were really starting to break up when crack was introduced. I saw what crack was able to do that heroin wasn’t able to do. I mean heroin wasn’t new, but crack was new. Crack really tore at the fabric of the neighborhood because either you were a kid who looked at it as an economy, a way to make money or you were using it and in many cases I saw it destroy families, mother, daughters, sons going to jail, sons strung out on it, it did a job, it did a number on that housing project.

Mike also believed that Darryl Whiting, as well as the Detroit Boys, and the Jamaican Posses, all played an important role in transforming Boston’s neighborhoods.

I think those groups had a huge impact in the neighborhoods where they took hold. When the New York Boys came into Drexler Park, it was clear that the community would never be the same. I mean it literally became a place that parents didn’t let their kids outside, it wasn’t safe anymore because not only was a lot of drugs floating around, there was families, women, who basically gave their lives away to these drug dealers. It was bad. And on the flip side to that was the gang kids saw an opportunity too, they’re watching this happen and they’re like well, we got to make some money out of this too and that created conflict with the New York Boys and the local gang. This gave the gang a reason to not only hustle (sell drugs), but to also stock up on guns. It led to shootouts all the time between the gang and the New York Boys. Add to that other gang rivalries with the LA Boys, C Street Crew, and the Village Gang. The Village Gang was connected to the Detroit Boys and the Detroit Boys had the BBoys, and LA Boys, and the South End sewed up, and the close proximity to us didn’t do us any good. I remember that by the
late 1980’s we literally had first cousins shooting at each other, like your mother lives in the Village projects, his mother live in Drexler Park, they’re sisters and you guys are shooting at each other, that’s how bad it was.

Mike’s memories of his childhood through early adult years in many ways capture the changes that were taking place in many of Boston’s inner-city neighborhoods during the 1980’s. The early part of the decade was a time of racial and ethnic change, with poor and lower middle-class African American and Hispanic families establishing roots and stability in some residential neighborhoods. Those living in housing projects were more poverty-stricken, with the neighborhood reflecting an intergenerational homogeneous structure of African American families with strong relationships. Both settings were challenged by drug crime, but were void of firearm violence for the most part. This would change starting in the mid-1980’s with the arrival of national drug gangs who were not afraid to use violence to assert their control over the neighborhoods and residents. The lucrative drug organizations they established captured the attention of many of the youth who were just reaching adolescence. This group of young men and future gang members watched and learned, and some started “cutting their teeth” in the drug game. Before long, the opening they were waiting for occurred, and they took full advantage of it. By the late 1980’s there was little difference between residential neighborhoods and the projects. Both were now suffering from the ruinous effects of crack, gangs, and guns, just as Mike’s account had depicted.

**Family**

Criminology has traditionally focused on the adolescent years to study criminal and deviant behavior. Sampson and Laub (1993) suggest this is incomplete: “[B]y concentrating on
the teenage years, sociological perspectives on crime have thus failed to address the life-span implications of childhood behavior” (6). Life course criminology stresses the importance of understanding not only the adolescent experiences, but more importantly, the childhood and adult experiences as well. Only by studying the entire life-span can we comprehensively understand the “link between early childhood behaviors and later adult outcomes” (6).

The family represents one of the most important social institutions in society, especially when it comes to the prevention of crime and delinquency (Sykes & Cullen, 1992). Parents are responsible for socializing their children, teaching them the rules of proper behavior in public settings, and taking corrective action when those rules are broken (Curry & Decker, 1998).

This section explores the role of family and parenting and its effect on the childhood and early adolescent years of the former gang members in this study. To analyze this process, multiple subject narratives were utilized to examine the wide range of parenting behaviors that took place among this group. The role of family is defined in two primary categories: family disruption and two-parent households.

**Family Disruption:** Family disruption was defined as “one or both parents absent because of divorce, separation, desertion, or death” (Sampson & Laub, 1993, p. 71). This category represents the majority of the sample and is further divided into several sub-sections that capture the specific type of disruption that took place. Referenced in the analysis are several theoretical perspectives that have focused on the link between family and delinquency. My intent was not to apply these theories as an explanation of gang involvement, but to provide a framework for discussion on the structure and parent-child interactions that may have affected the lives of the subjects.
A total of 24 of the 30 subjects fit the criteria for family disruption. Three categories were developed to distinguish the different levels and degrees of disruption including: (1) the presence of a strong mother, but no father; (2) the inability of one or both parents to properly raise their child due to alcohol and/or drug addiction; and (3) one or both parents who were offenders.

**My Mother Raised Me:** The largest category of family disruption involves 19 subjects who had no father figure in their lives. Eleven of these subjects described their mothers as being a strong parental presence in their life.

Darryl (BH Bombers) was raised by his mother. “My mother was West Indian, she had rules, she was strict, and she worked hard and I have a good relationship with her.” Darryl followed those rules until about age 12 and then he was in the streets. “My mother didn’t know what I was doing outside unless someone told her. My mother worked damn near all day to take care of our house, pay the mortgage, and make sure there was food on the table. A lot of us were doing shit our parents didn’t know.” Darryl did not consider his father to be part of his life growing up, “not like a father should be.” Bobby’s (TS12) experiences reflect this same situation. “I didn’t know my father, I remember sometimes only seeing my mother on weekends, and I know that was the case for a lot of my friends. She was a good woman, she worked all week, on Sundays, church all day. Sunday dinner was sometimes the only time we were together.” David (Warrior Clan) was raised by his mother and aunts. “My mother had rules for the house, it was a strict environment. I was raised by strong women, with strong family values and there were strong extended family relations. My mother was great, she was my best friend.” David’s family suffered from financial problems. “My mother had to work a lot and this allowed me to have a lot of free time.” For David, not having a father to guide him left a void in his life and it still bothers him to this day. “I never had one, you know, and that hurts me.” Lastly, Shon
(A Street Assassins) described the dysfunction of his childhood. “My mother and father split up when I was like six or seven, he was abusive.” Shon explained that his mother worked at an insurance company during the day and a convenience store at night, leaving him and his brother home alone at night. “We didn’t have no supervision because my mother just figured that my brother was going to take care of me and he wasn’t able to, so we did what we wanted.”

The concept of meaningful attachment between parent and child can be defined as involving affection, love, respect, open communication, and encouragement, and when established, can impact delinquent and criminal behavior. There is no question, based on my interviews with the subjects that not having a father created an emptiness in their lives and it was hurtful. It was also clear that Darryl, Bobby, David, Shon and others in this category had a strong attachment to their mothers. They loved and respected their mothers and did not want to hurt them. While their mothers tried to implement the proper levels of supervision and discipline, it appears that the quality and quantity of supervision and follow-through was not effective enough to offset the outside influences of the street and criminal and deviant behavior (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Hirschi, 1969; Osgood et al., 1996; Rankin & Kern, 1994).

**My Parents Had Problems:** The second category of interest within family disruption involves seven subjects whose parent(s) suffered from alcohol and/or drug addiction. Because of these parents’ overall inability to properly parent their children, often resulting in neglect or abuse, grandparents and other relatives, as well as state systems, had to intervene.

Carlos and Tony grew up in the Drexler Park Housing Development and were gang leaders. Their stories are similar in that neither had any parental figures in their lives during childhood and adolescence. According to Carlos, “I grew up with my grandparents and two sisters. My mom was a dope fiend. My father was a dope fiend. I was raised by my grandparents
until my grandmother died when I was six and then my grandfather took over until he died when I was 16.” Carlos recalls that his grandmother was very strict and she had a positive influence on his life. On the other hand, his grandfather was less strict and by this time he was “getting pulled to the streets and the gang.” Carlos reunited with his mother for a brief time in his late teens. “My mom was handicapped by this time, she lost her leg as a result of her heroin addiction.”

Tony states that his mother was an alcoholic and he had no father in his life. He lived with his grandmother and then his uncle. Tony explained that his uncle was strict and he didn’t like the rules so he moved out. “I was 15, I lived in rooming houses and with girls, I was on my own.” Today, Tony has re-established his relationship with his mother, who is doing better and they talk every day.

Kyle (Warrior Clan) also faced significant family challenges during his early years. “Both my parents were alcoholics and heroin addicts. They weren’t together and it had a huge impact on my life both negative and positive.” Kyle’s parents were open and honest with him and they talked to him about their addictions at an early age so he was able to understand what they were going through. “Instead of judging them and being angry at them, I took what they were going through as much as I could, and tried to do positive things to let them know that their lives were not affecting mine.”

But Kyle’s parents’ addiction issues did affect him. While he was convinced that his parents loved him, there was still a void in his life that left him seeking more from them, particularly from his father. “My father came around and we always had a good time with each other. We didn’t go to football, we didn’t play basketball, but he gave me tools on how to handle life.”
Kyle was aware that his situation was different from those of the other four members of the Warrior Clan from Mattapan who participated in this study, many of whom came from broken homes. “My family situation was different, you know, coming from Mattapan and dealing with parents that were drug addicted, that was a Roxbury thing, and my other friends didn’t have that problem.” This term, “Roxbury thing” is a theme that came up several times during interviews with Warrior Clan members. Kyle’s use of the term indicates that he was clearly self-aware and maybe even embarrassed that his parents were heroin addicts. The connotation (real or perceived) is that parents who are drug addicts are much more synonymous with the Roxbury section of Boston, rather than in Mattapan, where this was a rare occurrence.

At the core of this study is the attempt to better understand how early childhood experiences affect the individual over the life course. Andy’s (GHB) story is important in this regard as it underscores the resilient nature of young people and their ability to not only survive in the harshest of conditions, but to ultimately succeed in a world where the odds are heavily stacked against them. Andy grew up in the Talbot Projects in Dorchester. He remembers it being a very rough place. “It was the projects, I remember crimes being committed, armed robberies, drugs, people breaking into your house. It was also a dirty place, you could smell the urine in the hallways.” Andy’s mother was a heroin addict and his recollections begin before he was even 10 years old.

I remember on one occasion I was sleeping and I woke up. I went into the kitchen and I saw her at the table with a needle in her arm and a tourniquet around her arm. I thought she was dead, I ran to my room crying. I also remember witnessing my mother being physically abused by her partners. She would take me with her to get her drugs, I knew I was in places I should not be. I remember being left alone in the house, for hours, if not
days. It was pretty tough growing up with no food in the fridge. I think my mom loved me, but she also abused me. I remember getting caught playing with matches at home and she found out. My punishment was she put my hands over the stove, I guess to teach me a lesson not to play with matches. So, I endured a lot of physical abuse, emotional abuse, being neglected, you know.

By age 10, Andy was in the custody of DSS and was placed in a number of different foster homes. At age 12, he was eventually placed in one foster home where he remained for the next four years. At age 15, Andy found out through his foster parents that his mother had been murdered. She had apparently been stabbed to death by a junkie near the Boston City Hospital. By age 16, Andy’s life was starting to change. Living in a foster home was becoming more difficult and he was getting pulled to the streets. Andy’s initiation into the gang started when he was at Dorset High School and he met Joseph, who was one of the leaders of the GHB. His entry into the gang life was different from most of the other subjects in that he was an outsider who was brought into the gang by an insider. As Andy and Joseph’s friendship became stronger, Andy asked Joseph if he could move in with him. At that time, Joseph was dealing with his own personal issues of having a mother who was drug-addicted, but in spite of this, Joseph took Andy in and became like a brother to him. Having no real roots in the community, and having no family relationships to fall back on, Andy’s identity with and commitment to the gang grew strong. They were now the family he never had and he would stay connected to them for the next 11 years, before starting his journey to conventional life.

The absence of one or both parents, combined with parental substance abuse and addiction, had devastating effects for some of the subjects. The ramifications of parental neglect, abuse, and the lack of emotional attachment left many of the subjects seeking acceptance
elsewhere. For Tony, it was the gang. “Family wise, nobody really cared about me, I joined the
gang because we was like a big family, we was there for each other.” Tony’s reflection on his
adolescent years is important, and clarifies that for some of the subjects, the gang served as a
“family-like organization” that provided a means of survival and support, as well as a sense of
belonging, filling the emotional void that existed in each of them (Curry & Decker, 1998, p. 41).

**My Parent(s) Were Involved in Crime:** The final category of family disruption involves
parents who were involved in crime. Six of the subjects in the study grew up in situations where
one or both of their parents were offenders. Eric (Pack Posse) was raised by his grandmother,
who was also a drug dealer who sold marijuana in the neighborhood, “I was protected,
everybody knew me as the grandson of - - - -.” He stated that his mother and father were great
and he loved them, but they were not together. He described them as “street oriented,” adding, “I
used to tell them everything I did from fights to shootings, everything criminal. I didn’t want
them to get caught on the streets without knowing. My father taught me the rules of the street.”
Ziggy’s (AC Rollers) father was a drug dealer in the neighborhood. Shon’s (A Street Assassins)
father was a drug dealer and pimp. Anthony’s (BBoys) mother was a heroin addict and robbed
banks. But it is Joseph’s (GHB) story that highlights the notion of the role of family in
transmitting criminal behavior. One of the things his mother always said was, “If you’re going to
hustle, hustle. Don’t be a car thief. Don’t snatch pocketbooks. Don’t steal. If you’re going to sell
drugs, sell drugs.”

Joseph’s mother was the leader of a drug organization that was competing with a group
from New York for control of the neighborhood. According to Joseph, “that’s all she knew.
That’s the life she led. She showed me, that’s what I saw.” Joseph loved his mother and he knew
she was doing bad, but he saw her as a leader. “Back then when you were a kid, you kind of
looked up to crime, I don’t know why, but…” When I asked Joseph about his mother’s influence on him he stated, “what stuck with me was not what she did, but the way she did it. She considered selling drugs her job, it was probably a negative message, but I took what she said and how she did it and I stayed to it. My mother was a single woman, she was a leader that made money, she supported her kids, and she loved us.” By age 12, Joseph was a lookout for his mother’s drug gang and applying his own ingenuity to the street game. He was also a lookout for the opposition from New York, “when my mother wasn’t around and I wanted to make some money, because you get greedy, I used to be out there. If you got up early enough on Saturdays you could be the lookout boy and they would give you 20 or 25 dollars.” Joseph was 13 years old when his mother became addicted to crack and she could no longer take care of him. “My mother didn’t give me money any more, I needed to get money.” Joseph and his friends started to assert themselves, moving into the local drug trade and setting the foundation for GHB, which would become one of the more notorious gangs in the city in the late 1980’s.

For Joseph and the others in this category, their early socialization into the street life by their parent(s) would prepare them well for the transition into the gang culture and the criminal lifestyle that would follow. For this group, their street socialization was deeply embedded. This would present significant challenges for them as they reached adulthood and attempted to transition out of the gang and into a more conforming lifestyle.

**Two-Parent Households:** Not all of the subjects grew up in disrupted households. Six of the subjects in the study grew up in two-parent households that exhibited all the strengths of what a family should be. This should not be considered unusual. Sanchez-Jankowski (1991) studied gangs in three cities, including Boston. In his analysis he found that, “There were as
many gang members from homes where the nuclear family was intact as there were from families where the father was absent” (pp. 39-40).

James (37th Street) described his parents as being firm, but not overly strict, and they both administered discipline. “My father worked all the time, he was a good athlete, and he always had time for me and my brothers and sister. My mother was a good woman, she worked and she ran the house.” Mike (Drexler Park Ballers) stated that both his parents were hard working and he had a big loving family. “I didn’t know I lived in the projects, my house was immaculate, I never needed anything, I was never hungry.” Mike went on to explain that there was a high level of supervision in the house, his father disciplined the boys and his mother disciplined the girls. He also recalled that his parents got along and have been married for 35 years.

Ryan (Warrior Clan) also had positive recollections of his childhood. “My childhood experiences were good, I did not have it rough. I want to raise my kids the same way my parents raised me.” Paul (37th Street) recounted having a great childhood with both of his parents in the household. “Two full-fledged parents at home. There was a high level of supervision at home and rules to follow.” As Paul recalled his childhood years, it was clear that he respected and looked up to his parents. “My father was beautiful, my hero, and my mother, she kept us in line, she was strong.” During the interview, Paul hesitated briefly, shaking his head, “Anybody learning about my life, they would be like damn, how did he mess up, he had a great life?” Finally, Arthur (LA Boys) stated, "I knew right from wrong, there were rules of the house, supervision and discipline were present, I had a curfew. I snuck around my parents back doing wrong.” During the interview, Arthur stressed to me, “Write this down, my parents loved me and brought me up the right way.”
The subjects growing up in the two-parent households described here were socialized by parents who balanced control in such a manner as to promote conformity, while at the same time, resisting the temptations of crime and deviance. Their effective parenting styles combined support and nurturance with structure and discipline (Simons et al., 2005, p. 991). The parental relationships were strong among this group and this was reflected in the parent-child attachments that were formed. During their interviews, all of the subjects talked about the high level of love and affection that existed in their homes. But, despite their strong attachments to their parents and family, the excitement of the street life and the ability to make money in the illegal crack trade would overtake their attachment to their parents. Both Mike and Paul used almost the exact same terminology in describing this pull, “I just gravitated towards it, I couldn’t resist.”

The analysis of the family structure and its role in youth gang membership yielded no set pattern of behavior among Boston’s former gang members. For the subjects in this study, family experiences were diverse in both family structure and the level of parental attachment. Various types of family dysfunction marked the lives of many of the subjects and appeared to play a role in their gang membership. This was most evident for those subjects that came from households with parents who suffered from drug and alcohol addictions, or parents who were involved in crime. But the influence of gang membership was not just limited to this group, as those raised in two parent households characterized by high levels of supervision, discipline, and love, would also fall victim to the lure of the streets and the gang life.

Thus, for the purposes of this study, the dysfunctional family environment, in and of itself, cannot be the sole explanation for a youth’s gang involvement. Understanding gang membership is a more complex process that requires taking into account the multiple risk factors that affect a youth’s life. It is only from this compilation of risk factors that we are better
positioned to fully comprehend the influences that lead youth into the criminal and deviant lifestyle of the gang.

**Education**

It is difficult to separate the social institutions of family and school when discussing risk factors for gang membership, as their influences are intertwined and have a direct relationship with each other. Curry and Decker (1998) suggest that after family, school plays the most important role in influencing the lives of adolescents. Vigil (2002) believes that while both family and school inefficiencies can influence gang membership independently, when combined they create a seemingly hopeless situation for the adolescent. Sampson and Laub (1993) posit that children raised in environments involving family disruption face greater challenges in educational attainment. Some of the key measures used in their analysis of the Glueck men and the education-delinquency relationship included parental deviance, mother’s employment outside the home, and family size. Ultimately, Sampson and Laub (1993) found that the social processes of family and school played a critical role in influencing adolescent delinquency.

In retrospect, all of the subjects in the current study seemed to recognize the important role of education. But, as they reflected on their adolescent years, it became clear that regardless of their potential to do well in school or their actual successful performance in school, the social institution of school could not compete with that of the gang life. This is consistent with the gang literature (e.g., Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1999b; Padilla, 1992; Vigil, 1988), which asserts that, “The greater the level of a youth’s commitment to the gang, the lower his or her commitment to the cultural system represented by school participation” (Curry & Decker, 1998, p. 130). This perspective encompasses the underlying theme of this section.
Overall, the vast majority of subjects had attained at least a GED (see Figure 4). Only one subject, Joseph (GHB), did not complete high school. A second subject, Anthony (BBoys), was working towards his GED at the time of his interview. Nineteen subjects graduated from high school. Eight subjects received their GEDs while in prison. One subject obtained his GED in adulthood. Seven of the subjects had some level of a college education in their background. Three subjects earned associate degrees, one a bachelor’s degree, and three subjects earned master’s degrees.

![Education](image)

*Figure 4:* Subjects’ education levels.

**I Was a Good Student and Liked School:** For three of the subjects, school was important and they took pride in academics. Mike (Drexler Park Ballers) was an outstanding student and athlete. In high school, he was a National Honor Society student, and he went on to win a scholarship to a prestigious New England college. For Ryan (Warrior Clan) and some of his fellow gang members, education was important. “We were probably one of the only crews where you’d come around the block and we’re discussing report cards, education was huge to us.” Rob
(Warrior Clan associate) confirmed this, stating, “I loved school, I was an honor roll student in English, Art, Math, and Music.” But school would soon take a secondary role to the gang. Rob’s academic career would stop after high school; Ryan’s would be interrupted by incarceration. Only Mike would continue on to college before returning home and joining the gang.

I Had a Lot of Potential: Others showed great potential for school success, but family issues and the growing influence of the street life ultimately prevailed. Four subjects fit within this category. Chris (GHB) and John (A Street Assassins) share similar stories. In middle school, both were good students and excelled in sports. When it came time for high school, they were accepted to a respected parochial high school in the city. Chris made it to his senior year before problems at home and in school, as well as his growing involvement in gang activity, led to him dropping out. John states that he only made it a year: “I got kicked out, I just stopped going to school.” John transferred to the neighborhood public high school for a short time, but ultimately quit, stating that by this time, “I was pulled to the streets.” Within the next several years, Chris and John would be in prison, serving long sentences for gang-related crimes. Both received their GEDs while in prison and Chris has since earned his associate’s degree.

For three of the subjects, their early academic experiences were negative, but over time they began to realize their aptitude for learning. Shon (A Street Assassins) by his own account, was a good student and liked high school, but was also a gang member and involved in conflicts with rival gangs at the high school. “I was expelled every year for gun cases and being shot at.” He eventually graduated from high school and at age 37 received his master’s degree in sociology. Edward (T’s Disciples) showed great potential to succeed in the school environment. “I loved school and was a good student, but I had bad attendance and behavioral issues.” He recalls that in middle school, his grandmother and teachers urged him to take the test for one of
the city’s exam schools. “I wanted nothing to do with it, I did not want to go there, so I failed the test on purpose.” Edward did not make it through high school; however, while incarcerated, he obtained his GED at age 20. He states that he was smart and he knew he could take on college. “I just kept chipping away, two classes here, four classes there, two years off, but I finally got it done.” Edward was due to receive his master’s degree in public administration in December, 2015.

Del (E Street Gangsters) explains that he was a child when he moved to Boston from New York with his mother and brother. He was a bilingual student and in elementary school he was placed into classes with English-speaking students. Over time, he fell behind and was unable to keep up with the other kids. He states, “I only made it through middle school because I had good attendance and was an athlete.” Once in high school, Del only lasted four months before quitting school. He remembers at one point in high school he was confronted by his English teacher about his literacy. “She showed little concern for my situation and stated I was like many other Latino kids. I quit after that, I was embarrassed and I knew I was not going to get anywhere.” By this time in his life, Del was also in the street, selling drugs and making money. He earned his GED in prison while serving time for selling drugs; then, after his release from prison, he earned his bachelor’s degree, and eventually his master’s degree. His goal is a Ph.D.

The life-history narratives of Shon, Edward, and Del are further explored in the chapter on turning points, and for two of the three, the role of education would be an important component in their successful desistance from criminal and deviant behavior.

*My Gang Activity Affected School:* Nine subjects reported that gang activity and crime were part of their school experiences. Maurice (C Street Crew) was arrested in high school for selling crack cocaine. “The school zone law was just enacted and I was prosecuted under the
Maurice received a mandatory sentence to state prison where he earned his GED. Bobby (TS12), while in high school, became involved in a conflict with an adversary after being disrespected. “I remember leaving the school while I was still in gym class, going to get a gun and coming back and shooting at him.” Bobby was arrested and incarcerated for the incident. Darryl’s (BH Bombers) story is similar to Bobby’s, but he had support while incarcerated. “I liked school and I was smart, but I got arrested with a gun and was in DYS custody. In DYS my tracker helped me graduate, I told him that it was important I graduate from high school.” Finally, for Arthur (LA Boys), his street gang activity and conflicts carried over into the school setting. In the 10th grade, his friend was shot at school. When questioned by the police about the incident, he refused to cooperate, resulting in his transfer to an alternative school for safety reasons.

Decker and Van Winkle (1996), in their study of St. Louis gang members, investigated the issue of gang members controlling the school environment. They found no evidence that gangs controlled the schools they attended. This current study reflects those same findings, with one interesting and dissenting account. During the interviews of Warrior Clan members, four of the five referred to their high school as “Warrior High School.” When I asked David to explain this, he stated that the Warrior Clan was a strong presence in the high school; there were gang fights, and they victimized many students. While David’s statement was not in-depth and not corroborated by other Warrior Clan members, I do not question the validity of his recollections. The school activities he describes are completely consistent with the street activities of the

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15 DYS is the juvenile justice agency for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. See www.mass.gov/eohhs/gov/departments/dys/
Warrior Clan and their city-wide reputation of being physically aggressive and strong-armed in their interactions with youth in the neighborhoods. In this case, it was more likely than not that they did exert their control within the school setting, especially in their victimization of other students. How far this control extended is unknown. However, based on Ryan’s statement that Warrior Clan members actually went to school and graduated (with four members of the gang independently referring to their high school as “Warrior High School,”) and David’s specific description of their school-based gang activities, an argument could be made that the Warrior Clan did have a controlling presence in their high school. In that this was the only example offered in the study of a gang having a controlling presence in the school environment, this would suggest an exception to the findings of Decker and Van Winkle (1996) in their study of St. Louis gang members.

The analysis of this group of former gang members revealed no clear pattern of behavior with regard to their educational experiences. The vast majority made it to high school and stayed for some period of time. Only two of the subjects, Carlos and Tony (Drexler Park Ballers), never started high school. Like many adolescents, the social aspects of school—including sports, girls, and being with friends—were the primary motivation for staying. For a much smaller group, the academic component of school was what drove them. For most of the group, though, their high school experiences were difficult and full of obstacles and problems involving family issues, a growing desire to be in the gang life, and criminal activity. Interestingly, many of the subjects continued to pursue their educations while either still in the gang or as they transitioned out of the gang and into their adult years. Incarceration was one setting in which this was accomplished, and for others it became part of their life plan as they moved into a more mainstream lifestyle. For those who continued their education, the reasoning could have been as
simple as being locked up and needing something to do, or it could have been as important as finally understanding the lost opportunities of their adolescent years and now having a second chance to tap into the talents and potential they always knew they had.

**Case Study: Rey.** Rey was chosen for this case study because he identified the family as having the strongest effect on a youth’s gang membership. He reached this conclusion based on his own childhood experiences and the family socialization processes that influenced his outlook on life. Rey’s in-depth and honest account of his flawed family life provides us with a context from which to understand the interconnectedness of family and school and how one social institution can significantly impact the other. In Rey’s case, the dysfunctional structure of his family life would prevail over his own intellectual capabilities and educational opportunities, thereby limiting his pathway in life to that of the street and the gang.

“What do you think causes youth to become involved in gangs?” I asked Rey. His response:

I’d say family is the biggest reason because family are the people that are supposed to be supervising. Speaking for myself, my parents were 15 when they started having kids. I was born when they were 16 so that means I was conceived when they were 15 and they weren’t mature yet and as a result certain behavior was cool and certain behavior was taught. I was taught that if someone was bigger than you, you then equalize the situation. You pick up a brick or a stick. If he got a stick then you get a knife. I don’t believe that if my parents were 40 when they had me they would have taught me that. But, I believe that at 15 it made sense to them and I know they loved me and wanted to protect me. My parents were hustlers. They were slick and they expected us to be slick. My father was a very tough person. My mother was a very tough person. My parents were like my friends,
change that, more like my older brother and sister. I knew everything, they did not hide their lifestyle from me.

Rey grew up with no supervision and he was running the streets and acting as a lookout for the local drug organization by age 13. “The only time I would be disciplined would be if I did not defend my brothers or sisters if they were involved in street conflicts. So, I believe that family has a huge impact on how kids start this and once you start down that road, you cannot turn back.” When asked about his relationship with his siblings, he stated, “I was always fighting with my older brother, we wasn’t hugging a lot in the house. We wasn’t telling each other, I love you. We never said stuff like that.” In talking about his school experiences, Rey explains, “I was a good student and I loved school. While I was still in elementary school they worked out a deal and I was put into the METCO Program.”16 Being accepted into the sought-after METCO Program was a privilege that allowed Rey to attend school outside of the city in one of the suburban towns, but it also required being bussed to school. “I was around 13 and I was going to school, but no one woke me up, no one brought me to the bus stop. Nobody did, I did all that stuff on my own.” By high school, Rey was still in the METCO Program, but in his freshman year he became involved in an altercation with another student. “The administration said that neither myself or the other kid could come back without our parents. At the time I was disconnected from my parents and I didn’t have a parent to bring up there. I was like, what am I supposed to do?” Rey just stopped going to school for a while, but later began attending one of the city high schools. “Talk about a drop off in the quality of education. The first day I got there somebody got his eyeball stabbed out and the second day there was a shooting right in front of the school and I’m like the only damn kid there with a book bag and homework. I went home

16 See http://www.doe.mass.edu/metco/ for information about the METCO Program.
and I threw those books away. I was like, I’ll never carry another bag, no one else tries.” By this point, Rey had lost his interest and motivation for school, but he eventually did complete high school, albeit at an alternative school. “I still graduated with a diploma from my high school, but I had to make up some courses.”

Rey’s recollections of his upbringing are quite similar to Anderson’s (1999) graphic portrayal of inner city life in Philadelphia. Anderson suggests that in many poor neighborhoods there reside families and individuals that are labeled as being either “decent” or “street” in their orientation (p. 35). Decent folk are often hard-working, self-reliant, and responsible people who accept the values of mainstream society (p. 38). Street individuals and families, on the other hand, can represent the criminal element. Street families often have a superficial sense of family. “They may love their children but frequently find it difficult both to cope with the physical and emotional demands of parenthood and to reconcile their needs with those of their children” (p. 45). Their lives are disorganized and they may aggressively socialize their children in the street life. Many times, their children learn to fend for themselves. Some are employed by drug dealers. These children of the street grow up with little supervision and are said to “come up hard” (1999, p. 49). Rey’s parents, in many ways, socialized him in this “street” manner. They were most likely ill-equipped to properly raise children since they were children themselves. Their lack of parenting skills were directly related to Rey’s inability to attain his education, which held much promise. By age 16, Rey came to reflect all of the qualities that were stressed by his parents in his early years. He was slick. He was tough. And, he was a hustler. These characteristics would be critical as Rey led the emergence of the 37th Street Hustlers during the late 1980’s. He would become the respected leader of his peers and direct the drug and gang activity of this violent group.
V. Tracing the History and Formation of Boston’s Late-1980’s Street Gangs

What Is a Gang?

One of the most debated questions in the discussion of gangs is “What is a gang?” Being able to answer this question is critical in understanding gang formation and the role of the gang. In their study of St. Louis gang members, Decker and Van Winkle (1996) posed this very question to their subjects. The responses they received fell into several categories, including: (1) it was a group process; (2) it involved criminal activity; and (3) it involved threat and the need for protection.

For the purpose of this study, the gang is defined as “an age-graded peer group that exhibits some permanence, engages in criminal activity, and has some symbolic representation of membership” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 31). While not inclusive of all of the components of the gang culture, this definition captures the essence of Boston’s street gangs. The friendship component of the gang and their participation in criminal activity are the most consistent elements shared by all of the gangs in Boston during the time period under examination. More specifically, the cornerstone of Boston’s gangs in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s were based on the personal friendships of youth who grew up in the same neighborhoods and their involvement in crime, especially drug selling and firearm violence.

Building on the work of Decker and Van Winkle (1996), I asked the same question (“Back in the day, what was a gang?”) to the subjects and found that their responses were remarkably similar to those of St. Louis’ gang members. For example, Gus (Warrior Clan) responded, “A gang was actually just a whole group of friends who lived in the neighborhood,
hung together, and made money together. But, the thing with us was we were friends, we were really friends with each other, it was like a brotherhood.”

Carlos (Drexler Park Ballers) also referenced the friendship component of the gang, although criminal activity was what really defined the gang for him. “It was all the guys in the neighborhood. We grew up playing basketball, playing ping pong, wrestling all day. But once we became involved in crime, we became a gang.”

Anthony (BBoys) defined his crew as a gang once they controlled their building and the drug trade. “Before we became a gang, the neighborhood was an open air drug market. We finally decided that this was our building and nobody was coming in and selling drugs. We loved the lifestyle of hustling and making money. By the early 1990’s we were a fully-fledged gang.”

Hence, the neighborhood friendship group’s transition into crime would prove to be a critical defining component that shaped their identity as a gang. Status among the gangs was measured by their proficiency in the drug trade and their willingness to engage in firearm violence. This competition among gangs to be the dominant force in the neighborhoods would be the driving force that led to the unparalleled levels of violence that overwhelmed Boston’s neighborhoods during the late 1980’s.

**Understanding the Origins of the Gang**

When Hagedorn (1998b) initiated his study of gangs in Milwaukee in the mid-1980’s, he first wanted to explore the origins of the gangs and how they formed. He started his analysis by reviewing local Task Force reports and media accounts of gang activity in and around the Milwaukee area. These sources strongly suggested that the gang problems developing in Milwaukee and other small Midwestern cities were the result of “gang members moving from
Chicago or other large cities and starting ‘satellite’ gangs named after their metropolitan gang” (1998b, p. 54). As he further delved into these assertions, it became clear that the data did not support the findings and were, at best, uninformed generalizations. Frustrated, Hagedorn (1998b) turned to the academic literature for guidance, but surprisingly he found only a limited number of studies that focused on the origins of gangs. He concluded that, “Most academic research on gangs is fundamentally concerned with understanding why gang members are delinquent, not with understanding how and why they formed and their function within a community” (p. 57).

While scholars in the field of criminology have recently begun to expand their analysis of gangs and gang membership to include the years beyond adolescence, there remains much to learn about gang membership from a life course perspective (e.g., Krohn et al., 2011; Pyrooz, 2014; Pyrooz & Decker, 2011; Pyrooz et al., 2014). This chapter is devoted to examining the origins, influences, and decision making processes that led to the formation of Boston’s late-1980’s street gangs. These early experiences played a critical role in structuring the life course pathway of the subjects and significantly impacted the trajectories of their adolescent and adult lives. Only by understanding the world of gang membership through the eyes of those who experienced it can we fully grasp and appreciate the magnitude of their journey from crime and deviance to conventional life.

Much of the historical literature related to the formation of gangs suggests that for decades, teen groups have gathered together—usually by neighborhood, street, park, or corner. Thrasher’s (1927) research on gangs in Chicago showed that the origins of the gang are rooted in boys playing together in the neighborhood from their earliest years. “They know each other as well as brothers or sisters, and as they grow older continue to play together (p. 25). Within these settings, “spontaneous play-groups are forming everywhere—gangs in embryo” p. (23). Whyte
in his ethnographic study of Italian immigrant youth in Boston’s North End, asserts that, “The corner-gang structure arises out of the habitual association of members over a long period of time” (p. 255). He adds that for members of the gang, these associations can start in early adolescence and extend into their late twenties and early thirties.

In his study of gangs in Milwaukee, Hagedorn (1998b) determined that the vast majority of Milwaukee’s gangs developed from neighborhood friendship groups. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) also found that, for the most part, St. Louis gangs originated as neighborhood friendship groups, consisting of youth who had “grown up in the same neighborhood as other gang members and had done things with them over a lengthy period of time” (p. 65). While the majority of the gangs and gang members in Hagedorn’s (1998b) and Decker and Van Winkle’s (1996) samples were home-grown, there was also a small number of gangs that did represent larger metropolitan city gangs and established themselves in both cities. Hagedorn (1998b) reported, “We found that influence from Chicago gangs accounted for only a small part of the reasons for Milwaukee’s gang development” (p. 58). Decker and Van Winkle (1996) refer to this process as the “importation” model, one that emphasizes the role of gang members in other cities consciously coming to a specific city and opening up new markets (p. 86).

The early beginnings of Boston’s late-1980’s street gangs is consistent with the gang literature and strongly reflects the neighborhood friendship group model. In fact, all of the men in the current study were unified in their sentiments that the formation of their gang was directly related to growing up in the same neighborhood with a certain group of family members and friends.
Pushes and Pulls

Decker and Van Winkle (1996) indicate that for the gangs in St. Louis, the process of joining the gang had two elements: the first is a series of “pulls” that attract individuals to the gang, and the second are “pushes” that compel individuals to join the gang (p. 65). One example of a “pull” was the chance to become involved in the illegal drug trade, which, in turn, brought a level of respect or status within the neighborhood. “Pushes,” on the other hand, are coercive in nature and can be viewed as the “perceived need for protection” from outside rivals (p. 65). Decker and Van Winkle suggest that for the vast majority of St. Louis gang members, both “pushes” and “pulls” heavily influenced their decision to join the gang.

During the interview process, there was no evidence that Boston’s former gang members were coerced or forced into becoming a member of the gang. Many of the subjects stressed the importance of strong relationships and neighborhood attachments. They were adamant and passionate in their belief that through growing up with their peers, developing strong relationships, and socializing in many different ways, a trust and loyalty became ingrained in them and a strong bond was formed among them. The attraction or lure of the gang for Boston’s youth was solidly built around friendship and camaraderie, the desire to make money in the illegal crack cocaine trade and the status of being associated with a gang (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 65).

According to Rey (37th Street Hustlers), “Man, back then the members of the gang really knew each other, really loved each other. It really was you, your loved ones, and friends. That’s really my life-long friend, we really grew up together. I think a lot of gangs truly came from the neighborhoods that were connected to their gang identity.”
David (Warrior Clan) emphasized the importance of family in the gang’s origin. “It was maybe six families that lived on one street, that’s how it started. Our mothers knew each other, so it was family oriented. We were a tight bunch of people that were raised together, and hung together every day, we just started making bad decisions.”

When I asked them the question, “Why did you join the gang?” many subjects hesitated and seemed uncomfortable with the term “join.” Ryan (Warrior Clan) stated, “I don’t think I joined. These were the guys in my backyard playing basketball. These were the neighborhood kids I grew up with. We didn’t look at it like a gang, these are my guys, these are my friends who I hang with. That’s how it happened.”

Edward (T’s Disciples) responded in a similar manner: “It wasn’t something I joined. It was something I grew up around. These are my friends I went to first grade with or played marbles with or hide and go seek as a kid. We just evolved to that point.”

The origins of Boston’s street gangs appear to be consistent, for the most part, with other gangs that formed during this time period in Milwaukee and St. Louis. Built on the intimate union of family and friends and indigenous to their neighborhoods, they resemble in many ways Thrasher’s (1927) play group model, which postulates that the origin of the gang is “spontaneous”—a natural occurrence of groups of youths as they grow up in poor, inner city neighborhoods (see Hagedorn, 1998b, p. 56).

While the vast majority of friendship groups that develop remain social in nature, this cohort of former gang members moved in a different and more perilous direction. Within a short period of time, these friendship groups transitioned into gangs, established a strong presence in their neighborhoods, and became involved in serious and violent criminal behavior.
Antecedent Influences of Gang Membership in Boston

By the mid-1980’s, as subjects started to reach adolescence, they became exposed to and influenced by a dynamic series of events that would begin to shape their life views. These events were fluid in nature: developing, changing, and sometimes fading away. They could impact multiple neighborhoods or could be unique to specific settings. The three primary events that marked this era and ran from approximately 1985 to 1988 include: (1) the migration of outside drug organizations into Boston; (2) the concept of “crews” preceding “gangs”; and (3) the influence and actions of an individual named Anthony James and the Warrior Clan. These events are unique to Boston; thus, they require a more involved analysis to chronologically frame and provide context for the transition from neighborhood friendship groups to the gang. Their combined overall influence in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End laid the groundwork for the re-emergence of gangs in Boston by the late 1980’s.

The Migration of Outside Drug Organizations into Boston: The illegal drug trade that existed in Boston’s neighborhoods would be taken to another level during the mid-1980’s, when drug organizations representing Detroit, Jamaican Posses, and New York migrated into the city and established themselves as a strong presence in Boston’s neighborhoods. For many of the subjects, who were still in their early adolescent years, this would be their primary entry point into criminality. Their infatuation with the money and status derived from selling drugs would become a primary motivating influence that drove their actions and decisions and would remain a stable aspect of their lives well into their adult years.

When asked about the influence of the Detroit Boys, Jamaican Posses, and Darryl Whiting and the New York Boys, David (Warrior Clan) stated, “They taught Boston a lot about
the hustle (selling drugs). They were coming in from big hustling cities and teaching people how to get the money, real money, so that was trendsetting alone.” David’s assessment of the new arrivals in the city suggests that Boston’s neighborhood drug markets paled in comparison to the outside drug organizations whose tactics, structure, and organization were more advanced and more business-like in their approach to the illegal drug trade.

The Detroit Boys’ influence was most strongly felt in the neighborhoods of Dorchester, the South End, and Roxbury. In Dorchester, they aligned themselves with youth from the Village, bringing them into their illegal drug trade and setting the foundation for what would later become the Village Gang. Their presence was also felt in the South End. According to Cedric (LA Boys), “We interacted with them, I knew the leader of the Detroit Boys personally, he was an alright dude, a sharp dresser, had lots of money. They sold drugs in the Washington Street area.”

Paul (37th Street) recalled, “They came in about the same time as the New York guys, I knew them, they controlled everything because they had the product (drugs), they also put a lot of fear in people.”

By the late 1980’s, a changing of the guard began to take place with the newly forming gang culture displacing the national drug gangs, which had infiltrated and controlled their neighborhoods. In June 1988, the leader of the Detroit Boys was stabbed to death by individuals from the Village after an internal feud. Within a short period of time, the now-leaderless Detroit group would fade from the landscape of Boston’s drug culture. Members of the Village drug crew quickly filled this gap, transitioning to the Village Gang and taking control of the Detroit drug turf. As they attempted to establish and expand their territory, the Village Gang was met with resistance from the LA Boys, who also claimed parts of the South End as their drug area.
This led to one of the early bloody turf wars between two neighborhood street gangs and resulted in both sides suffering major casualties. This early clash of Boston’s re-emerging street gangs set the stage for the escalation of violence that would continue into the 1990’s as they competed for dominance in the area of street gang status and control of the drug trade.

The influence of the Jamaican Posses was most impactful in Mattapan, where they established their drug organization during the mid-1980’s. It was not long before they distinguished themselves among Boston’s future gang members as being a group worthy of both fear and respect. Paul (37th Street) specialized in robbing drug dealers and remembers quite vividly his encounter with the Jamaicans. “Jamaican Posses were the craziest group of dudes I ever met. I remember robbing one of their (drug) houses and they caught me. I will never forget when I was coming downstairs and they were there. I had a gun and they knocked it out of my hand. I started running and they got me in the back with a machete.”

David (Warrior Clan) also had very clear recollections of the Jamaican Posses, especially since they had set up their operation in his neighborhood. “That’s the realist thing I have ever seen. I’m a victim of that war, I got shot five times. That was big, they had the weaponry that other people could not imagine. They were respected and they played the game on another level. Whatever happened, it stayed on the streets, no police.”

Ultimately, the Warrior Clan proved to be a worthy adversary. According to Gus (Warrior Clan), “They had something we wanted (drugs and money),” while David added, “we backed them down, setting up on our turf was a no-go.”

The Warrior Clan, for the most part, had little respect for those they encountered on the street. But in feuding with the Jamaican Posses, they were dealing with a group that was unlike anything Boston had seen before. Known for their use of lethal violence to gain their objectives,
they were well-seasoned veterans of street wars. For Warrior Clan members, this was a time to pause and contemplate what they were getting into. Their willingness to take on the Jamaican Posses and prevail over them would enhance their street reputation even more and solidify their position as the stand-alone power in Boston’s neighborhoods.

Of all the criminal groups that migrated to Boston during the mid-1980’s, it was Darryl Whiting and the New York Boys that would have the most destructive effect on Boston’s neighborhoods—particularly the Drexler Park Housing Development. Mike (Drexler Park Ballers) remembers the negative impact Whiting had on his neighborhood:

He was a manipulative person, a charming person. So this guy comes in and he’s giving people stuff and he’s charming people. People start to take to him and he’s feeding the kids, he’s taking them to Six Flags (amusement park), and he’s giving them money. People didn’t see his motives right away and when they do it’s too late, before you know it you’ve sold your soul to the devil and he has no good intentions. He took everything from the community and gave nothing back.

After taking control of Drexler Park, it did not take long before Whiting’s presence was felt across the neighborhoods. According to Carlos (Drexler Park Ballers), “He was the supplier not just for the neighborhood, but for the whole town.”

Shon (A Street Assassins) grew up in Codman Square in Dorchester and confirms this. He was about 13 years old when he was first exposed to Whiting’s crew, who took control of the neighborhood and allowed area youth to become involved in their illegal drug business. “I remember that’s when the New York Boys were really doing their thing and they sent a couple of guys down there who kind of started the block. And once they got it rolling, everybody just kind of jumped in. We seen the money they were making, so we started picking up that money.”
While Whiting was building a legendary status among some in the city, one future gang leader of Drexler Park saw something different. Tony (Drexler Park Ballers) was only 10 or 11 years old when Whiting came into the neighborhood. “I was young, just on the outside looking in. I wanted to see what the older guys in the neighborhood was going to do to stop Whiting and the New York Boys from taking over. And initially the older guys did do something about it, there were shootings every night. But eventually, the New York Boys paid them off to stop the problem. After that they ended up hooking up together.”

Wanting to clarify this statement, I asked Tony some follow-up questions:

Q. “So the older guys became friends with the New York Boys?”
A. “First they were enemies, the older guys were trying to rob and kill them. And then they became friends.”

Q. “And it was all because of money?”
A. “All because of the money. Sometimes if you give somebody money, money changes a lot of things when you’re broke. They say you’re gonna eat with us or you’re not gonna eat.”

Q. “How did this effect your thinking as you were growing up and seeing all of this?”
A. “My thinking was, we’re gonna start our own crew, our own gang, and we’re gonna make a name for ourself.”

While Whiting was able to control most of those he came in contact with, it seems that Tony and his friends saw Whiting as a means to an end. They observed and learned the methods of crime and violence from him, but ultimately they did not want to follow him. Instead, they wanted their own identity and status, and they wanted to be respected just as he was.

By the end of the 1980’s, these drug organizations were shut down through multi-agency investigations involving the BPD and federal authorities. Thus, the era of the Detroit Boys,
Jamaican Posses, and Darryl Whiting and the New York Boys ended, and they were no longer a presence in Boston’s inner city neighborhoods. And while their reign of control was relatively short-lived, their impact was long-lasting in that it played a direct role in shaping the minds of Boston’s gang members. These drug organizations were responsible for advancing the understanding of the workings of the drug trade and the structure and organization required to succeed in this volatile business. While initially awestruck by the presence of these outside entities, the local players eventually began to come together as a group and take a stand against the outsiders and their efforts to control the illegal economy of the neighborhood. As suggested by Thrasher (1927), conflict is the most important component that provides structure within the gang. Conflict is driven by the immediate milieu in which the gang is located. Within the gang’s geographical borders, resources are limited and the fight for control of both territory and assets contained there make conflict an ongoing, relentless process.

**Before Gangs, there were Crews:** During the early to mid-1980’s—before Boston’s youth began to formally identify themselves as gangs—the term “crews” was the appropriate designation for youth who formed themselves into groups. These informal groupings of friends or peers could be linked through their involvement in criminal activity, or they could be just a group of friends involved in social activities unrelated to crime. They could be neighborhood-based or their alliances could cross neighborhood boundaries. Some of the crews identified by the subjects in the study included dance crews, girl dating crews, money making crews, and drug crews.

To get a better understanding of the difference between what a crew was and what a gang was, I asked Reggie (37th Street Hustlers), “Before you became a gang, there were no gangs before that?”
Reggie responded, “No, there were like crews, but they weren’t gangs. They were like
guys who were affiliated with each other. Crews weren’t confronting the issue of we are from
over here, you are from over there, and we’re beefing with each other. There wasn’t that type of
gang environment in Boston at that time.”

Del (E Street Gangsters) had a similar perspective on this idea of what a crew was versus
a gang. He described the early days before the Gangsters became a gang: “It was crews, not
gangs. We were a drug crew and it was about making money and having things. I think as people
started seeing how lucrative it was (the drug trade) you grew into the next level of the violent
gang. Gangs were those groups that really began to protect their turf and property through
violence.”

The insights of Reggie and Del are important in that they both, independently, see a
distinct difference between the terms “crew” and “gang.” First, their concept of the “crew” seems
to be broadly defined, connoting an alliance, or less binding type of relationship among youth
that are involved in either criminal or non-criminal activities. Additionally, it appears that while
the “crew” is neighborhood-based, there is no defining boundary that limits them from moving
across neighborhoods.

The term “gang,” on the other hand, appears to carry a much more intense and serious
meaning for them, especially as it relates to the relationship of the group and its members and
how they perceive their neighborhood rivals. As established in the Boston case, the gang evolves
from neighborhood friendship groups that are strongly connected through family and friends
growing up together in the same setting. Furthermore, and as we will see in the next section, the
notion of marking one’s “territory” or “turf” is a strong stimulus in the formation of street gangs
as they fight for control within the confines of their neighborhoods.
This blending of the concepts of “crew” and “gang” is best exemplified by the Kangol Crew—a mid-1980’s group of adolescents aged roughly 13-15, who came from the Roxbury area and played a direct role in the formation of Boston’s gangs. According to Rodney (GHB), “It was everyone, they wore Kangol hats, all young kids, they later transitioned into gangs.”

Fellow gang member Joseph added, “There were no gangs at the time, it was everybody in Roxbury, from Dudley all the way to Grove Hall.”

These descriptions were interesting in that they were starting to describe what looked like a citywide juvenile gang. Needing more information, I asked Rey, who was a member of the Kangol crew to tell me more. He stated,

Hats is a Boston thing, all hats, it started with the hats… people fighting with each other started with hats it seems like. So pre-gangbanging, people getting their hats taken used to be a big deal. The Kangol Crew was a gang that used to just take hats. Go everywhere and just take hats. So when you went someplace and if you wanted to be somebody one of the things you would do is make sure that your hat was in order. So the Kangol hat, that specific hat, identified the group, and we dared others to take our hats.

The Kangol Crew, like the outside drug organizations that came to Boston, eventually ran its course and faded away. When asked why the crew disbanded, Joseph (GHB) stated,

It started with two of the guys, they were arguing over a girl. Then they started fighting and people were forced to choose sides because one guy was from our neighborhood and the other guy was from the neighborhood up the street. It escalated to the point where someone took out a knife and someone got stabbed. It seemed like that was the start of the end of the Kangol Crew. Almost out of the blue everybody started forming their own gangs with their own people because this person didn’t get along with that person.
Bringing together the qualities of the “crew” and “gang” as put forth by Reggie and Del combined with Rey’s and Joseph’s description of the Kangol Crew provides us with a context from which to understand the “crew-gang relationship.” The “crew” experience reflected groups of youth who affiliated with one another and came from many neighborhoods within the Roxbury and Dorchester area. Their activities were not limited to any one neighborhood and they seemed to have very few goals other than seeking out conflict and victimizing other youth. Importantly, this crew distinguished themselves from other groups in two ways. First, they adopted a symbol, the Kangol hat, to identify themselves and separate themselves from other youth groups in the city. Second, it appears that their collective behavior is what brought them together, thus providing a unifying aspect to the group, especially as it related to the criminal behavior and violence they carried out in their interactions with other youth. These two distinctions will become quite important as the study moves forward and delves further into the re-emergence of gangs in Boston.

Anthony James and the Warrior Clan: The re-emergence of gangs in the late 1980’s was also strongly influenced by the Warrior Clan and its charismatic leader, Anthony James. While its home turf was based in Mattapan and the adjoining neighborhoods of Dorchester and Hyde Park, its influence was felt citywide. The Warrior Clan’s development as a street gang was at least several years ahead of any other gang in the city; by 1985-86, they were already up and running in their neighborhood. It was heavily represented by families and boasted a membership that numbered between 60-80 members. At the center of the gang was the James family—a formidable group of men whose propensity for physicality and intimidation was well known by neighborhood youths, who both feared and loathed them. While most of the early gang members
in the neighborhoods were in their early to mid-teens, Warrior Clan members were in their late
teens and early twenties.

Darryl (BH Bombers) remembers the damage they inflicted in his neighborhood. “They
were bullies, they used to beat up the older gang members, they were men beating up boys.”
Darryl’s recollection reflects the sentiments of a number of other participants who described
their interactions with Warrior Clan members in similar terms of being on the wrong side of
physical beatings and robberies.

Kyle (Warrior Clan) also remembers the impression the Warrior Clan made on him.
“They were real serious guys, down to a man. A lot of times when you think of crews or gangs,
if you have a crew of ten guys, three of them are real serious. What I remember about the dudes I
grew up under is that I wouldn’t want to be enemies with none of them, not with none of them,
no way.”

Anthony James was in his late teens when he became the face of the Warrior Clan. While
equally as tough as his older cousins, it was his other qualities that separated him from them and
propelled him into a leadership role. According to David, a fellow Warrior Clan member and
close friend,

Anthony had a glow and people just wanted to be around him all the time. He’s most
noted probably for the way he handled business if you had a problem with him, but he
was also a sports star, he had a lot of vision, more so than most other gang members. He
knew how to get the money, he knew how to put crews together. He was a born leader, he
probably never looked at himself as a gang leader. Anthony was one of the first guys on
the block to go to college. The women loved him. He just kind of ran circles around
people, especially at his age.
Anthony’s status and respect were not just limited to his gang; his impact extended
citywide. Rodney (GHB) considered himself a friend of Anthony’s, even though their gangs
were involved in a feud. “I met Anthony in high school, he was like a brother to me. He was
tough, an athlete, and smart.”

Anthony (BBoys) attended the same high school as Anthony James, but he was younger
and did not know James personally. He did, however, know of him and was still influenced by
him. “I remember hearing stories about him and his attempt to bring different gangs together, I
wanted to be like that.”

Anthony James’ impact, as well as his ambitions to play a central role in Boston’s gang
culture, was cut short when he was murdered in June of 1988. Rivals from another gang
ambushed him at his home while he stood in his driveway. One assailant, armed with a shotgun,
shot him twice, with the first shot striking him in the leg and the second shot striking him in the
head and killing him. News of his death spread quickly across the city and set off a chain of
events that included a number of retaliatory shootings and homicides, starting the process of
dividing neighborhood youth groups into street gangs.

Ryan (Warrior Clan) remembers the after-effects of Anthony’s death:

I was young, but I was smart enough to understand what was happening. I knew Anthony
personally and a lot of people was hurting because no one thought that could happen.
Nobody seen that coming. With his death it was like, ‘Oh shit. This is real.’ It was almost
like Anthony couldn’t die, like he was a superhero. Then, things turned up heavy,
extremely targeted, like extremely targeted. People wanted revenge, and not just us. His
death affected a lot of people and a lot of people wanted revenge for it.
Warrior Clan members immediately put the word out on the street that they were looking for those responsible for Anthony’s murder. The anger and emotions connected to this incident set in motion a series of back and forth shootings and homicides as Warrior Clan members sought out those who were linked to his death in any manner.

David (Warrior Clan) believes Anthony’s death contributed to the formation of gangs in some neighborhoods. “Anthony’s death turned the city upside down. He kept the peace in a lot of neighborhoods. Once he passed away, all bets were off. The dynamics really changed because everyone just had the mindset that if Anthony can go, we got to move a little different.” By “move a little different,” David meant that the invincibility of the Warrior Clan was now in question and there were those individuals and gangs that were willing to take them on. By killing Anthony James, other gangs became empowered, and similar to the championship team that now has all contenders coming after them, the Warrior Clan would now have to fight to keep their top position among Boston’s gangs.

The importance of the Warrior Clan and Anthony James, and their influence on the formation of Boston’s street gangs in the late 1980’s, cannot be overstated. While they were involved in the drug trade, their identity among other youth in the city was that of a street gang and not a drug gang. According to John (A Street Assassins, and an ally of the Warrior Clan), “The Warrior Clan was never known for being a money making neighborhood, you know what I mean. They were tough guys, they were a street crew back in the day.”

The reputation of the Warrior Clan was built on toughness, violence, and physically dominating other groups. If Darryl Whiting was considered to be the most influential person with regard to the illegal drug trade in Boston during the mid to late 1980’s, then Anthony James was
the most influential person with regard to the re-emergence of the street gang culture during that time.

It can be argued that James’ death—and the rash of retaliatory violence that followed—led to the growth of gangs and gang violence in Boston. Citywide, he was looked up to by those he came to befriend and feared by those who crossed him. His murder was symbolic in that it represented the loss of leadership and structure in the neighborhoods—and with no leadership and structure come chaos and confusion. Curry and Decker (1998) call this process “contagion” (p. 56). In the case of Anthony James’ homicide, contagion refers to “subsequent acts of violence caused by an initial act; such acts take the form of retaliation.” Curry and Decker (1998) go on to state that “the reciprocal nature of gang violence accounts, in part, for how gangs form initially, as well as how they increase in size and membership” (p. 57). This early example of contagion would be a precursor to a much more widespread surge in violence that would develop as gangs formed and feuded, creating a cycle of retaliatory violence that would continue for the next decade.

**Case Study: Edward.** The use of case studies “allows the exploration and understanding of complex issues. It can be considered a robust research method particularly when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required” (Zainal, 2007, p. 1). To fully comprehend the antecedent events that led to the re-formation of the street gang culture in Boston, the experiences of one subject—Edward (T’s Disciples)—is recounted because, more than any other subject, he lived through all of the early influences that led to the formation of street gangs in Boston in the late 1980’s. His account of what was taking place in Boston in the mid-1980’s brings together all of those overlapping and intertwining events involving the migration of outside drug organizations into Boston in a succinct and clear manner. While Edward’s narrative
focuses on his personal experiences, his perspective extends beyond his Dorchester neighborhood and, in many ways, captures the struggles faced by all of the subjects in adapting to the changing landscape of their neighborhoods and the role they would play in those changes.

Edward witnessed firsthand the migration of the outside drug organizations into Boston and the impact they had on Boston’s neighborhoods:

Those gangs were fascinating to Boston people. New York and Detroit were big towns and Boston was small. New York was like Boston’s mentor, especially from a street perspective. New York had that kind of appeal, Detroit as well. We were not even at that level. We needed to step up to that level of hustling, violence, that whole street mentality so we can prove that we can hang in there with New York, Detroit, and the Jamaican Posses. They definitely influenced us… During that time people in my neighborhood broke into three groups. First, there were those that were just scared, they weren’t used to that level of money or violence. Second, were those who were fascinated by those outside groups and they wanted to be part of them. Third, were the group that were frustrated, like ‘fuck y’all, you’re not coming into our neighborhood and selling drugs, having kids with our girls, and taking over, it’s not happening.’ We had a number of run-ins with all of them, we weren’t impressed or fascinated and wasn’t going for it.

Edward was also a member of the Kangol Crew:

It was right around the same time as Whiting, Detroit, and the Jamaicans. It was like a mixed bag of nuts, a bunch of guys from all the neighborhoods where gangs would later form. All in one crew. It was basically a juvenile crew. No older guys, just a bunch of teenagers. It was basically all the cool guys from those neighborhoods that came together to hang in one crew. We knew each other from sports and school. We were a terrorizing
kind of gang, robbing people, beating people up. We used to go to big events in the city like the Kids Fair and the Kite Festival. This is really where our membership kind of bloomed at these events.

Edward described the downfall of the Kangol Crew:

We ran into the Warrior Clan at one of the Kite Festivals at Franklin Park. They were like one of the only crews that by themselves could match the Kangol Crew like member for member. We were a teenage group, they were a young adult group, we was in middle school, they had dudes with beards and kids. It was like grown men fighting kids. The Warrior Clan was the dominant crew at that particular Kite Festival and when it was over, it was kind of like the end of the Kangol Crew. We were a unified front at one time, but after that it started to dissolve and people started sectioning off into their own neighborhoods.

Edward then talked about Anthony James and how James was a mentor to him:

The Warrior Clan was the first real street gang. Anthony was their leader, like period. He had older cousins that did more than him in terms of violent acts, but they didn’t have his charisma. He went to college, he was popular with the girls, and he was a hustler, that’s what put him on top. He started our gang. He came to our neighborhood at a really interesting time. Our neighborhood was going through a transition where our OG guys (original gangsters) had started getting high and strung out, a couple of them got killed, a couple of them went to jail, and a couple of them got married. So our executive leadership was in transition and there was no mid-management type group. So it was just like the little dudes left and I was one of the little dudes. All our OG’s are gone and there is a gap. So it was like ‘its our time, we’re going to be the next ones to run the block,’ and
so we stepped up. I was one of my neighborhoods top hustlers. I ended up meeting Anthony and he took me under his wing. He came into the neighborhood and kind of took over. I became his guy because drug dealing wasn’t really his thing. He allowed us to run our block and he supplied us. So our gang started as a drug dealing crew and we were like a little hit crew for him. There was just like five of us and we sold drugs for Anthony. That year, after the Super Bowl, he bought us all jackets with the winning team’s logo on them, it was super random, but that’s how he started our gang… When he died, it was like a slap in the face, a reality check, like the streets is real in terms of people getting killed. It was at that point that I felt I needed to turn my violence up, I had to turn my hustle up, we were on our own now. His death was the true fuse that sparked the blow up of what started with gangs. The Warrior Clan was still strong, but not like before, nobody in his gang was able to fill his shoes. It was his death that triggered the confidence for people to even have the attitude of ‘I don’t care who you are or I don’t care what neighborhood you are from.’

Edward’s exposure to the migration of outside drug organizations into Boston, the Kangol Crew, and Anthony James and the Warrior Clan gave him the necessary tools and mindset to become a respected and feared gang leader by the age of 16. From the Detroit Boys, Jamaican Posses, and Darryl Whiting and the New York Boys, he learned that Boston was a small-time drug city, well behind their big city brothers when it came to making money and using violence to intimidate and control territory. He also learned that establishing a street mentality that was ruthless and unforgiving was required in order to survive.

From the Kangol Crew, Edward got his first taste of the gang lifestyle. He began to understand that there was strength in numbers; that by adopting a symbol—a hat—you created
an identity and reputation that led to unification of the gang; and to always be cognizant of the fact that there were others out there that were stronger and tougher than you. Through his relationship with Anthony James, Edward was mentored by Boston’s most prominent early gang leader. This led to his rise from a low-level street hustler to running the neighborhood drug crew. This opportunity provided him with the money and status that came with being Anthony’s protégé, and would open the door to a leadership role as his neighborhood crew transitioned into a gang.

Finally, with Anthony James’ death, Edward quickly came to realize that things had changed in Boston. With the re-emergence of gangs came a much more violent and dangerous lifestyle that now extended across Boston’s inner city neighborhoods. For those involved, a new way of thinking was required—one that was more calculating and cunning—for mistakes could now cost you everything, including your life.

**The Re-emergence of Boston’s Street Gangs**

From the perspective of the BPD, it was in late 1987 when the first signs of the re-emerging gang culture began to surface. It was during this time that the BPD began seeing an increase in the number of youth ages 14-19 being arrested for crimes involving firearms and other violent activities. By the spring of 1988, it was becoming apparent that groups of youths were congregating together and engaging in serious violent crime. These groups were loosely organized and began identifying themselves by the streets or neighborhoods in which they lived. The BPD was cognizant of the serious gang problems plaguing cities such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit at that time, and there was increasing concern within the department when the number of violent incidents involving the city’s youth began to rise. The neighborhoods
primarily affected by this problem were Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, and sections of Jamaica Plain and the South End.

By the fall of 1988, the BPD identified 15 street gangs operating in the city with a membership of nearly 450 self-identified gang members. Firearm violence became synonymous with the gang activity taking place in Boston’s neighborhoods. With the re-emergence of street gangs came a more lethal violence, with disputes and rivalries being settled with firearms. As street gangs moved into the crack cocaine trade and the number of firearms proliferated, shootings and homicides became a daily occurrence.

The most dramatic increase in youth violence occurred from 1988 to 1990. In 1988, there were 95 homicides in the city, and in 1989, that number increased to 100 homicides. That fall, “police department figures for the 40 days from September 6 to October 16 show that 101 people were wounded in 170 shooting episodes in Area B” (Boston Globe, 1989). By 1990, there were 152 homicides in the city—the most ever (Boston Police Department, 2008). And this epidemic of violence was primarily found among young African American and Hispanic youth—both as victims and perpetrators (Cook & Laub, 2002, p. 1).\(^\text{17}\)

\(^{17}\) While the City of Boston and the BPD endured challenging times during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s with regard to the re-emergence of street gangs and the dramatic increase in firearm violence, by the late 1990’s this situation would reverse itself. In 1990, Boston recorded 152 homicides. By 1999, that number decreased to 31 homicides. This drastic reduction in violence, and particularly youth firearm violence became known as the “Boston Miracle.” The success achieved in Boston was the result of a comprehensive collaboration among law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, street workers, clergy, the community, and other agencies, and a strategic approach that balanced enforcement, intervention, and prevention initiatives. One of the programs that contributed to Boston’s historic reduction of youth violence was the Boston Gun Project/ Operation Ceasefire—a partnership between the BPD and Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government (see Kennedy et al., 1996).
The notion of younger youth in the neighborhood “coming into their own” was a consistent theme that came up in many of the subject interviews when discussing gang formation. Their transition into leadership roles was created in part because of the weaknesses and shortcomings of the older youth in the neighborhood. Once respected, this group of older youth were now falling victim to prison, drug addiction, death, as well as the ambitions of the younger youth. In six of the neighborhoods where gangs formed in the late 1980’s, the loss of the older youth created a void that was filled by the younger youth, providing them with the opportunity to assert themselves and start to control the neighborhood. Four examples highlight this process of leadership change in the gang neighborhoods.

According to Mike (Drexler Park Ballers), before the introduction of crack cocaine there was no gang, but there was a group of older youth in the neighborhood that were respected and looked up to. “So when those guys started to go to jail or get involved with drugs there was this void created and somebody had to step up. The time was ripe. There was a sense of pride with the younger guys and they weren’t going to let anyone come in and take over the neighborhood. The younger guys filled that void and became the gang.”

For Joseph and his fellow GHB members, the failings of the older youth combined with the introduction of crack allowed them to exert their influence over the neighborhood. “At that time a lot of older drug dealers were becoming drug addicts, so there was a void in the neighborhood and we started selling crack. We called it nature taking its course in a bad life

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18 See Gang Membership Chart for ages of subjects when they self-identified as becoming gang-involved.
because now everyone wanted crack. People started to recognize us and look up to us because we were now controlling the neighborhood.”

For others, it appeared that it was their time to step up and continue the neighborhood tradition. Kyle (Warrior Clan) was 13 years old when he first got involved with the Warrior Clan:

One thing that sticks out to me is one of the older guys said to me and my friends, ‘you’re all gonna be Jr. Warrior Clan, because we’re about to go to jail for the rest of our lives. All of us are going to be in jail and all of you have to hold this down.’ So for a 13 year old to have that kind of pressure put on him to have to uphold a name, it was for me personally like, ‘Damn, I got some big shoes to fill.’ And I was determined to help fill them shoes, represent in a way that I felt that the Warrior Clan needed to be represented.

Finally, Rey (37th Street Hustlers) and his cohort took a more aggressive approach:
You have to remember there were no gangs in Boston before us, there was no 37th Street gang when I was growing up. So, for the most part it was myself and a few other individuals who were the first persons to be identified as 37th Street gang members... The turning point for us was when we started getting our own money (by selling drugs). We began to defy the older guys and we were bold enough to challenge them. This is when we started to create our own identity, we were our own people now.

Rey went on to explain that this same process was happening in neighborhoods all over town. This “domino effect” of street gang formation would continue through the summer and into the fall of 1988.

The Increasing Importance of Turf
With increasing threats from other gangs and the need for protection, gangs began establishing their own “turf” or territory that they deemed to be theirs. All of the subjects discussed the importance of establishing geographic control of their neighborhood, and by 1988, as gangs were forming, sections of neighborhoods were being divided up and controlled by the local gangs.

For Ryan (Warrior Clan), the concept of turf was an important component of how he defined the gang. “I’ll be honest with you, I didn’t have a definition until I became really involved and then my definition of the gang was more about territory. ‘This is our territory. We’re going to defend it. We’re going to hold it down. No one is coming through. No one is bothering us.’ The definition was to protect your neighborhood. That’s how I would define it.”

When I asked Reggie (37th Street Hustlers) to talk about the changing dynamics in the neighborhoods, he stated:

When the drugs (crack) started coming in, gangs were forming quickly because there were big areas and a lot of money out there. Before that you used to be able to travel across blocks, but no more. Now it was, ‘you can’t come over here no more.’ That’s what started the beefs between certain gangs, the money aspect of it… The other thing that you had going on was that you had stick up guys coming in and robbing people (of money and drugs). We got a taste of those guys coming into our neighborhood and we were like, ‘they’re not coming into our neighborhood anymore and doing that to us.’ That is what also played a part in forming our gang.

While not minimizing the symbolic importance of turf to the gang, Reggie’s explanation of why gangs (including his) were claiming territory and committing themselves to protecting it suggests a more “instrumental” reason for defending their turf. To be successful and survive in
this newly developing economy, a gang needed to have a secure turf from which to sell drugs (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, pp. 111-112).

John (A Street Assassins) recalled these same changes taking place in his neighborhood:

Before crack nobody had turf, there was no defending turf, there was no GHB, no A Street, no 37th Street. I remember when I was younger and crews were forming, you could go through different neighborhoods and there was no problem. Now everybody was hustling, now people couldn’t come through the neighborhood because we don’t want you stealing our clientele, we don’t want you making money around here. It was different now, things changed. When it went from powder cocaine to crack things changed, everybody’s common goal now was to represent their neighborhoods, make money, and hold the neighborhood down.

With the introduction of crack cocaine and the fight for turf, neighborhoods were being transformed into gang territories that would be fiercely defended as control for the drug trade was rapidly escalating.

The Role of Popular Culture and the Media

Twenty-two of the thirty subjects identified one or more aspects of the popular culture as being an important component of their gang identity. While there is no evidence that movies, music, or the media played a role in the origins of their gangs, it does appear that popular culture “provided the symbols and rhetoric of gang affiliation and activities that galvanized neighborhood rivalries” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 88).

In the area of movies, many of the subjects talked about the impact the movie “Colors” had on promoting the gang image. Released in the spring of 1988, this movie takes place in the
gang-ridden neighborhoods of South Central Los Angeles and depicts the experiences of two LAPD officers and their attempts to quell the violence between rival gangs (see Hagedorn, 1998a). According to Ryan (Warrior Clan): “‘Colors’ is what introduced us to L.A. gangs and that is when the violence came into play, because it wasn’t there before. Before it was, if you got beat up, you got beat up. But then after ‘Colors,’ it moved into shootings.”

Rob (Warrior Clan associate) agreed: “When ‘Colors’ came out it got adopted by the East Coast. It instilled in us a real understanding of the gang life, it was one of those movies that after you saw it you wanted to be like that.”

Anthony (BBoys) said, “We knew nothing about gangs until ‘Colors.’”

The movie “Colors” made a strong impression on Boston’s emerging gang members and appears to have provided a sense of legitimacy and justification for their existence. The idea that Boston could be like Los Angeles was an exciting and empowering feeling for many young and impressionable youth. As suggested by Decker and Van Winkle (1996), “popular culture provided the mechanism or catalyst by which gangs in St. Louis [came] to resemble those in Los Angeles” (p. 88).

Music was also an important contributing influence to the gang mentality, especially N.W.A., the west coast rap group, whose 1988 album, “Straight Outta Compton” provided an added level of unruliness to an already out-of-control group of emerging gang members. Each of their songs focused on important issues facing African American youth growing up in disadvantaged urban settings, including gang violence, adversarial relationships with law enforcement, and making money through the selling of crack cocaine.

When I asked Joseph (GHB) about the influences of music, he stated, “N.W.A. and Dr. Dre. I mean they talked about killing police back then. We weren’t about shooting police, but it
was more about just the act of violence. You listen to certain music and the rhythm gets in your head, it pumps you up.”

Fellow gang member Chris added, “Hip-Hop definitely played a role, we just fell in love with this bad boy bravado. N.W.A. was a very popular rap group out at the time. One of their featured tracks was, and you’ll appreciate this, was ‘Fuck the Police.’ I remember one time getting arrested in a stolen car and that was playing in the tape deck.”

The popularity of hip hop and rap during this time became an important aspect of the gang culture. With a tone of rebellion and rejection of some of the elements of mainstream American culture, this genre focused on painting a picture of the realistic narratives of inner city street life, including the necessity of revenge, drug selling to survive, and fully accepting the personal risk that comes with these activities (Riley, 2005).

The media also played a key role. During the late 1980’s, as firearm violence increased in the city, both the print media and broadcast media became increasingly focused on gang crime. The “fifteen minutes of fame” accorded by the media to T’s Disciples, the A Street Assassins, as well as other gangs during that time served to strengthen their gang identities, their esprit de corps, and their reputations as they all battled for status and recognition as the “baddest” gang in Boston.

According to Edward (T’s Disciples), “I feel like personally it was the media who made us a gang. We weren’t a gang until the media told us we were a gang. The media gave us that label and as teenagers with our names in the paper it was – that was something impressive.”

John (A Street Assassins) agreed, “The media called us a gang, we used to read the newspapers and watch the news. At one point, a reporter for one of the television stations did an undercover gang story and he spoke with us.”
Shon (A Street Assassins) collected newspaper articles on the gang. “I remember reading, ‘The A Street Assassins, the notorious A Street Assassins.’ That made you feel like, this is infamous. Like, we were them guys. We made the paper on a regular basis. So it was to the point where after you put in some work (shootings), you check the paper the next day to see if you got your credit.”

Movies, music, and the media all played an influential role in shaping the mind-set of Boston’s early street gangs, and not in a good way. Based on the subjects’ recollections, it could be inferred that the pop culture of the late 1980’s not only solidified the idea that violence was the primary characteristic that defined them, but that violence was the only acceptable means by which to resolve conflict. As Boston’s gang culture continued to develop and expand in the 1990’s, so did the role of pop culture and the media in influencing up-and-coming gang members and bringing the public’s attention to the gang lifestyle (see also Pattillo-McCoy, 1999).

The Concept of Team Symbols

Boston’s street gangs were exclusively neighborhood-based during the late 1980’s through 1990’s. The gangs, for the most part, adopted the name of the street, neighborhood, or housing development from which they came. Many of the gangs also started taking on the names of professional sports teams and wearing the teams’ apparel. Some of the gangs represented themselves through Boston’s professional sports teams, while other took on the names of National Football League, National Basketball Association, and Major League Baseball teams. As gang members began to prosper in the drug trade, hats, jackets, sneakers, and jewelry began to become an important part of the gangs’ identities. Combine that with their control of neighborhood turf, and by the late 1980’s, there was nothing anonymous about Boston’s street
gangs. Their turf was clearly marked, their members all looked the same, and they self-identified as gang members. There was no mistaking who they were.

In Boston, it was the symbol of the hat that distinguished Boston’s gang members from one another and became a source of conflict and violence. There was almost unanimous agreement among the subjects that the hat was a defining symbol of gang membership in the late 1980’s. According to Rey (37th Street), “It started with the hats. I think the differentiation between us and national gangs was we ended up leaning towards the hats and it ended up going heavy hat, and you had better known what a hat meant or you could get killed.”

This idea of the gang adopting a professional sports team to identify and separate them from others gangs took off rapidly in the neighborhoods. Several of the subjects, including Mike (Drexler Park Ballers) even talked about apparel stores catering to the gangs and making hats for them. “I remember there was a store downtown that used to make hats and everybody used to go down there to get their hats made. I’m talking about everybody from all over the city, that was the place to be seen to get your hat.”

Displaying symbols is important to the gang in that it helps to identify both rivals and allies and it also announces the presence of the gang in the neighborhood or other public places (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 75). But, for Boston’s gang members, it seemed to go deeper than just that. The word “team” brings forth the idea of people joining forces, and teamwork evokes the notion of devotion to one another. In their early days, Boston’s gang members showed a high level of commitment to each other and they exuded pride in symbolically communicating to others their status as a gang.

For Rey and the 37th Street Hustlers, dressing nice and in the same way gave them a sense of self-esteem, power, and status:
In the late 80’s tough kids dressed nice. It’s like all right, you get money, buy yourself nice stuff and dress nice, groom yourself nice. It’s funny, if you look mug shots of 37th Street kids at that time, you gonna see that we were dressed nice. Back then, buying out racks used to be a big thing among gangs. For us it was like, ‘All right, if we’re running together and we’re accessing the economy together, we’re going shopping together. Like you bought everything off the rack, there ain’t no more of those. So back then there would be a certain color sweat suit and you buy all of them, you’re the only ones with them. For us it was like, ‘I want to look exactly like him.’

According to Decker and Van Winkle (1996), another important component of gang symbols is that they increase the cohesiveness among members and “serves to heighten the identification of individuals in the gang to each other” (p. 76). Through this process, bonds of membership are strengthened and gang activities attain a group context and, hence, a certain legitimacy. As gangs prospered in the illegal crack cocaine trade, they exhibited a sense of self-worth and pride, and even arrogance as they flaunted their new found wealth through hats, jackets, sneakers, and jewelry. They also sent a message of “we are to be taken seriously.” As suggested by Del (E Street Gangsters), “Everybody wanted to make sure their brand was recognized. They did a lot to really let people know. I don’t think they ever tried to hide it from anybody.”

This use of a symbol to identify the gang, its members, and its turf would be a defining element of Boston’s gangs and was a flash point in the violence that erupted across the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End during the late 1980’s.
The Role of Crack Cocaine

According to the National Narcotics Intelligence Consumers Committee 1985-1986 report, crack first appeared on the west coast in Los Angeles and San Diego in 1981, arrived in New York by 1984, and eventually came to Boston as well as a number of other cities by 1986. Agar (2003) states that one of the keys to the success of crack was that it was simple and safe to make. All one needed were grocery store items such as baking soda. By cooking powder cocaine and baking soda in water and then letting it cool, a resin-like substance would form at the top of the container and harden. You would then break the substance into pieces, hence the name “rock” for crack. The user of crack would then smoke the rock cocaine. The profitability of crack came from its rapid and intense high that was brief in nature and highly addictive (p. 5).

Subject interviews suggest that the New York drug organizations that migrated to Boston during the mid-1980’s were primarily responsible for introducing crack cocaine into Boston. The influence of the introduction of crack cocaine into Boston and its control on the gang and its members cannot be overstated. The ability to make large sums of money through the distribution of crack became the primary activity of the gangs, consuming much of their time and, in many ways, providing for many of the subjects the most basic needs in life.

Rey (37th Street Hustlers) described the introduction of crack cocaine into the neighborhoods in this way: “Once the economy presented itself, we organized and got in line to access, influence, and control the economy.”

Fellow gang member Reggie further explained:
It made everybody instantly rich. I was 14 years old when crack came around. My family was broke, I didn’t have no money, when we were growing up, it was hard. So being 14 years old, my boys hooked me up with a package and I’m selling this thing and I got $465 dollars in my pocket, it was like so much money and to be able to go up to Midpoint Ave. and buy pizza or whatever you want. Like for us, that was a big thing, eating. It was like we’re able to eat. Your stomach ain’t hungry no more.

As crack took hold of the neighborhoods and more and more people became addicted, the resulting high demand for the drug required the gangs to take a workman-like approach in order to compete, survive, and succeed against their rivals. For Chris (GHB), selling crack was his primary source of income, it was his job. “The thing about crack was that it was easy to sell. It was so addictive that people would sell their souls to get it. When someone got hooked on crack, it’s like a 24 hour case, either you’re getting high or stealing and robbing and chasing money to get high, so it’s all consuming.”

The crack trade was not only all-consuming for the user, whose appetite for the drug was insatiable, but also for the gangs members who were required to be on call and available at all times of the day to supply the drug. When I asked Rey (37th Street Hustlers) how often drug selling took place, he stated, “Anybody who’s a real drug dealer you sell drugs 24/7. There’s no vacation. There’s no days off. You don’t go to the Bahamas for a week, if you do when you come back somebody already moved in on your block. Seven days a week, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.”

James expanded on Rey’s statement even further by suggesting that the gangs’ commitment to selling crack, while demanding and labor-intensive, was also goal-oriented. “It gave you your sense of power and stature. If your gang was making money, that gave you star
power. If you were riding around in brand new cars, flashing jewelry, flashing money, it was just like being a star athlete, it’s the same lifestyle. The drug game was important because it was your business.”

For the gang and its members, the role of selling drugs, specifically crack, was an important component of the gang life. Drug selling fed them, clothed them, and took care of their families. Drug selling was their job, it consumed much of their time, and it was a business to them. But in the end, selling crack did little to create a better lifestyle for Boston’s late 1980’s and early 1990’s gang members. When I asked Joseph (GHB) to look back on his adolescent gang years and discuss the role of drug selling and the gang, he said, “I think we were all living this fantasy life that we were major drug dealers. We really weren’t.”

Reggie (37th Street Hustlers) was in full agreement with Joseph. “We thought we were getting rich, but that was all smoke and mirrors. We weren’t getting rich, we were just living day to day.”

In sum, the relationship between the gang and drug sales was a strong one. The introduction of crack cocaine into Boston was likely the single most influencing factor that led to the formation of street gangs in 1988 and the expansion of the street gang culture throughout the 1990’s. Selling crack cocaine was the gangs’ main activity and it occupied the majority of their time. Crack played a direct role in the establishment of their turf and boundaries that were now clearly marked and fiercely defended. It played an important role in their gang symbolism by providing the funds to purchase clothes, jewelry, and cars that would reinforce their gang identity and brand them citywide. And, as we will see, crack played an important role in the violence that would devastate the neighborhoods.
The Structure and Internal Workings of the Gang

Boston’s street gangs of the late 1980’s were not very well organized. This should come as no surprise in that gangs were just re-emerging and there were no predecessors to guide them and mentor them in the essentials of the gang life. As suggested by Curry and Decker (1998), as gangs emerged in cities across the country during the late 1980’s, they, “tend to have fewer roles, and those roles [were] not very well defined” (p. 68). Boston’s gangs, for the most part, follow this trend of loose organization and interchangeable roles.

Membership: Based on subject interviews, the gang universe in Boston during the late 1980’s contained approximately 550 youth, representing 15 gangs in five neighborhoods (this slightly contrasts BPD estimates of a gang population of 450 youth during that time). These figures suggest that for 15 gangs there was an average of 36 members each. The range of membership in the gang could be as low as 10 members or as high as approximately 80 members. The subjects indicated that in many cases, regardless of the gang’s size, there was a smaller group within the gang that was considered the “core” of the gang—members that shared a stronger bond among each other.

According to Rey (37th Street Hustlers), there were approximately 25 members in his gang, but within that 25 there was a smaller group of intimate friends. “I’m running with eight people and they mean everything to me. Nothing better happen to those eight. There’s a whole bunch of other people, but they don’t mean as much to me as these eight do. They are my inner circle, they meant everything.”

This was a consistent theme that came up in many subject interviews, especially in those gangs with large numbers of members. Decker and Van Winkle (1996) found this same structural aspect in St Louis’ gangs, with subgroups existing in all of the gangs and ranging from
two to ten friends. They suggest this may have occurred as a result of long-standing friendships that existed before the gang was formed.

**Recruitment and Initiation:** As previously discussed, Boston’s street gangs evolved from neighborhood friendship groups—youth of roughly the same age, growing up in the same neighborhoods from childhood through adolescence, who shared a strong attachment through socializing with each other in many different ways. When asked, “Did the gang recruit?” and “Was there an initiation process?” the subjects summarily dismissed these processes as not being relevant to their gang in any way.

Ryan (Warrior Clan) stated, “We never recruited. We didn’t understand that. I still don’t understand that to this day. Everybody was from the hood, there was no outside recruiting.”

Reggie (37th Street Hustlers) had a similar perspective: “To be part of 37th Street you had to be from the neighborhood, no outsiders. The neighborhood was close knit. It was more like a family thing before a gang thing. When we became a gang there was no initiation. There was never a thing where you had to prove yourself.”

The gang literature is rich with descriptions of the recruiting and initiation processes that are carried out by gangs. Curry and Decker (1998) report that “Nearly every documented gang in the United States has an initiation process, and there is variation in how rituals occur” (p. 65). Decker and Van Winkle (1996) suggest that being a gang member requires more than a decision. In their study of gangs in St. Louis, they found that over 90% of the sample had participated in some type of initiation ritual. The most common method of initiation for potential members involved acts of “toughness” and fighting to prove their worthiness to the gang (see also Hagedorn, 1998b).
Boston’s street gangs may be unique in this area of gang research. The subject interview process yielded no evidence that widespread recruiting took place or that initiation rituals were required to be a member of the gang. The lack of this component within the gang reflects the strength of the neighborhood friendship model of gang formation and the relationships that were developed in childhood by Boston’s gang members.

**Hierarchy and Roles:** Leadership and individual functions within the gang were varied, overlapping, and inconsistent. All of the subjects in this study were considered to be “core” or the nucleus members of their gangs; there are no “wannabees” within this group. With that being the case, their roles in the gang fell into three primary categories: leaders or individuals of influence, shooters or enforcers, and stick-up kids.

In the category of leadership, only Rey (37th Street Hustlers) identified himself as the sole leader of the gang. “I sold more drugs than anybody else. If I was tough, it’s because I was smart. I didn’t have to be tougher to win, I just needed to be smarter to win.”

For other gangs, leadership was a transitional process based on the individual’s status in the gang and neighborhood. According to Carlos (Drexler Park Ballers), “At different stages of the gang different people had the leadership role. If he gets arrested then another person has to step up and start making decisions and choices for what members can and cannot do. So it becomes whoever steps up into that position actually has to have leadership qualities to do it, if not, nobody says nothing and you just wait for the next person to follow.”

For the majority of gangs, though, decision-making was the role of “individuals of influence” in the gang and involved a consensus-type model. Anthony (BBoys) stated, “I was a person of influence in the gang, but the majority ruled when it came to making decisions.”
Ryan (Warrior Clan) shared this same perspective. “That didn’t work for us, what’s a leader anyway and what’s he leading us to. I’m not saying everybody was on the same level, but for us decisions were made by group consensus.”

Clearly, the idea of leadership varied among gangs. In Hagedorn’s (1998b) study of Milwaukee gangs in the 1980’s, he found that one-third of the gang leaders interviewed believed that the “reputation or ability to fight was the main criterion for a leader” (p. 92). In Decker and Van Winkle’s (1996) study, they found that, “over half of gang members identified leaders as persons who could ‘deliver’” (p. 97). “Deliver” in this case meant being able to procure large amounts of drugs for street sales. While all of the subjects appeared to have had the required attribute of toughness in being able to handle themselves in street encounters, it was the individual(s) who took control of the drug aspect of the gang who were more often looked up to and respected. And, while not explicitly stated, the characteristic most subjects wanted to be recognized for was their smartness, or “the capacity to achieve a valued entity-material goods, personal status-through a maximum use of mental agility and a minimum use of physical effort” (Miller, 1958, p. 9).

A second role in the gang involved those individuals who were considered to be shooters or enforcers. Some gang members took on this role because of their aversion to selling drugs, while other wanted the prestige that came with harming others. For Reggie (37th Street Hustlers), it was his dislike of the drug selling part of the gang:

I was basically an enforcer. If you owed us money, I was coming to get it. I was also the one that if you came around our way and did something to somebody, I was coming to see you. During the late 1980’s I probably shot at least 25 people, 10 just in the summer of 1989. That was basically my life for a long, long time and I thought it was right. I had
it in my mind that this part of life right here was right. Like this is what we learned. I wasn’t a drug dealer, I hated selling drugs. As far as protecting each other, that was my thing.

Arthur (LA Boys) sought this role out. “I wanted to be known as a shooter for the LA Boys, it led to respect and recognition. It got me through ages 16-22. My reputation deterred those who wanted to challenge me. To have true respect, it wasn’t about just shooting at someone, it’s about actually shooting someone.”

Some gang members simply did not have the desire or patience to sell crack. For them, the role of enforcer was a better fit, as it allowed them to carry out violence in the name of the gang and established their own reputations as individuals of influence.

The final role discussed by the subjects involved those that were the stick-up boys, whose job was to rob rival gangs and other drug dealers of their proceeds. Bobby (TS12) filled this role for his gang. “Drug dealing was not my thing. I got arrested a couple of times and I got ripped off once. So after that it was just easier for me to take from other people. I robbed people coming into the neighborhood and outside the neighborhood. It was just I wanted the money the quickest way I can get it.”

According to Reggie (37th Street Hustlers), robbing other gangs was an important part of the gang culture. “Wherever you got drugs and money, you also got stick-up boys. You got stick-up boys in every crew. We had a stick-up crew and they used to rob dudes from around the way.”

Role differentiation in Boston’s gangs was similar to that of many of the gangs that were emerging in cities across the country in the late 1980’s. Loosely organized, with few positions,
and little stability to those positions created a fluid and constantly changing structure, reinforcing the viewpoint that the gang was less than organized.

**External and Internal Relationships:** Boston’s gangs were most organized when it came to their conflicts with other gangs. While all of the gangs had a set of alliances with other gangs that were usually based on past friendships or family relations, they usually had one primary rival with whom they violently feuded.

When I asked Rey (37th Street Hustlers), “Did each gang have one primary rival,” he stated, “Usually the people across the street. Whoever your rival is, it’s across the street. No one goes shopping for a rival, it just naturally ends up to be the people across the street.” Rey’s point is well taken in that the most violent gang feuds that developed in the late 1980’s involved those gangs that shared neighborhood borders. Of the 15 gangs that were active in the late 1980’s, some combination of eight of those gangs were involved in violent border disputes. The high levels of retaliatory violence that grew out of these bitter feuds is best explained by Decker (1996), who states, “Gangs have strong spatial structure; they claim particular turf as their own and are committed to its ‘defense’ against outsiders. The specter of a rival gang ‘invading’ their turf and violating its sanctity is likely to evoke a violent response, leading to the spatial clustering of violence” (p. 245).

Thrasher (1927) was the first to propose that conflict was the most important component that provided structure within the gang. He believed that gangs were strongest and most motivated when they came together to deal with the outward and ever-present threat of conflict. When I asked Ryan (Warrior Clan), “Did external conflict bring the gang together?” he stated, “Absolutely, every time. Some things are a no brainer. Someone gets shot or killed, you got to ride. Violence and retaliation was a no brainer.”
While the gangs were strongest in their response to threat and conflict, their internal relations exhibited only chaos and dysfunction. By their own accounts, their internal structure was weak and disorganized. The rules guiding the gang were informal at best, and there were no repercussions for violations. Some of these informal rules included no snitching (talking to the police), don’t hurt innocent people, don’t go after another member’s girlfriend, and don’t rob each other.

Mike (Drexler Park Ballers) laughed as he described the rules of the gang. “We had rules, but they were breached all the time.”

For other gangs, there were no set of rules, but unspoken ways to behave. According to Rey (37th Street Hustlers), “We never had rules. We never needed to be told to stick up for each other, that was a given. If someone started fighting, everyone jumped in, we never needed to be coached into that.”

Curry and Decker (1998) found that in emerging gang cities, there is a much less chance of seeing gangs that have established formal rules guiding the gang. In most cases, gang rules are minimal and general in nature. When they asked a St. Louis gang member to discuss the rules of the gang, he stated, “Don’t steal from me.” Another stated, “Ain’t no rules, just do what comes to mind” (1998, p. 78). The similarities of these responses suggest that Boston was no different from St. Louis and many of the other major cities across the country that were experiencing the re-emergence of the street gang culture during the late 1980’s.

The prime example of disorganization in Boston’s gangs is highlighted in the internal relationships that took place between gang members on a day-to-day basis. When asked what was the biggest cause of fights within the gang, Reggie (37th Street Hustlers) stated, “Greed, me
wanting what you got, jealousy, and females. In our gang, what broke us up was greed. The money situation always plays into the downfall of the gang.”

This theme of jealousy and greed over drugs and money was consistent across the entire sample. The internal philosophy of the gang seemed to be that when it came to drugs and money, anything goes. You could run off with your friend’s drug stash, you could take his customers, you could not pay him the money you owed, or you could outright rob him of his drugs and money. These acts, in many ways, represented the ultimate acts of disrespect, yet the responses by those who were victimized ranged from fighting, to not talking to that person, or doing nothing at all. What is clear, though, is that if these types of acts were carried out by a rival gang member, the response would be quite different.

**Loyalty:** The weak organizational structure of the gang also played an important role in the degree of loyalty that gang members have for each other. “Their solidarity is not lasting; the loyalties of their members to each other and the gang cannot be counted on too far; the natural leaders may not be recognized definitely as such by the rest of the group” (Thrasher, 1927, p. 48). With lax rules and punishments, as well as the dysfunctional way in which they treated each other, loyalty was a fragile commodity in the gang.

For Del (E Street Gangsters), this was a conflicting issue with no easy answers:

I was loyal to the gang, but there were individuals I had even more loyalty to because of their past actions. When some of the guys are stealing from each other or putting you in bad situations where you don’t know all the facts, it is really uncomfortable. I saw guys go to prison for 20 years because they got dragged into something without knowing all the facts, and then chose to say nothing. I think I was smart enough to be really careful about who I spent more time with and who I needed to spend less time with.
One of the true tests of loyalty in the gang occurred when law enforcement intervened in their illegal activities and gang members were faced with long prison sentences. James (37th Street) remembered the fallout in his neighborhood after a federal investigation involving the gang’s illegal drug distribution operation. “At one point the loyalty in the gang was strong, but then it wavered when the Feds came in and guys didn’t take their weight and do their time. I’ll be honest with you, I’m kind of ashamed. I was related to a couple of them, they opened their mouths, took some people down. Instead of taking their 15 years, they turned.”

Boston’s former gang members describe a confounding picture of gang life as it relates to their external and internal relationships. Their interactions with other gangs, especially with regard to conflict, was by far their most unifying component. Curry and Decker (1998) suggest this is a key ingredient in creating strong ties among members because it establishes the need for cooperation and dependence among them, and serves to strengthen their gang identity and reputation.

Internally, the picture of the gang is one of complete disarray. This “I’m in it for myself” attitude created an atmosphere of jealousy, greed, and mistrust. With no structural criteria to guide proper comportment, gang members were left to their own devices to decide what worked best for them personally, rather than what was in the best interest of the gang. This unbridled discretion, as well as the growing lack of trust members had in each other, would eventually lead to the gang’s demise and leave many members feeling betrayed by the friends they once held so close.

Gangs, Guns, and Violence
To this day, we still do not know the exact reasons for the increase in firearm violence in Boston and nationwide in the late 1980s, nor do we fully understand the connections between the introduction of crack cocaine, the re-emergence of street gangs, and the influx of firearms that drove the violence. This section examines this phenomenon, taking a detailed look at the motives and thinking that led to this era of unprecedented firearm violence.

According to the literature, two schools of thought emerged as the primary reasons for this increase in firearm violence. First, Blumstein’s (1995) hypothesis contends that the primary reason for the rise of youth homicide rates in the mid-1980’s was associated with the recruitment of juveniles into the illegal drug trade. Those participating in this illegal activity were required to arm themselves for a number of reasons, including self-protection, dispute resolution, defense of product and territory, and the protection of money derived from selling drugs (p. 20). He adds that the atmosphere created by this highly volatile business often resulted in a more frequent use of firearms among those involved to resolve disputes and send a message of intimidation and fear.

Blumstein (1995) identifies the post-1985 period as the starting point for the rise in violence, and associates it with the introduction of crack cocaine into the illicit drug market (p. 20). He states that crack was low in price and extremely addictive. This specifically affected low-income people from disadvantaged neighborhoods who could only purchase one “hit” or “rock” at a time, which dramatically increased the number of transactions needed to satisfy the urge for the drug. To adjust to the increased demand for the drug, distributors were required to recruit large numbers of sellers. Blumstein (1995) points out that in addition to adult sellers, the juvenile population was fertile ground for recruitment because they would often work for a lower monetary rate than adults, they were less exposed to the severe punishments of the criminal
justice system, and they were more prone to risky and dangerous behavior than their adult counterparts. He asserts that because of the hopeless conditions in which many African American youth were growing up, the illegal crack cocaine trade became a route for economic success that was hard to resist. Firearms were considered an important tool of the trade, and when combined with the reckless nature of youth, conditions became conducive to the escalation of serious and fatal violence.

While Blumstein’s (1995) explanation focuses on the influence of drug markets, the second explanation focuses on the influence of a small number of violent youth. More specifically, the second explanation—set forth by Kennedy et al. (1996) and Braga (2003) in his follow-up study—rests on the notion of a cohort of youth violence—the “super predator” or the impact player. According to Braga (2003), youth homicides in Boston (with victims aged 24 and under) “increased more than threefold—from 22 victims in 1987 to 73 victims in 1990” (p. 34). Reasons given for the homicide increases include the crack cocaine markets formed during this time and the continuing development of street gangs. Braga (2003) proposes that the epidemic was confined to “gangs and criminally active youth” rather than all African American youth living in some of Boston’s more deprived neighborhoods (p. 50).

Braga’s (2003) explanation is based on his study of criminal history data on “gun assault and gun possession offenders, ages 24 and under, arrested between 1984-1995” (p. 40). His analysis indicates that “[i]n 1984, only 53.3% of arrested youth gun offenders had a prior criminal record,” but by 1995, this rate increased to 83.3% (2003, p. 42). Additionally, prior court arraignments also increased for this group of gun offenders, going from an average of 3.75 arraignments in 1984 to 9.28 arraignments in 1995 (p. 42). Braga concludes that this small group was well known to the criminal justice system and was involved in high levels of serious and
fatal violence driven by gang involvement and drug activity. In Boston, the youth violence
epidemic of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s was “highly concentrated among serious youth
offenders who carried high capacity semiautomatic pistols and used their guns in an increasingly
deadly way” (p. 52).

**Guns:** According to the subjects in this study, as gangs re-emerged the crack cocaine
trade would be a strong influencing factor in their development and would provide them with the
opportunity to arm themselves in order to protect their assets and turf from would-be invaders.

In Jamaica Plain, Reggie and James (37th Street Hustlers) grew up in the projects, while
Del (E Street Gangsters) grew up in a residential neighborhood several miles away:

Q. “Tell me about guns and when they showed up and how they came into the picture?”

Reggie: “The first time I came across guns, we started getting heavy into the guns was
around 1987. I came across Mac-10’s, Tech-9’s, shotguns, 38 revolvers, all different types of
guns. Guns were easy to come across. It was when crack came. It was like someone took the
locks off the gun shops and said, ‘hey, just get what you want.’ It was easy, there was no such
thing as you can’t get a gun.”

Q. “So people started selling guns?”

Reggie:

People were selling guns. Crack opened the doors. It was guys coming home from the
military, you could jet down to New York and buy a gun, or you could go down south.
There were certain dudes that would travel out and they’d come back with guns. So the
gun situation was very, very easy. I never had a problem when I was younger and I was
in the gang with getting a gun, all I needed to do was make a phone call. We’d go to
South Boston or Charlestown, you got friends there you met when you were locked up.
They’d break into people’s cribs, come back, and empty their whole drop with us. It was all about money.

James: “Guns showed up in the late 1980’s. I remember guys taking runs down south and bringing guns back. The guns started coming from the south, Atlanta, South Carolina. We had certain guys who would make gun runs and bring the guns back.”

Q. “Can you talk about the crack trade and the purchase of guns?”

James: “If you were making money off crack, it was nothing to get a gun for $200 or $300 dollars. Crack was definitely the money to get the guns.”

Q. “Tell me how the access to guns started to evolve?”

Del: “I think what really made them more accessible is the fact that now there were resources to buy them. I think the drug market provided the funding that made it now accessible to have them. And the reason you wanted to have guns was that other gangs had them, so the more you had the more leverage you had on the street, the more leverage you had over other gangs.”

Q. “What were the sources of guns?”

Del: “I knew that there were guys who would go down south and bring them back. Because for some people selling guns became very lucrative because drug dealers wanted to feel protected.”

Andy and Chris were members of the GHB gang located in a residential neighborhood on the Roxbury/Dorchester line, while Tony (Drexler Park Ballers) grew up in the projects in lower Roxbury.

Q. “How did guns change the picture of what was going on in the neighborhood?”
Andy: “I think guns came in for protection. So we had guns to protect us from rival gangs, stick-up kids, and then the drugs. Drugs bought guns and that was what we needed.”

Q. “Tell me about guns, when they came, how they came, and how they affected the landscape?”

Chris: “Most of our guns came from people that were strung out. People who were on drugs. They would want 10 cracks for a gun that was probably worth a $1000 if you walked into a store to buy it. That’s an easy sell. So a lot of it came from people who were strung out that had access to firearms or stole them.”

Q. “How did guns come into the neighborhood?”

Tony: “You got people coming by and selling guns. People going to the store and getting guns for you with gun licenses. Anybody back in the day could go to the store and get a gun. They scratch the numbers off, sell it to you and you got yourself a gun right in the box. Some people went down south and bought guns and when they came back they would come around the neighborhood and sell them.”

Q. “What did you need guns for?”

Tony: “We needed guns for the stick-up kids and for the gang bangers, the rival gangs.”

Gus (Warrior Clan) and Bobby (TS12) both grew up in the residential neighborhood of Mattapan:

Q. “Can you talk about guns, how the access to guns in the late 1980’s changed the city and violence?”

Gus: “It made it dangerous, people were going back and forth to the south, getting guns and coming back here, it changed the dynamics of everything.”

Q. “What caused the guns to come in? Was it the drugs? Was it the street gang activity?”
Gus: “It was the drugs. Once the drug trade came in and money came in, you started getting guns.”

Bobby: “My people is from down south. A lot of families from Boston migrated from the south and gun restrictions down there are a lot more lackadaisical than it is up here. You could just get on a Greyhound bus, go to Walmart, get like 10 guns down there and then you ride back on the bus up here with no problem.”

Q. “Did the drug trade help finance guns?”

Bobby: “Absolutely. Without guns you would be unable to protect your drug trade.”

Lastly, Shon was a member of the A Street Assassins, whose turf was in a residential neighborhood in Dorchester, while Edward (T’s Disciples) grew up in the Park Street projects in Dorchester.

Q. “How did guns come into the neighborhood?”

Shon: “A lot of addicts brought them. Fiends brought them into the neighborhood. They wanted to get high, so they’re going to sell me a gun for $25. It came from the drug trade, they were coming through with guns all the time and selling them.”

Q. “Tell me how guns changed the picture of violence in the city and how they came into your neighborhood?”

Edward: “I remember I went down south. I went to K-Mart and there was a big sign that said, ‘Must be 18 with a photo ID to purchase a handgun.’ I’m like, ‘are you kidding me,’ I’m 18. It’s a time when $500 is like $5 and it’s like, ‘so how much for that nine—it’s $500, let me have 5 of them, it was easy.’

According to Curry and Decker (1998), “A number of observers have noted that the rise in crack cocaine trafficking in the mid-1980’s produced the need for protection, usually in the
form of guns” (p. 70). Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) agree with this line of thinking, adding, “Guns have been characterized as necessary tools of the drug trade to protect the money, protect dealers from assaults and robberies, to settle disputes over money or drugs, for instrumental displays of violence, to secure territory, and to preempt incursions” (p. 125).

Subject narratives corroborate these assertions, claiming that the introduction of crack cocaine required Boston’s gang members to acquire firearms for protection of their drugs and money from rival gangs and stick-up kids. The subjects’ statements also shed light on the fact that proceeds of the crack cocaine trade provided the necessary monetary support and financing to purchase the illegal firearms.

Intertwined with the need for guns as a tool of the drug trade was the process by which firearms were procured and brought into the neighborhoods. As seen in the quotes above, two primary paths of gun acquisition were discussed by the subjects. First, guns came into the neighborhood through the hands of drug addicts who were either selling or stealing guns to feed their drug habits. As previously discussed, the addictive nature of crack required its constant use; thus, users were willing to do anything they had to purchase the drug. The bartering of drugs for guns was profitable from the perspective of the gang members in that they would usually come out on top of the negotiation, often receiving the firearm at a vastly discounted price from the strung-out addict.

The other avenue for receiving illegal firearms involved traveling to southern states with much less restrictive gun laws. This could involve the gang members themselves making these gun purchasing trips or others in the neighborhood (unconnected to the gang) providing this service. Other opportunistic entrepreneurs saw the expanding crack trade and its high level of profitability as an avenue to create their own enterprises that involved selling firearms to gangs.
and drug dealers. In many ways, this was a cleaner business and involved less risk than the street drug trade. Those involved in the illegal gun trade prospered during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s as the demand for firearms continued to grow and gangs and the crack trade expanded across Boston’s neighborhoods.

**Drama:** Many of the subjects indicated that firearm violence was driven by much of the “drama” associated with the street gang lifestyle. In the gang context, “drama” is closely linked to the concepts of respect and disrespect, which are critically important in the street culture, and even more so in the gang culture, as they play a direct role in conflict and gun violence. As suggested by Anderson (1999), within the street culture exists a “Code of the Street,” or a set of informal rules that govern interpersonal public behavior. The foundation of this “code” is built on the elements of respect and disrespect. Respect can be defined as, “being treated ‘right’ or being granted one’s ‘props’ (or proper due) or the deference one deserves” (p. 33). Disrespect, on the other hand, is an assault on one’s manhood. When one is disrespected in the street or gang environment, there are limited options for recourse. In order to restore the respect that has been temporarily lost, the only acceptable response is for the individual to “seek to retaliate with equal or greater force [including] being able to take somebody else’s life if the situation demands” (p. 92).

The complexity of the concepts of respect and disrespect and the role they play in conflict lay in their definitions, which can be so broad in nature that they can involve the most serious of personal offenses or the most minor of slights. For Boston’s gang members, gaining and holding
respect while constantly being sensitive to acts of disrespect was a heavy burden they dealt with on a daily basis, with guns being the primary tool of resolution.¹⁹

Drama related to respect and disrespect could involve street-level disputes. According to Bobby (TS12), “Before guns, if you had a conflict with someone, you would fight. Once guns came into play that was the quickest way to eliminate your problem. Once people knew you had a gun and you were known for using it the fear and respect were evident, it was through the roof.”

When I asked Shon (A Street Assassins) to discuss the role of guns and conflict, he stated. “Because that stepped it up from me having to fight you, to me shooting you.”

Drama could involve females. According to Tony (Drexler Park Ballers), “The majority of fights and feuds with other gangs is probably girls. We had a beef with another gang for 10 years, all because a guy smacked a girl.” Anthony James was 21 years old when he was murdered in 1988 by rival gang members. Respected citywide and considered Boston’s first gang leader, his death touched off an intense series of gang shootings and homicides that would influence the formation of Boston’s street gangs. The reason for his murder: an alleged incident with a woman.

Respect and disrespect played a role in trying to instill intimidation and fear in rivals. When I asked Shon (A Street Assassins) to talk about the idea of respect and disrespect and the gang culture, he stated, “I think one of the greatest mistakes we made was to equate respect with fear. If we had everybody scared, we felt like everybody respected us. We learned quickly that only made people attack us more.”

¹⁹ Subject narratives suggest that the indicators of respect and disrespect were consistent across the neighborhoods and within the street gang culture.
Drama could involve words or a look. According to Carlos (Drexler Park Ballers), conflict with other gangs could start over the most minor of issues. “Over things that don’t even matter. You bump into gangs in different places, words are passed, and it turns into a problem that lasts for years. All because of respect, trying to be the biggest, baddest gang.” Fellow gang member Mike agreed. “Disrespect, whatever your idea of that meant, because for everybody it meant something different, somebody could look at you wrong. The respect thing was important to people.”

Lastly, drama could occur over a stolen gun. The feud between the 37th Street and C Street gangs was one of the most violent within the gang culture starting in the late 1980’s, resulting in multiple shootings and homicides that would continue over the next 10 years. When I asked James (37th Street) if he knew what initiated this bloody feud, he responded, “From what I can recall, the conflict that started with C Street was over a stolen gun. Someone asked to use a gun. Then all of a sudden they lost it. It turns out they just straight jacked (stole) it from them. That was the start of the 37th Street and C Street feud.”

Subject narratives highlighted the multifaceted nature of violence that existed among Boston’s street gangs and the role that firearms played as a means of settling conflict. The gang experience in Boston is consistent with the literature, which asserts that 1) youth gangs have long been assumed to contribute disproportionately to violent delinquent behaviors; 2) gang members are more likely to carry guns; and 3) gang members are more likely to be involved in gun-related crimes (Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, & Howard, 2000).

For gang members, reasons for gun carrying invariably revolve around the issue of protection. According to Horowitz (1983), gang members arm themselves because they believe their rivals have guns and they do not want to be caught at a disadvantage. As for why gang
members actually use their firearms, Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) suggest that the accessibility of firearms in today’s society has had an effect on the way some individuals think about and resolve situations of conflict. They believe that this cognitive process is enhanced in neighborhoods that are inundated with street gangs, drug markets, and high levels of violence. In these environments the presence of firearms create an “ecology of danger,” or a hyper-sensitive climate of fear and paranoia where “social interactions are perceived as threatening or lethal, and where are normatively seen as harboring hostile intent and the willingness to inflict harm” (p. 130). The consequences of these complex and devastating conditions lead to situations where, “The proliferation of guns and shootings by gang members escalates violence by creating a demand for armaments among rival gangs” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 22-23).

**Type of Gang Activity:** Delving even further into this important issue of what drove the violence of the late 1980’s, I posed one additional question to the subjects in order to better understand the mind-set and motivations of gang life: “Was your gang a drug gang, a street gang, or both?” Of the 15 gangs represented in the study, subjects representing 11 of the gangs responded that they were both a drug gang and a street gang. Subjects representing three gangs responded they were primarily a drug gang, and subjects representing one gang responded they were a street gang.20

The primary motivation for Boston’s street gangs in the late 1980’s was making money. While violence was an important part of their identity, it was not their priority. Andy (GHB)

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20 Defining what constitutes a “gang” has been a long-term challenge for both gang researchers and law enforcement officials. For the purposes of this discussion, I adopt Maxson’s (1998) version of the difference between street gangs and drug gangs. “Drug gangs are perceived as smaller, more cohesive, and more hierarchical than most street gangs and are exclusively focused on conducting drug deals and defending drug territories. Street gangs, on the other hand, engage in a wide array of criminal activity. Drug gangs may be subgroups of street gangs or may develop independently of street gangs” (p. 2).
captured the perspective of many of the subjects when he said that, “the focus of the gang was on making money more than making violence.”

Clearly there is a contradiction in this idea that the gang was both a drug gang and a street gang. The drug aspect of the gang called for a low-key operation that brought in money while at the same time avoiding the interest of law enforcement. The street gang aspect wanted attention—they wore their colors, and they flaunted their success in the drug trade through the clothes and jewelry they wore and the cars they drove. And they sought out conflict and violence in order to build their reputations in the gang culture. These outward gestures resulted in heightened levels of law enforcement attention and intervention.

I asked Darryl (BH Bombers) if the gang was aware of this contradiction of roles and he stated, “We knew it hurt business, but you could never back down from conflict or you would lose all respect.”

Rey (37th Street Hustlers) helped me make sense of these differing perspectives on the motivations of gang violence during the late 1980’s. His perspective on the gang culture was based on a wide range of personal experiences. At age 13, he was a lookout for one of the New York drug organizations in Roxbury. In early adolescence, he was a member of the Kangol Crew, an early form of the gang. And as gangs re-emerged, he established himself as a leader not only in his neighborhood, but citywide, building a reputation as an impact player. When asked, “What drove the violence of the late 1980’s?” Rey responded:

It was the crack era, there was way more drugs on the street, there was way more weapons on the street. I think back then the violence was a lot more deliberate, it was a lot more personal. We all knew each other in this city, we were like really bad kids and we knew each other. So if something happened with me and another guy, I know his
name, I know his face, the violence between us would be different. Like I really want to kill him. I’m not letting it go. He knows me, he knows better than that… To establish yourself as an official gang, the only way to do that is by violence. Nobody considered you a gang because you sold drugs. It was about violence and retaliation and defending yourself. If someone did something to one of your people, you take things into your own hands and settled it with guns. Then you’re official. People say, ‘they’re official, you fuck with one of them and it’s never going to end… Drugs bought the weapons. Drugs didn’t drive the violence. In our neighborhood we were more concerned with money than violence. Our motivation was around the money. We had zero motivation to hurt people… So being young and fully armed, if something happened it’s like, let’s take it all the way. When crack came it was like growing on trees and then it was like weapons growing on trees. Everybody had an ego. Everybody was running around like little kingpins ready to go to war. It was a bad age range to have a whole lot of money, drugs, and guns.

I then asked Rey if his gang, as well as other gangs in the neighborhoods, recognized the level of violence they were involved in and the negative impact it was having on the city. “We all knew it. We definitely noticed. We definitely responded to it. It was like TV. Basically we knew there was a citywide audience watching. So when the audience was watching, nobody’s backing down because you’re all young and stupid. Nobody is backing down and it’ll go down anyplace. You find out someone’s at the club, you show up at the club in front of everybody and have a gun fight right there in front of everybody.”

**Boston’s Gun Violence -- Drugs or Gangs:** As discussed earlier, there are two schools of thought regarding the primary reasons for the increase in firearm violence in the mid-1980s.
First is Blumstein’s (1995) theory that the increase was due to the recruitment of juveniles into the illegal crack cocaine trade. Second is Kennedy et al. (1996) and Braga’s (2003) assertion that the youth violence epidemic in Boston was “highly concentrated among serious youth offenders who carried and used guns in an increasingly deadly way” (Braga, 2003, p. 52).

Based on the narratives and experiences of Boston’s former gang members, Boston’s story of firearm violence more accurately reflects the perspective of Kennedy et al. (1996) and Braga (2003). Boston’s gun violence problem was a gang problem, in that those driving the cycle of violence through gun acquisition and gun use were gang members. Boston’s homicide victims and offenders emerged from a universe of gang membership and gang activity, “most violence was not about drugs and drug-market issues or about turf but was more ‘personal;’ acts of violence involving members of different gangs often sparked vendetta-like ‘beefs’ that were assumed by both (or several) gangs” (Kennedy et al., 1996, p. 158). This perspective is corroborated by Tony (Drexler Park Ballers), who stated: “A lot of gang wars sometimes it will be over nothing, but when somebody gets shot or killed, then it prolongs forever, you can’t turn back then.”

Blumstein (1995) is correct, though, in that the crack cocaine trade did pose a strong potential for violence, thus requiring those involved to arm themselves for protection. Boston’s former gang members confirmed his assertion in their accounts, clearly describing the links between the crack cocaine trade, gun purchasing, and gun carrying. It is in the area of gun use that Blumstein’s (1995) perspective does not hold up and Kennedy et al.’s (1996) research reflects a more accurate picture of gun violence in Boston.

Curry and Decker (1998) suggest that gang firearm violence, and specifically gang homicides, have their own set of distinct traits. First, gang violence involves firearms,
particularly handguns. Second, the victims of gang homicides resemble their killers in that they are usually of the same age, race, sex, and neighborhood. Finally, most gang homicides lack a relationship to drug trafficking and instead appear to be motivated by revenge (p. 70). Based on these notions, Boston’s gang violence was not unique in any way compared to what was happening in other urban settings across the country. Gang violence in Boston was reckless and chaotic in its reasoning. It was often emotionally driven, based on informal street rules of conduct and carried out by immature adolescents who were seeking to make a name for themselves in the emerging gang culture.

In Boston during the late 1980’s, as gangs battled for recognition and status, the body count of victims reached record-breaking levels. Those viewing this deadly destruction from the outside were perplexed and unable to comprehend its essence. But for those living in the world of gangs and violence, it was a much clearer picture. “In those days whoever had the most guns and shooters, ruled, it was simple.” (David, Warrior Clan).

Conclusion

The re-emergence of the street gang culture in Boston in 1988 and the unparalleled level of violence associated with gangs in the years that followed has had a long-lasting impact that still continues today. In 1988, there were approximately 15 identified street gangs with a membership of between 450-550 self-identified gang members. By the mid-1990’s, the gang culture in Boston had expanded to approximately 61 gangs and a gang population of 1,300 individuals (see Kennedy et al., 1996). By this time, five of the gangs represented in the study would no longer be active due to law enforcement efforts and their own internal breakdowns. The remaining gangs became the focus of intense scrutiny by multiple law enforcement agencies.
for their continued involvement in firearm violence and drug distribution. This resulted in significant numbers of gang members being incarcerated for long periods of time.

For the subjects in this study, gang involvement and its associated negative life experiences would be life-altering. Carlos became a gang member at age 13, had his first firearm arrest at age 14, and was convicted of murder at age 16. Bobby was age 9 when he joined his gang. His first drug arrest was at age 13, his first gun arrest at age 15, and he was found guilty of manslaughter at age 19. Rey and Chris both served prison time for serious, non-fatal shooting incidents. Ziggy, Cedric, Edward, Del, and John amassed considerable prison time over large portions of their life for drug offenses. John went to prison at age 24 for distribution of crack cocaine and would not come home until age 41. Many suffered significant victimization as a result of gang violence. Tony recounted that his gang involvement resulted in him being shot and stabbed 17 times. Joseph reported that he was shot five times and required open heart surgery, and David stated he was permanently injured as a result of being shot five times. And, Reggie had to cope with the murders of two cousins and two close friends before he was even 17 years old.

The re-emergence of gangs in Boston and the devastation that followed was no different from what happened in many small- to mid-size cities at that time. This aspect of the study has found what other scholars have found: 1) the re-emergence of gangs started to come about in the mid- to late-1980’s; 2) the structure and organizational aspects of the gang were weak; 3) adolescent minority males, mostly African American from poor neighborhoods, were highly represented in the gang composition; 4) drugs—primarily crack cocaine—was a motivating factor that drove the gang; 5) violence was an important component of the gang, with influx of
guns leading to heightened levels of shootings and homicides; and 6) following their initial re-emergence, the presence of gangs continued to grow over time.

Additionally, while the police and other public officials in re-emerging gang cities may have initially been in denial about the problem and were unaware of the long-term negative impact that gangs would have on their cities, the same can be said of the youth who participated in this lethal activity. Through their retrospective interviews, the subjects in this study seemed to suggest that they did not completely understand what they were signing up for when they became involved in the gang lifestyle and the long-term effects that gang membership would have on their lives. While they are accountable for the illegal acts they committed, it should not be surprising to us that adolescents were making bad decisions in their lives. Most bad decisions by youth this age result in learning experiences and second chances. For this group of gang members, however, bad decisions would result in fateful outcomes that would take years to repair.

Curry and Decker (1998) recognized these aspects of the gang experience, “a key to understanding gangs is understanding who their members are and what they are like. The majority of gang members are in their teens, a time of life that is not characterized by high levels of formal or organized behavior. We ought not be surprised then, that by and large gangs lack the characteristics of formal organizations and that the processes of membership reflect the sometimes haphazard nature of adolescence” (pp. 80-81).

I asked John (A Street Assassins), “Could anything have changed the violence that occurred back in the late 1980’s?” He responded, “No, crack, guns, and gangs changed everything and everybody. It was just the era. It was the lure of the streets. It was so new to everybody. We will never see it again in the City of Boston.”
As we will see in the following chapters, the road to recovery for Boston’s former gang members would involve a long process of trial and error. Some made it, some continue to struggle, and some may never get there.
VI. What are the Turning Points or Events that Cause Gang Involved Youth to Either Persist in or Desist from Criminal and Deviant Behavior?

This study is, at its core, an attempt to “make sense” of the lives of a cohort of youth who led the re-emergence of street gangs in Boston in the late 1980’s (see Laub & Sampson, 2003; Maruna, 2001). The study of gang membership has a long and respected tradition dating back over a century (e.g., Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Cohen, 1955; Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998b; Horowitz, 1983; Matza, 1999; Miller, 1958; Moore, 1978; Padilla, 1992; Short & Strodtbeck, 1974; Suttles, 1968; Sykes & Matza, 1957; Thrasher, 1927; Vigil, 1988; Whyte, 1943). However, even with its revered history, knowledge about gangs remains incomplete due to researchers’ inability to study the entire life span of individuals who commit themselves to gang membership (see Klein & Maxson, 2006). This is the gap in knowledge I seek to fill and the focus of this chapter.

To fully understand the life experiences of Boston’s former gang members in the most accurate and authentic way possible, qualitative methods were combined with a life course approach, with the latter being required because of its “focus on continuity; change, especially turning points; age, period and cohort effects; and both internal and external forces that may shape life-course development” (Laub, 2004, pp. 3-4). While Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) identified the turning points that could alter the life trajectories of deviant and criminal men, my objective is to delve into “how” and “why” these, as well as other turning points, were able to influence change in the lives of serious and violent offenders. The strength of the life course approach rests in its ability to link the implications of early life experiences with later life outcomes; one cannot be understood without the other (Laub, 2004).
There is still much to learn about the desistance process. To properly grasp the meaning of desistance within the context of entrenched gang membership, life-history narratives were employed. Laub and Sampson (2003), in their study of the Glueck men, found that life-history narratives helped them “unpack mechanisms that connect salient life events across the life course, especially regarding personal choice and situational context” (p. 10). Additionally, the use of life-narratives allows for a more detailed examination of human lives because it offers “a potent, systematic framework for studying the human change process from the perspective of the individual” (Maruna, 1999, p. 13). Only through this methodology was it possible for the current research to draw out the in-depth level of knowledge needed to understand the inner workings of the desistance process as it applied to a group of former first-generation gang members.

The current study is unique in that it combines a life course theoretical perspective with individual life stories to study and understand the desistance process in gang membership. This strategy allows entry into the worlds of Boston’s former gang members—a world in which the subjects navigate their paths of development as best they can. “Human development is embedded in the individual’s life course and historical time” (Elder, 1998, p. 9). Therefore, to fully comprehend the challenges of life, we need to take into account all the life stages, from childhood to adulthood.

**Persistence and Desistance in Gang Membership**

The focus of this chapter is to examine and understand the processes of stability and change in the life course of a group of serious and violent offenders. The adolescent experiences of the subjects in this study were strongly influenced by the time period of the mid to late 1980’s. Impacted by the changes in neighborhood characteristics, and shaped by the social institutions of
family, friends, and education, they developed and led the re-emergence of the street gang culture in Boston. Their exposure to and involvement in the illegal crack cocaine trade, the street gang culture, and the carrying and use of firearms set them on a pathway in life devoid of any positive long-term outcomes.

Prior gang research has established that “Being a member of a street gang facilitates delinquent behavior” (Thornberry et al., 2003, p. 179). Delinquent behavior can be thought of as including selling drugs, perpetrating violence, being a victim of violence, having a heightened exposure to violence, and having long-term involvement in the criminal justice system. In addition to the impact of delinquent behaviors on the gang member’s life course, Thornberry et al. suggest that stable gang membership also significantly increases the odds of dropping out of school, impregnating a girl, being a teenage father, and experiencing unstable employment (p. 179). Thus, it can be assumed that core gang members, with a long duration of gang affiliation, will be significantly disadvantaged as they attempt to successfully transition into adulthood (p. 7).

Sampson and Laub (1993) believe that a different outcome is possible for men with deviant and criminal backgrounds. They contend that “life-event transitions and adult social bonds can modify quite different childhood trajectories” (p. 24). By bringing together the juvenile period with the adult life course, a more unified picture of human development is produced—one in which individual behavior can be mediated over time through interaction with age-graded social institutions (1993).

Maruna (2001) also believes that change is possible for serious offenders, but he takes a more cognitive approach in understanding this transformation. He suggests that, “Subjective aspects of human life (emotions, thoughts, motivations, and goals) have largely been neglected in
the study of crime” (p. 8). Maruna argues that individual’s interpret and react to situations in various ways according to their beliefs, judgments, and experiences. Therefore, to adequately examine the persistence in and desistance from criminal behavior, it is not enough to just have the structural correlates that predict desistance; it also requires the cognitive mediators that influence individual behavior and lead to the individual’s commitment to self-transformation (p. 8).

Understanding Persistence and Desistance

To study stability and change in the lives of Boston’s former gang members over the life course, we first have to define and understand the concepts of persistence and desistance. Laub and Sampson (2003) contend that defining the terms of desistance and persistence is “fraught with difficulty” (p. 18). According to Maruna (2001), “One obstacle to understanding desistance from crime is the lack of a clear definition of just what this thing is that we hope to understand” (p. 22).

For the purposes of this study, “persistence” is defined as having been “arrested at multiple phases of the life course.” And, “phases of the life course” will be defined as follows: juvenile years (ages 7-17); young adult years (ages 18-32); and adult years (ages 33-54) (see Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 150). This definition also incorporates Maruna’s (2001) “persistent offender” whom he describes as an individual that “at some point in their life has been engaged in a sustained period of very high-frequency offending” (p. 13).

Desistance is a more complicated process to define. Laub and Sampson (2003) suggest that to understand within-individual change over time, “it is first important to distinguish termination of offending from the concept of desistance” (p. 21). They define termination as “the point at which one stops criminal activity, whereas desistance is the causal process that supports
the termination of offending” (p. 21). Laub and Sampson (2003) believe that termination and desistance are explicitly linked to the cessation of crime, with termination representing the “outcome” and desistance representing the driving forces that lead one to discontinue engaging in criminal activity. For Laub and Sampson, desistance is viewed as a series of gradual steps that evolve over time, and that involve both social transition and transformation, rather than an individually distinct event (p. 22).

Maruna (2001) defines desistance as “The long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending” (26). More specifically, Maruna’s version of desistance is a “maintenance” process that is a continuous “work in progress,” particularly when the ex-offender is dealing with personal challenges and feelings of discouragement (p. 26). Both of these perspectives—Sampson and Laub (2003) and Maruna (2001)—integrate well with one another and will serve as the basis from which desistance will be understood.

Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) strove to identify what factors explain stability and change over the life course. In Crime and the Making (1993), they concluded that “‘turning points’ related to work, marriage, and military service were crucial for understanding processes of continuity and change across the adult life course” (p. 6). In Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70 (2003), they expanded their explanation to include “human agency, situational influences and contexts, and historical context,” to delve further into understanding criminal behavior, and the persistence and desistance from crime (p. 54).

The current research also strives to identify the factors that explain stability and change over the life course, but from a different perspective. Chapter 4 examined the influences of neighborhood, family and friends, and education and their role in the subject’s transition into
gang membership. The current chapter revisits those same areas in an attempt to understand their roles, if any, in the processes of desistance and persistence. Thus, desistance and persistence is explored from the context of neighborhood, the social control institutions of family and friends, and education. Additionally, following the lead of Laub and Sampson (2003), the current study includes human agency, situational influences, and historical context to further understand the subjects’ success in or inability to desist from crime.

Detailed life-history narratives were used to delve into the subjects’ experiences throughout their lives. Some subjects identified specific turning points, while others had no turning points in their lives. Based on their narratives, neighborhood, family and friends, and education—both individually and collectively—played critical roles in their lives, both positively and negatively. For many of the subjects who experienced positive change, strong social support networks were in place to assist them in their desistance process.

As suggested by Laub and Sampson (2003), “defining and identifying desistance is problematic. Classification schemes that posit ‘desisters’ as formally distinguishable from ‘persisters’ or other offenders are at some level arbitrary and suspect” (p. 115). The current research is also challenged by this thin line of understanding. In distinguishing “desisters” from “persisters,” I relied heavily on the subjects’ retrospective accounts of their life experiences and their ability to restore “meaningful” social ties in their adult lives, their ability to resist the temptation to move back into crime by taking control of their lives (human agency), and the recency of offending based on their criminal history records. Those falling into the persister category were unable to implement these restorative steps. While I identify the subjects as either persisters or desisters based on Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) and Maruna’s (2001) classic
definitions, I was conflicted at points in being able to fit some subjects neatly into one of the two categories.\textsuperscript{21} Overall, the vast majority of the subjects were in a constant state of struggle. With that being said, I concluded that 21 subjects fit into the category of desisters. Their roads to desistance involved a wide-range of influences (often in combination with one another), including the structural turning points of age and maturation, family (marriage, parenthood) and friends, neighborhood, work, education, religion, prison, the death of someone close, and adult mentorship. Four subjects were identified as persisters based on their offending histories over all phases of their life course. And five subjects were placed into a third, intermediate category due to their determined yet unsuccessful efforts to reach the goal of desistance from crime. This group was neither persisters nor desisters. Through their words, decisions, and actions, they were trending towards desistance, but were not yet there; thus, they best fit within this indeterminate state between crime and redemption (see Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 196).

**Desistence through Age and Maturation: James and Cedric**

Perhaps the simplest explanation for desistence is the theory of the age distribution on crime, which posits that “age has a direct effect on crime” (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983, p. 573). According to Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983), criminal activity increases during adolescence, peaks around age 17 and then declines as the individual moves into adulthood. They contend that the age distribution on crime is invariant across time, place, demography, and types of crimes, and that this has been the case for the past 150 years. Their steadfast position is that there are no

\textsuperscript{21} I adopted Laub and Sampson’s (2003) strategy of “not consider[ing] arrests for minor motor vehicle violations as counting against the men in terms of desistance” (p. 115).
correlates to the age-crime discussion other than age itself. Their evaluation of life course explanations of desistance and crime are equally consistent. They believe that linking age and desistance to important life events such as marriage and employment are misleading. “Age affects crime whether or not these events occur” (1983, p. 580). For Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990), there is only one explanation for the individual’s desistance from crime and that is “due to the inexorable aging of the organism” (p. 141).

This section examines the impact of age and maturation on desistence. It begins with the life-history narratives of James and Cedric, two of the oldest subjects in the study. James’ story is one of lost opportunity, drug addiction and serious and violent crime, and the potential of life in prison. Age and maturation combined with fear of prison was the shock that changed his way of life. For Cedric, there was no event or epiphany that freed him from a life of deviant and criminal behavior; it was purely a matter of getting older and growing tired of crime.

James: James represents one of the two neighborhood street offenders in the study. He grew up in the 37th Street housing projects. As a child and adolescent, James’ home life was a good one. Both of his parents were in his life, and they had a loving relationship. James’ father worked hard to take care of his family, but at the same time, he always made time for him and his siblings. He described his mother as a good woman, who also worked and ran the household. James recalled that his parents established rules in the house and he abided by them. He also remembered supervision in the house as being firm, but not overly strict.

James’ childhood and adolescent years were quite normal in many respects. Born into a supportive and loving environment, he was also a gifted athlete, and his future held great potential.
I grew up pretty much the basketball star in the projects. I went to high school, I liked school, and I graduated. Later I got my associates degree. I was a high school basketball star. I was actually an honorable mention All-American in high school. I could have gone anywhere to school in the country, but I chose to stay home and attend college locally. I was respected by the up and coming gang members, they looked up to me, and not just because of my basketball abilities. Growing up in 37th Street you learned how to fight and I was a pretty good fighter, I have to admit that. I was tough, I didn’t take no junk from nobody. I wasn’t a bully, but if you got into a fight with me, more likely than not you’re getting beat up. So I earned my respect. Looking back on it now, as much as I was part of being someone that was looked up to for doing the right things, I was also part of the problem because I had issues in my life that would later send me to prison.

While the structural components of James’ life appeared to be on good footing, there was another pathway forming that would eventually overtake and negate the good work done by his parents, who strived to raise their family in a conventional manner. James started drinking and smoking marijuana when he was about 14 years old. In high school, he sniffed his first line of cocaine and by the time he was in college, his use of cocaine had become more serious. “I’m about 20 or 21, I’m partying a lot, sniffing a lot of coke. I’m still playing basketball, but not knowing this little monkey is growing in me, this little chip is getting bigger and bigger.”

After college is when things really started to spiral out of control for James. For a short time, he played professional basketball and he invested the money he made in the drug trade with his younger cousins who ran the 37th Street gang. Having acquired a serious cocaine habit, he now became curious about crack, which was making its way into the neighborhoods. At the age of approximately 24, James tried crack cocaine and the results were devastating.
It was the worst thing I could have ever done. I lost everything and it turned me into a different person. I turned to a life of crime. I put a pistol in my waistband and I went on a one-man crime spree through the City of Boston. I got busted for a bunch of store robberies. They originally charged me with 15 armed robberies, but to be honest with you, I think I robbed 40 stores. I got indicted and I went to prison. Crack made me a monster, I didn’t trust myself, it took everything. It took my dignity, it took my soul – phew. It put me in a black hole that I thought I could never get out of. I’m still not out.

At age 40, James was arrested for a stolen car—a fairly minor charge in comparison to the more serious crime of armed robbery for which he was known. But, unbeknownst to James, after years of violent offending, he was now eligible to be charged as a habitual offender, an offense that carried a potential sentence of life in prison. “I was scared, I was very scared. I’m 40 years old. They’re going to hang me. They’re going to give me 15 years to life, I’ll be getting out when I’m 55, 60 years old, my life is over then.”

James was held in jail for the next two years while he awaited trial. On the day of the trial, the witness didn’t show up and the charges were dropped. “It was God’s mercy, he spared me. For some reason that made me say to myself, he’s not done with me.” James described this experience as the turning point in his life. “That was definitely the turning point in my life because I had already lost enough time. I didn’t want to go to prison for the rest of my life.”

James came home in 2006. By his own admission, drug use has still affected his life and he has relapsed on several occasions, resulting in additional criminal justice system involvement. His criminal record indicates that he has been crime-free since 2009. James is proud to say that he has been clean for the past three years. “I just take it one day at a time.”

James’ recovery process has included family and work:
Family has definitely been a big support for me. Everyone in my family knows what I should have done with my life. They’ve seen me fall and they’ve seen me get back up and they have remained supportive. They don’t sugarcoat nothing with me. When I was out in the streets and when I was in prison, they showed me tough love. They didn’t condone it, they didn’t support it, they taught me right from wrong. But, when I was on the right track and doing what I needed to do, they were very supportive. Family has always been supportive.

Prior to 2006, James had no work history. When he came home from prison, he worked at a temp agency before being hired as a youth worker. James recalled that being in prison gave him time to think about life. “It made me think about wanting to do good in life and it made me want to help young people.” James was a youth worker for almost four years before having a setback with his drug addiction and losing his job. He also coached basketball at his old high school. Most recently, he has been a seasonal worker for the City of Boston. “I want to work for my money. Work is a necessity for me, I need to work to stay productive.”

When I asked James to discuss how he deals with the temptations of moving back into crime, he responded, “I don’t think about crime. I’m at a point in my life where I know that if I even spit on the sidewalk they’re going to lock me up forever. And I got to ask myself, do I want that? I ask myself this question all the time. I just want to live. I don’t want to go to prison for the rest of my life. I just want to be a citizen.”

At the time of his interview, James was living in transitional housing and shared an apartment with three other men. He was comfortable, but concerned about his future, particularly job security. Several months after my interview with James, he called me to let me know he had just gotten a full-time job. He was very happy.
**Analysis:** James’ road to desistance was long and arduous, and his drug addiction issues will be a life-long battle. In his study of ex-offenders, Maruna (2001) found that drug use and criminal behavior were directly linked. His analysis suggests that many long-term recidivist offenders are addicts with continued involvement in crime. He concludes that for one to reach a successful level of desistance, abstaining from both drug use and criminal activity is required (2001). James recognized this: “I’m working hard at it. I still play in a few basketball leagues, that’s part of my therapy along with going to NA meetings. You’ve got to have a release, something to get rid of the stress, and for me playing ball and working out does it for me.”

While age and maturation, and the fear of going to prison were turning points for James, steady work may be the most important factor to his ultimate success in desisting from crime. Laub and Sampson (2003) found that having stable employment was strongly associated with desistance. They contend that “full-time legal employment gives structure to one’s time and provides fewer opportunities for offending and other forms of deviance. Work is central to structured routines. The simple fact is that people who work are kept busy and less likely to get in trouble” (p. 47).

Now in his fifties, James’ life appears to be coming together. The age and maturation process that began at age 40 has slowly started to show some positive results. With the social institutions of family and work in place, as well as his personal resolve to succeed, James may reach the potential he always knew he had. When I asked him if life has improved from childhood to young adulthood, and now adulthood, he stated, “It’s improved immensely. Three years ago I wouldn’t have said the same thing.”

**Cedric:** Cedric grew up in the L Street Projects and is an original member of the LA Boys gang. Before transitioning into the gang at age 27, Cedric was already embedded in the
neighborhood drug culture. He was raised by his mother, who loved him. Cedric described his father as being an alcoholic who hung around the neighborhood, but was not part of his life. He remembered his mother telling him stories of how he used to beat her. Cedric was one of seven boys in the house. He remembered his mother having rules for the house, but they didn’t apply to him. Cedric graduated from high school, but those years were mostly wasted in that he had attendance problems and he spent almost all his time smoking weed, drinking, and selling drugs.

In addition to his early start in the neighborhood drug culture, Cedric’s gang career lasted 16 years. His criminal history reflects the most sustained and high level of offending of any subject in the study. The first entry on his criminal history record was in 1975 at age 13, and the majority of his crimes were concentrated in the areas of drugs, assaults, robberies, and larcenies. His history of incarceration was equally consistent, with long and short stints in prison starting in his late teens, into his early and mid-20’s, through his 30’s, and finally into his mid-40’s. Interspersed in this revolving door of incarceration were drug addiction issues with cocaine. “I had challenges with drug addiction, but it was my decision to use drugs. It was hard at times, but it was also part of the lifestyle that I grew up in.” Cedric’s involvement in the criminal justice system ended in 2013, culminating in a criminal career of almost 38 years.

In looking back on his life, Cedric expressed regret, especially as it related to his gang involvement. “All that time I spent in the streets, it was a waste of time. I wish I could have started my life over. I should have a house, I should be taking care of my family, I should be retiring soon. It’s funny, my brothers and sisters grew up in the same life as me, but they just never took the turn that I did and they’re doing well.”

Cedric’s desistance from deviant and criminal behavior is a classic example of the age distribution of crime rationale (Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983). This combined with the lack of
turning point events in his life, and his inability to cut himself off from past negative influences, has limited his pursuit of a normal life. “I can’t say there was a turning point event. I just guess my running days are over. When I think about it actually, there was no turning point in my life, you just get old and mature, you know.”

Growing up in the L Street Projects and being entrenched in the gang and drug culture were high points in Cedric’s life. “When I was heavy into selling drugs it was a good lifestyle. Back then it was easy money. I had nice things and any time I wanted, I could just get up, jump on the highway and go to New York. Just make quick decisions without even thinking about it.”

But it was this same lifestyle that severely limited Cedric’s opportunities in life and ultimately established his identity as that of a career criminal. Eventually, Cedric recognized that if he had any chance of moving away from crime, he needed to separate himself from the neighborhood. “When I was out of there it helped keep me away the street stuff.”

But this realization came too late in life for Cedric. By this point, he had been in and out of prison for a total of almost 15 years, with his last stint coming at the age of 42-45 years of age. Even though Cedric understood that the neighborhood was the worst place he could be in terms of the temptations of crime, he still returned to the projects after being released from prison. “Going back to the old neighborhood after getting out of jail was different. The people I used to hang with wasn’t even out there anymore. Anybody down there now were new faces, plus they were just younger. I guess once you’re dead or gone, it’s gonna be someone else claiming the neighborhood.”

In the end it was not so much a case of Cedric having the strength and motivation to separate himself from the neighborhood in order to better himself, because he did not. It was
more of a situation where the neighborhood had passed him by and the hard reality that he no longer fit into the environment where he had spent almost his entire life.

The pull of the neighborhood and its negative influence on Cedric’s life, as well as his inability to identify any turning points or even positive influences, has resulted in his life being at a standstill and his future prospects appear to be dim. Regarding family, Cedric stated that he has a good relationship with them. His mother is still alive and he speaks regularly with brothers and sisters. “They’re all supportive. They know I am having a difficult time and I know they would help. I don’t really want to ask them for anything. I’m a man, I should be able to handle my own problems, but I’m pretty sure that if I needed anything, they would be there.”

Because of his past criminal offending, Cedric’s work history is scattered and he has held only lower-level laborer-type positions. He has been employed for the past three years working in a restaurant. “Work has helped me. It made me feel good when I first started working, I didn’t have to be in the street getting money. When checks started coming in it made me feel good about myself, that I could help support my family.”

Cedric has been married for 10 years and credits his wife with keeping him on the right path, although he acknowledged there are some problems between them. He stated that his wife wanted nothing to do with his past and that he hasn’t been totally forthcoming about all the things he has been involved in. “When I met her, I wasn’t really honest with her, I didn’t want to share where I’ve come from and all the stuff I did. So basically, she don’t even know everything.” Cedric stated that he has had a tough road in life, but hopes the future holds better things for him.

**Analysis:** In many ways, Cedric’s life reflects what Maruna (2001) refers to as the “burnt-out” ex-convict (p. 151). In this context, “defiant rebels eventually lose the youthful spirit
and passion required to maintain a deviant lifestyle in the face of repeated failure” (p. 151). For Cedric, this appears to be the case. “For me I don’t have the strength to do it again. It’s not what I’m looking for now, it’s in the past.”

Growing up, Cedric did not have available to him a strong family structure. Raised by his mother and as one of seven in the household with no father to guide him (Cedric’s words), the pressure on his mother to properly supervise and monitor him and his brothers put her in an unenviable position. According to Pinderhughes (2002), “Father absence coupled with lack of supervision of the children predisposes them to delinquency. Mothers are often overwhelmed, unskilled, and may lack nurturing supports that would help them to function as effective parents” (p. 279). By age 13, the pull of the neighborhood and the streets had its hold on Cedric and he would embark on a criminal career that would last over 30 years.

In adulthood, with no turning point events or “meaningful” attachments involving family, work, or marriage\(^22\) to fall back on, he faced potentially insurmountable odds of regaining his life. It is not that Cedric is resisting conformity, it is more a case of him lacking those important relationships that can provide informal social control and social support that can move him forward (Laub & Sampson, 2003). Of greater concern is Cedric’s mind-set when it comes to moving back into crime. “Yeah, it’s a strong temptation and the thoughts do come to mind, you know.”

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\(^{22}\)Laub and Sampson (2003) posit that marriage “especially, strong marital attachment” is an important component of desistance (p. 41). They also suggest that marriage “characterized by weak or nonexistent attachment, continued offending will occur” (p. 44). In Cedric’s case, I found his marital attachment to be weak. I based this on his statements that he was not honest with his wife about his past criminal life, and his reference that there were problems between them.
As he moves into his mid-50’s, Cedric is trying, but struggling. His inability to summon the personal resolve to break away from his past as well as the lack of informal social support networks available to him have delayed, if not stopped his forward progress, leaving him teetering on the edge of moving back into crime.

**Desistence through Religion: Joseph and Chris**

Many of the subjects in the study made references to God and religion during the interview process. In most cases these references were made at times when they were either facing serious criminal justice sanctions (“If God gets me out of this”) or they had somehow avoided those sanctions (“God spared me”). In only two cases did subjects explicitly identify religion as being the primary turning point in their lives. This finding is consistent with both Laub and Sampson (2003) and Giordano et al. (2008), who found that formal religion was an important catalyst for only a small percentage of their samples. For both Joseph and Chris, their religious conversions took place in the prison setting.

**Joseph:** Joseph was about 20 years old and facing what amounted to be a life sentence in prison for gun and drug violations when his change took place. He remembered calling his mother, “Ma, they just came in and offered me 46 years. She was like, ‘God got your back against the wall. You can’t run no more.’” During his gang career, Joseph was a serious and violent offender, yet he had not spent any significant time in jail. The potential outcome of this incident scared him for the first time. “After talking with my mother, I went in the cell and I cut the light off and I had a conversation with God.” In this conversation, Joseph vowed to change if he was given another chance and it appeared to work. “My lawyer came up two days later and he said, ‘They’re going to let you out on probation.’”
When Joseph was released from jail, he did two things. First, he quit the gang life and started going to church. And second, he went to his stash house. “I gave every single thing I had away, guns, drugs, and my bullet-proof vest and I never looked back.” Since 2002, according to Joseph’s criminal records history, he has had only two criminal incidents of note.\(^\text{23}\) Today, he remains a full-fledged member of his church.

**Chris:** Chris’ situation was slightly different in that he was already serving a significant sentence in jail when religion came into his life. “I got locked up in 1989 and I didn’t get serious about religion until 1994. But that was the key for me. That was the turning point. My arrest was a rescue mission by God. It was necessary for me, it allowed me to grow and mature. If I had beat my case, I would have jumped right back into the street life feeling invincible, feeling like superman, and I know it would have got worse from there.” Chris was released from prison in the late 1990’s. He has remained loyal to his religious teachings and those who mentored him. He has also been crime-free since that time.

**Desistence through the Influence of Neighborhood: Reggie and Tony**

Long-term neighborhood effects such as poverty, family disruption, crime, and violence have added a level of complexity to the change process for the vast majority of subjects. For most of the subjects, the only time they were away from the neighborhoods was when they were incarcerated. Only one subject in the study left Boston in order to change his life. For the other subjects, work, family and friends, and everyday activities continue to take place in the same neighborhoods where they were serious and violent offenders. Thus, in order to successfully

\(^{23}\) Since 2002, according to Joseph’s criminal records history, he has had only two criminal incidents of note: a domestic violence arrest resulting in a six-month prison sentence and a felony motor vehicle violation, which was ultimately dismissed.
move away from their past lifestyles, the subjects had to overcome the unrelenting pressure of the streets, a hurdle that some are not able to get over.

**Reggie:** Reggie grew up in the 37th Street housing projects with his mother and four sisters, and early life was a difficult time for him. “It was a tough place. People were poor, it was not a good living experience. There were a lot of guns, drugs, and prostitution – things kids should not grow up around – it was really a dark place in the 80’s.” Within this challenging environment, Reggie’s mother practiced tough love in raising her five children. “My mom was tough, she loved us to death, but she was a stern woman. She taught us to take care of ourselves, never let no one do anything to you. She told us to guard ourselves as best we could.”

Reggie’s early adolescent years were marked by gang membership and an inordinate amount of death. “My cousin George was murdered when I was about 13. Then my grandfather passed away, he had diabetes. In 1987, my father died, he was an alcoholic and my friend Craig was murdered. My cousin Renaldo was murdered in 1988, and another friend Thomas was killed around 1991. And there were others, I experienced a lot of death.”

Reggie’s gang career started at age 13 and ended at age 31. His role in the gang was that of an enforcer, and his recollections of that time suggest that he was an extremely violent individual. He was in and out of juvenile detention during early adolescence and he was incarcerated in state prison as a young adult. According to Reggie, all of his crimes involved violence and not drugs.

Reggie’s memories of his gang years reflect a deep sense of friendship and camaraderie, set within an environment of complete dysfunction. “When I was growing up the gang was always there for me, they had my back. A lot of times when I was young, I slept in the hallway or outside. My own family members would not open the door for me. The gang was there for me.
We used to live in empty apartments, there were a lot of empty apartments in the projects. We would crack the locks off, put mattresses in and move in.”

With no male role models in their lives, Reggie and the gang had to rely on themselves to recreate and improvise on those childhood events that ideally should have been shared by a father and son. “Mostly, all of us had no fathers. I can never recall any fathers coming out and saying, ‘we’re going to take you out to go play basketball, or baseball, or to a movie.’ It was none of that. It was just us. We took each other to the movies or we figured out how to put together a football team without pads, it was really tough growing up down there, but we really loved each other.”

It was clear during the interview process that Reggie was troubled by some of the things he witnessed and was involved in during his gang years.

There was a lot of death. You had to do certain things, you had to do things in order to make a name, nasty things. Sometimes it got to you, its like, ‘Man, I just want to live life. I just want to have fun. I don’t want to be out here in the streets. I remember in 1988, my cousin was shot in the back of the head with a shotgun and I went to the service. I was by myself and I looked at him. His head wasn’t the way it was supposed to be, it swells up, it doesn’t look right. I promised myself then that I’m never gonna let nobody do nothing like that to me, and I took that really, really serious.

Reggie reflected on his past gang life with a sense of relief, regret, and uncertainty.

Today, there’s a lot of us who are gone. A lot of my friends are dead. A lot of guys from other neighborhoods are dead. We were all major players, so when I see guys from that time, it’s like, we’re just happy we made it through that time. Those were bad times.

Those were not glorious times in our lives. A lot of guys from that time are drug addicts,
some of them are paralyzed, and some are in jail for the rest of their lives. A lot of the stuff I did was wrong, but I’m happy I made it. I’m happy that I’m alive, because there’s a lot that didn’t make it. Once you make that ultimate decision to cross over into the gang life, that’s a decision that’s going to carry with you for the rest of your life. Just walking down the street ain’t the same, looking over your shoulder, always wondering if.

Reggie got married at age 27 and he credits his wife with changing his life. He has been married for 15 years and has six children. His two oldest (in their early 20’s) are from a previous relationship and he has four children (ages 7-18) with his current spouse. For the first four years of marriage, Reggie was still a member of the gang and running the streets. The true pivotal change point in his life came when he decided to leave Boston after the death of a close friend, which was also the point at which he quit the gang life. “It was 2004, a friend of mine named Juwan was killed. It woke me up, because this guy, he never did nothing to nobody, he was a good guy, he took care of his elderly mother who was sick. When I heard he got killed, it really affected me. By this point my wife was tired, because I was still in the streets. She said to me, ‘we need a change.’ I knew she was ready to go, and she was stern about it, she was like, ‘I’m leaving whether you leave or not.’”

This was a crucial point in Reggie’s life, and the decision he made would ultimately define his future. At first he wasn’t sure—not because he didn’t love his wife, but because he would be leaving family as well as the neighborhood, which is all he had known in life. He sought guidance from his aunt, who told him, “It’s time for you to go, there’s another life out there for you.” After initially wavering, Reggie decided he would go. “I was like, ‘if I stay here, I’m going to end up in the street. Or, do I go with my wife and we continue to grow. My thing
was, I want to grow. So I took her and the kids and we moved down south and we were able to find a different life.”

For Reggie, leaving Boston was the best decision he could have made. The change of environment and the stability of marriage and family changed the trajectory of his life. “Moving down south pulled me away from the projects and gave me a chance to see what life was about. The living I was doing, I was killing myself and basically, trying to kill other people. The benefits of moving away from the gang have been tremendous for me, it allowed me to be a normal person.”

Reggie and his family were away for nine years. They returned to Boston about two years ago because of his father-in-law’s death. The transition back has presented challenges and also opportunities.

The last couple of years have been tough. When we moved back, we gave away everything just to come back, because her father passed away. We had trouble finding housing and we had to stay with relatives. My wife now works at one of the hospitals and she is making good money. Things are starting to come together. When we came back to Boston, we loved it, it had changed so much. I don’t worry about my past, that life is over and I will never go back to it. I see myself doing good in this city. Boston will be a good place for me and my family. My life is improving. It’s improved a lot since I was a child. I weathered the storm. I think I’m going to do good. I think I’m okay.

*Analysis:* In his 18-year gang career, Reggie was exposed to an overwhelming amount of violence, both as a perpetrator and as a victim, and he still carries with him today the long-term, negative effects of gang membership. His ability to overcome this level of trauma is
confounding in many ways and his apparent adjustment to mainstream life is a story of unexpected resiliency.

Reggie’s desistance from crime was strongly influenced by the concepts of neighborhood and family and friends. The loss of his friend Juwan to street violence brought him to the realization that he needed to change. His decision to leave the neighborhood provided him with a clean slate and a new start in rebuilding his life. And marriage and parenthood gave him the stability and strength to continue to move away from his past life.

Now in his mid-40’s, marriage continues to be the most stabilizing force in Reggie’s life. Laub and Sampson (2003) suggest that marriage acts as an investment process that, over time, incrementally strengthens the offender’s resistance to the temptations of crime because now there is much to lose. They maintain that “social ties in marriage are important insofar as they create interdependent systems of obligation and restraint that impose significant costs for translating criminal propensities into action” (pp. 41-42).

Laub and Sampson (2003) also put forth that marriage may influence desistance through “the direct social control exerted by spouses” (p. 43). Reggie’s wife sternly put him on notice that it was time for a change. Additionally, Reggie’s wife exercises direct social control by financially supporting the family. Reggie’s work life is not a strong component in his life. His work history reflects a series of low-level menial type jobs with no longevity attached to any of them. Reggie openly acknowledges that his wife is the breadwinner in the house and he is a stay-at-home father. Thus, as the primary income earner in the household, Reggie’s wife wields considerable direct social control. Reggie’s continuing commitment to his wife has withstood the test of time and this may help explain his ability to remain crime-free for 10 years.
Directly related to marriage is family, and Reggie’s strong attachments to his children has also solidified his position in life. By all accounts he is a good father who loves his children and is involved in their lives. Thus, it seems quite plausible that marriage augmented by parenthood is serving to further strengthen Reggie’s desistance process.

Finally, Reggie is the only subject who took the dramatic step of leaving the neighborhood in order to transition away from gang membership and crime. This change in his everyday activities played an important part in his overall change process: “One day after we were settled down south, my wife said to me, ‘Why don’t you go out and meet some new people?’ And I said to her, ‘No, I’m okay. New people mean new problems.’ I’m like, ‘I’m settled into my new life right now. I’m fine with being who I am right now. I don’t need friends to validate who I am. I get validation from my kids.’ Moving away allowed my life to become much more easy. I became a citizen.”

Tony: While Reggie and Tony’s early life experiences were similar in many ways, their stories of change reflected divergent pathways. Reggie’s decision to leave Boston gave him the opportunity to start over and rebuild his life. Tony’s road to desistance differed and was a more challenging one in that he returned home from prison as an ex-offender, facing the pressures of the neighborhood to move back into crime, and understanding that he had to move beyond his past gang life in order to succeed. In order for Tony to achieve a crime-free life, an intensive effort was required.

Tony grew up in a broken home with no father and an alcoholic mother, and he did not attend high school. By age 15, he was in the gang and living on his own in rooming houses and with different girls. By age 19, he had three children with two different mothers. During his gang career, he was extremely active as both a perpetrator and victim of violence, being shot or
stabbed 17 times. At age 21, he went to federal prison for six years for selling crack cocaine. It was in that setting that he decided he needed to change. “I did my time. I wasn’t in there complaining, but I decided when I came home I’m leaving this life behind me and that’s what I did, I left it behind me.”

Tony’s assessment of his gang life paralleled that of Reggie, particularly in the areas of the gang as family and the remorse of bad decision making.

I joined a gang, I joined it for a reason. At that time I had no real family, nobody cared about me. The gang was my family, with the gang I had a team behind me. I did what I wanted to, selling drugs and doing all the wrong things. If I could turn back the hands of time I would have done it different, but at the time it meant a lot to me. You live with the decisions you make in life. I don’t blame anyone for what happened in my life. Being in the gang, selling drugs, doing shootings, getting shot. Other kids went to school, graduated from college, I went to jail. I had choices and I made the bad choice.

The lingering effects of gang membership was a consistent theme among the subjects, indicating that past adversarial relationships and unresolved conflicts were not yet forgotten.

Being in the gang still affects my life today. I’m real nervous when I go to different neighborhoods, even though I got respect. Some of these young guys don’t care about what you did back in the day. Sometimes your past can catch up to you, cause of the dirt you did in the past. An old enemy comes home from jail after doing 20 years and they don’t care if you’re working or you’re married, they don’t care nothing about that – so you got to be real careful and cautious where you go.

The day Tony came home from prison was the day he quit the gang. He prepared himself well for his transition from prison to home. His mind-set coming home was that he wasn’t going
back to the streets, but he also knew he would be tested. “When I came home from prison there were definitely temptations. Temptations all the time and peer pressure to get back in the streets, but you got to keep it together.”

Tony focused on getting a job. He knew if he was working he would be able to take care of himself and not be tempted back to the streets. He was also fortunate in that he had people supporting him. “I had a lot of push behind me, a lot of people calling me. When they told me to be somewhere, I was there.” Tony’s first job was as a laborer for a construction company.

“It was a Monday. I went to the job site and spoke to the boss. I said, ‘I just came home from prison, could I sweep around the construction site, could I help out wherever?’ He told me to come back on Friday, I was in his office on Wednesday. He said to me, ‘I told you to come on Friday,’ and I said, ‘I’m here right now.’ He decided to hire me.”

I asked Tony why he thought the boss took an interest in him. “Probably because I was thirsty, you go to a job interview like you really want it, if you don’t they’re not gonna hire you.” Tony’s first opportunity at legitimate work gave him the motivation needed to deal with the temptations of the streets. Interestingly, and likely related to his former role as a leader of the gang, it also influenced some of his close friends to move away from the temptations of crime and follow his example. “When I first came home and I started working, everybody followed behind me and started working. None of us really wanted to go back to the streets.”

Since coming home in 2001, Tony has continued to grow as a person in both his work life and in his commitment to the community in which he spent much of his life. At the same time, he has had several setbacks. In the roughly 14 years he has been home, he has been charged with four criminal offenses. One of the offenses resulted in court-imposed supervision, while the other
incidents were all dismissed. At the time of his interview, and according to his criminal record history, Tony had been crime-free for six years.

Today, I got three jobs. I’m a chef, I work in a hospital, and I do construction on the side. Add all that up and I’m taking care of myself. I love to cook and I like working with people. At the hospital I work with a lot of people that ain’t gonna make it, so that keeps me motivated. Also, and a lot of people don’t know this, is that for the last five years I volunteer on Saturday’s at the Boys and Girls Club in a basketball league. I’m trying to get to the kids before they get involved in the streets. They know who I am, they know the road I’ve been down. I think they’re listening to me. Overall, my life has improved. The things I’m doing in life are right, the decisions I’m making are right. I’ve come a long way from the streets, gang banging, and federal prison.

**Analysis:** Tony was a gang member for 12 years and, like Reggie, he grew up hard with no family ties other than those with the gang. His youth was spent in the street gangbanging and selling drugs, and his victimization scars serve as a daily reminder of his gang life during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. His emerging adult years were spent in prison, and it was during this time that he decided he did not want to spend the rest of his life in prison. By mentally preparing himself to come home and having a game plan in place, he started to take control of his life. Laub and Sampson (2003) describe this control process as human agency, or the individual’s ability to “be an active player in their destiny, especially when their actions project a new sense of a redeemed self” (p. 55). Tony’s human agency took two forms. First, by returning to the neighborhood, he exposed himself to and withstood the peer pressure to move back into the gang life and the temptations of easy money through drug selling. Second, by obtaining legitimate
employment, Tony was able to sustain himself economically, while at the same time establishing a structured daily routine that occupied his time and provided a sense of accomplishment.

In order to fend off the continuous pressure of the neighborhood environment, work became the primary social agency that kept Tony moving forward in a positive direction. According to Uggen and Staff (2001), “Employment remains one of the most important vehicles for hastening offender reintegration and desistance from crime” (p. 1). Sampson and Laub (1993) believe that work, on its own, is not enough to initiate and sustain the change process. In their Theory of Age-Graded Social Control, they stress the importance of the quality and strength of social ties over isolated and unrelated life events. They contend that a decrease in criminal and deviant behavior occurs when employment is coupled with job stability, job commitment, and mutual ties to work. Lastly, Matsueda and Heimer’s (1997) interactionist approach follows this same line of thinking. They maintain that for work to have a true impact on the individual’s desistance from crime, it must be meaningful. “When work means more than simply having a job, when it is tied to long-term commitment, when it leads to reference groups that disdain crime, and when it brings prestige and status and thus self-esteem and a positive attitude, it can be an important restraint from crime” (p. 200).

Tony’s decision to stay connected to the Drexler Park neighborhood and his childhood friends and, at the same time, remain crime-free required him to establish a strong social support network. Since coming home 15 years ago, it has been the social mechanism of work that has, for the most part, kept Tony distanced from his past lifestyle. Work has been meaningful, satisfying, and motivational for Tony, and in the next five years he hopes to own his own business. In their study of the Glueck men, Laub and Sampson (2003) concluded that “Most offenders desist in response to structurally induced turning points that serve as the catalyst for
sustaining long-term behavioral change” (p. 149). Maruna (2001) contends that the individual’s desistance from crime goes beyond the impact of social control agencies, and is ultimately the result of an ex-offender’s own “free will” (p. 152). Tony’s is a story of both.

Desistence through the Influence of Family and Friends: Paul and Rey

The influence of family and friends was an important component of desistance for many of the subjects in the study. This section explores the different ways that family and friends contributed to the change in behavior that ultimately led Boston’s former gang members to restructure their lives. The next two narratives focus on the family and its influence on the subject’s entire life course. While Paul and Rey came from different family socialization backgrounds, the lessons they learned from their early childhood and adolescent years would prove to be of great benefit as they developed into adulthood. Their stories provide a holistic view of the role of family and its effect on the desistance process.

Paul: Paul grew up in the 37th Street housing project. He is the oldest subject in the study and he represents one of two neighborhood street criminals. Paul had six brothers and both of his parents were in his life. “I had two full-fledged parents at home, my dad was my hero and my mother kept us in line. You’re talking about a kid who took music lessons, played sports, had the best of clothes, and was on the honor roll in middle school.” Despite a good upbringing, Paul’s first arrest was at age 15, marking the beginning of a criminal career that would span the next 20 years. Along the way, Paul would build a reputation as one of the most infamous street robbers of the time.

“As soon as I got to high school everything changed, everything that was negative became appealing to me. My first arrest was in high school for Larceny from a Person, I was
15.” By the time Paul graduated from high school at age 19, his criminal career was already established. “I hooked up with some childhood friends and we just started robbing people. I didn’t rob stores, I robbed drug dealers, that’s where the money was back then.”

By his 20’s, Paul and his crew were known citywide. “I would go into the projects in broad daylight, strip all them drug dealers of their jewelry, drugs, and money, rob every last one of them, and then go to the car that was waiting for me.”

Paul’s criminal career was almost sidetracked in his late 20’s when he became addicted to crack cocaine. “I got involved with drugs, crack cocaine, I was probably around 28. It took me to a bad place, I robbed even more.”

At the peak of his criminal career, Paul had been arrested for over 50 robberies. “I remember one time I had a case saying I had 52 armed robberies with drug dealers, but everything got thrown out because it was drug dealers, nobody ever showed up.” This would appear to account for the relatively little time that Paul spent in prison. “The longest I did was 18 months, I was mostly held on charges, but never convicted.”

In his early to mid-30’s, Paul’s life started to change. While not married, he had five children—four with his long-term partner—and one of his sons was extremely sick with a life-threatening disease. He also had a close, former street associate who was trying to get him to leave the street life, and he was working to clean himself from his drug addiction. Taking care of his sickly child was the primary motivating factor in Paul’s desistance process. He was also fortunate in that he had a strong social support network including family, work, and his relationship with his girlfriend.

The first important influencing factor that helped Paul move forward involved his early family socialization experiences and a knowledge that his parents had raised him and his brothers
in a loving and caring environment. “I was taught right from wrong, I already had a foundation of knowing what it was like to be brought up right. In my house, at my table, we understood the meaning of what a productive citizen was.” This insight by Paul is a critical one to understand since it acted as a conduit that directly influenced other components of the rebuilding process—specifically, work and parenthood.

Prior to his mid-30’s, Paul had no legitimate work history. Since his decision to make a life change, he has been employed as a youth outreach worker and has also worked in his father’s painting company. Over the last four years, he has settled into a career as a youth outreach worker. Assigned to work with the highest-risk youth, many of whom are gang-involved, he appears to be in his comfort zone. Paul credits his upbringing, in part, with making him a good youth worker, “My upbringing and my street credibility. I know what it was like to be raised in the right manner. So many young people are being raised by single parents, grandmothers, grandfathers, they have no foundation and no direction and they are influenced by everything that is wrong. This is where I can help them.”

He also believes that his street credibility is important. “I know how these kids think, since they are me. I have full knowledge of what their thought process is. People in the neighborhoods still know me and look up to me. This includes some parents whose kids I deal with. I know what they are thinking, ‘If he can change, I know he can change my son.’ So the more and more positive outcomes I got, the more I stay engulfed in this work.”

Parenthood has also become an important part of his life. Paul acknowledges his shortcomings as a father. He had his five children at the ages of 17, 20, 21, 22, and 23, which also coincides with his peak years of offending. While his children were not a priority in his life during that time, things are different today. “I couldn’t be without them. They’re so important to
me and I’m thankful they didn’t grow up like me. They are all doing well. When my son was sick (he has since recovered) and I saw what he was going through, it humbled me to change my life. I’ve tried to replicate in my family the way my parents raised me, especially with establishing structure, rules, and love.”

Paul also feels it was important that he share his past life with his children. “I laid it all out for them, drug addiction, everything. Everything is therapeutic for me, so when I talk about it, just like sitting here and talking about it, it’s therapeutic because I remember the type of life I lived, I remember the type of negativity that I chose to do, and being here right now, it’s the grace of God.”

Paul’s relationship with his girlfriend is also important to him. “When we first met we were both doing negative things, but we have been positive for a long time now, we are good for each other.”

Today, at age 54, Paul admits that the transition from his criminal lifestyle has been a long and arduous process. His criminal history indicates that he has had only one incident since 2009, and he now appears to be beyond the temptations of crime. “I laugh at it, because I know the downside to it. I’m too strong now, I’m never going back.”

**Analysis:** Throughout his adolescent and adult years, Paul’s life was severely impacted by his involvement in crime; he represents one of the most serious and violent offenders in the study. Paul’s criminal lifestyle fits well within Jacobs and Wright’s (1999) study of street robbers in St. Louis. They found that the “street culture subsumes a number of powerful conduct norms, including but not limited to, the hedonistic pursuit of sensory stimulation, disdain for conventional living, lack of future orientation, and persistent eschewal of responsibility” (p. 165). With a 20-year history of criminal justice system involvement, it could be reasonably
assumed that by his adult years, his life was lost and beyond repair. Yet, after years of criminal offending, drug addiction, and an isolation from mainstream society, he decided he wanted to change the course of his life.

Paul’s attachment to family has been one of the most important components available to him in rebuilding his life. He came from a two-parent household where love and support were present. There is no evidence that he was neglected or harshly disciplined. In fact, it appeared to be the opposite, with both parents providing attention and a balanced approach to supervision and discipline. By his own account, childhood and early adolescence were healthy and happy years for him. Now, after 20 years of offending, Paul has returned to the values his parents instilled in him and he uses them as a blueprint to recreate structure in his family and work life.

In addition to his solid upbringing, work, parenthood, and his relationship with his girlfriend are all foundational components of Paul’s life. Employed as a youth worker and assigned to mentor the toughest of youth has proven to be a good fit for Paul. He has achieved mentoring success with his clients by drawing on the wisdom of his past experiences. Work has become “important” to him, thus strengthening his ties to society (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003). Paul’s reunification with his children, as well as his 15-year relationship with his girlfriend, have also provided additional structure and emotional commitment in his family life. Witnessing his son’s illness opened his eyes and he finally recognized that it was time for him to accept his responsibility as a father and to solidify his relationship to his girlfriend. The idea of having someone to care for and take care of has strengthened his resolve to stay on a positive and forward direction. In summary, it appears that Paul has changed the trajectory of his life.
Paul’s pathway to desistance aligns well with Laub and Sampson’s (2003) ideology of desistance, in which they posit that “offenders desist as a result of a combination of individual actions (choice) in conjunction with situational contexts and structural influences linked to important institutions that help sustain desistance” (p. 145). They found that the men who most successfully desisted from crime established everyday repetitious behaviors that ingrained these structural influences into their lives. They believe that the men who overcame their years of criminal involvement had “acquired a degree of maturity by taking on family and work responsibilities. They forged new commitments, made a fresh start, and found new direction and meaning in life” (p. 147).

In looking back on his life, Paul sees significant change for the better. “My life has improved considerably. I know how to be positive now, getting up every day, going to work, raising kids, being respectful of people and the law. I’ve gained a lot of knowledge.”

Rey: Rey’s road to desistance differs from Paul’s in that his childhood socialization process was one of a street orientation (Anderson, 1999). In Rey’s case, the shortcomings he experienced in his upbringing heavily influenced his deviant and criminal behavior, his gang membership, his involvement in violence, and in his incarceration. After his release from prison, Rey began rebuilding his life. This would prove to be a challenging endeavor, especially in the area of family life. At the age of 20, Rey had his first child with his girlfriend, who was 17. By age 27, they had a total of three children together and they all lived under the same roof. Rey was not a committed father and this reflected in his children’s early life experiences. It was only when Rey recognized that his children’s path in life was mirroring his own that he paused, reevaluated his priorities in life, and decided to fully dedicate himself to becoming a better person and caretaker of his family.
Rey was a 37th Street gang member for 10 years, starting at age 16 and finishing at age 26.

When you’re a gang member your pride matters so much. Your street image matters so much. You will defend them at all costs. I went to prison for a shooting incident. I shot a bunch of people. It really didn’t have anything to do with me personally, it had to do with one of my uncles and some gunplay. I let the individual involved in the incident know that these were my people and if it happened again I would take care of it. And it happened again. I went to a barbeque he was at and ruined everybody’s day. He disrespected me and I disrespected him back.

Rey’s decision, based on his street values, would cost him four years of his life. “Gang membership definitely affected my life. It changed my view of humanity in the world. I know what a human being is capable of when threatened with violence. For me, once I became a gang member, there was no turning back, there was no undoing or unlearning.”

Like many of the subjects in the study, Rey’s gang membership still affects his life today. Rey’s work and family life has kept him in the same neighborhood and he knows that past gang issues don’t go away for some people. “Let me tell you, I live everyday very much aware of those facts. I understand that someone could be mad enough to hurt me. You know, I’m sort of still traumatized from that whole experience. I remember being hurt too. But I’m not gonna be scared every day and I ain’t running from nobody.”

For Rey, transitioning away from his past gang life has been an evolving process.

When I started seeing people at first, we weren’t cordial, but after a while you’ll get a head nod, and then someone will just say, ‘what’s up.’ And I’m like, ‘what’s up,’ and the next thing you know they stick their hand out and shake your hand. Then you’re asking
how their kids are doing. And the next time we see each other we’re wishing each other
the best of luck. People back then thought I was crazy, they thought I was putting myself
on the line doing this, but I told them I got no choice, I got to move on with my life.

Rey realized that even with the best of intentions of making peace with rivals over past
grievances, he would never really be able to shed his past gang life. “The most dangerous thing
for me though is knowing that the neighborhood I came from is still an active gang
neighborhood. So when they do stuff, I have to know that people still associate me with the
neighborhood and I may have to pay for that.”

The trajectory of Rey’s life began to change as he transitioned from prison to home at age
24. “I was in prison getting ready to come home. But I was on some gang list, so I couldn’t go
anyplace. They (corrections officials) said, ‘We tell you where to go.’ They sent me to a
mentorship program in Boston. I would not have chosen to go, somebody else made that decision
for me.”

The program Rey was sent to involved professional men of color working with younger
men of color. This program was the best thing that could have happened to Rey because it
provided him with the skills and confidence to move back into conventional life. “What struck
me about the program was the number of young professional men of color. I was expecting a lot
of old gray dudes, it was impressive. Being exposed to them made me think differently. It made
me want differently. I realized I needed to be around people that were sophisticated, to witness
their life, just to watch to see how they lived their life. Before meeting them, I never thought I
could make it in the real world, not until I met them.”
Once Rey was released from prison he returned to the neighborhood. One of the most important challenges he faced in his transition into mainstream life was what he referred to as his “parenting.”

The kids weren’t doing good, and I knew things had to change. I was ashamed, and humiliated, and embarrassed. My pride was hurt. Everybody believes they have a particular stature and image in the streets. People knew about me and my past. I didn’t want to be known as the dude with the little bummy, dirty kids. I had a significant other that was just too young to properly parent, I was young too, it was just like my parents situation when I was growing up. It just wasn’t working between us and I decided to go on my own way.

Rey’s one focus was to get custody of his kids. In order to do this, he first spoke with his kids, who were now old enough to understand what was going on. “I had a conversation with the kids. Told them I was going to try and get custody of them. They agreed with it. I promised them if they hung in there with me, I would never go back to my old life and I would work hard to raise them right.” The second thing he had to do was go back to the mentors who had made such a strong impression on him and get their guidance. “I went back to the program and asked my mentors for help. They sat me down and helped me formulate a plan to get my life together along with the kids.”

By age 33, Rey had custody of his three children. At age 34, he married for the first time and he has been with his wife for 11 years. Together, they have two children, ages 11 and 7. Rey’s only setback in his desistance process came at age 24, when he was arrested with drugs shortly after coming home from prison. He has been crime-free since that incident. By his own account, his life is good and he has no regrets. “I couldn’t imagine a better life. I don’t think I
could have dreamed of a better life, I feel like I’m in uncharted territory. I couldn’t have dreamed of a better wife, better kids, you know. I’m also a grandfather, and it trips me out every day. I wouldn’t trade my life for nothing.”

**Analysis:** Rey was the only subject in the study to identify the notions of guilt and shame as being important factors in his desistance process. In the desistance literature, the relationship between shame and desistance is most often applied to the ex-offender and the remorse he feels for his past criminal actions. This is not the case with Rey, who does not apologize in any way for his past gang membership and the serious offending that accompanied it. Rey understood and came to terms with himself long ago, accepting that he grew up in an environment and time period where the code of the street and the use of violence to resolve conflict were the prescribed rules for survival (Anderson, 1999).

Rather, Rey’s feelings of shame stemmed from what Maruna (2001) refers to as “any failure event” in the ex-offenders life including, “neglected obligations,” which in his case involved his children (p. 133). Additionally, Rey’s embarrassment with regard to his children’s neglected condition was not just confined to his own personal assessment of his family situation. His humiliation also extended out into the neighborhood, worrying about how he was being viewed by his peers, who knew him only as being a respected gang leader.

Leibrich (1996) suggests that shame can be a driving force in the desistance process. In her study of desistance involving men and women in New Zealand, she identified three kinds of shame: public humiliation, personal disgrace, and private remorse (see Laub & Sampson, 2003). Rey, it would seem, falls into all three of these categories, thereby enhancing the depth of his pain and self-reproach. While it needs to be noted that Rey bears some level of responsibility for
this troubling situation, his self-described inability to properly parent nonetheless served as a strong factor in his cessation from crime.

To resolve his predicament, Rey called upon his network of mentors to develop a solution. He initiated open and honest discussions with his children in which he discarded his past and committed himself to their well-being. By recreating himself as a caring, loving, and responsible parent, Rey now had a foundation from which to build a new life.

The success Rey has earned in his life has many contributing components including work, marriage, family, and a strong social network of supportive individuals. But it was the singular experience involving the guilt and shame he felt for his dereliction as a parent that would have the most significant impact on his life course. Thus, it is important to understand that desistance is a complicated process that involves many different pathways. In Rey’s case, without the shame he experienced, the building of his conscience would have been impossible (see Braithwaite, 1989; Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Other Ways Family can be a Turning Point in Life: Gus and Rob

The next two abbreviated life history accounts examine how fatherhood can lead to dramatic change in an individual’s life. According to Moloney and colleagues (2009), in order for fatherhood to be a potential turning point in the individual’s life, mere age is not enough to induce change (p. 316). A more in-depth level of understanding is required that involves “age readiness” of taking on the role of being a “real” father. Under these circumstances, it is the individual’s choice and agency that initiate the turning point by ‘activating the father role,’ and leading to a stronger level of commitment that is needed for long-term change (p. 316). For Gus and Rob, early fatherhood alone was not a strong enough influence to change their behaviors. It
was only when they achieved this degree of development that they were able to redirect the pathways of their lives.

**Gus:** Gus, who was 44 at the time of his interview, identified the death of his first son as the turning point in his life. “It was a difficult time, I had just lost a close friend, he was like a brother to me. So when I found out my ex-wife was expecting with my first child, I was really looking forward to it. That was the only thing keeping my spirits up. When my son was born, he had a rare disease, one in a million kids get it, he lived for two months and passed away.”

With the loss of his son, Gus did some soul searching, trying to understand why this would happen to him. “I looked in the mirror, and I said, ‘It’s something that I’m doing wrong, the drug selling, being in the streets.’ God is looking down and he’s saying, ‘Hey, you got to change.’” Yet as devastating as it was, the death of his son was not enough to keep Gus completely out of the street life. “It was a turning point in my life, I walked away from the gangbanging, but I was still selling a little bit here and there.”

Though Gus slowly continued to separate himself from the street life, his final break-off didn’t come until the birth of his second son. “When my son Richard was born, that’s when I stopped everything, no drug selling, no nothing once my son was born. I was done with everything.” Gus’ decision to leave the gang life at age 24 was a binding one and he was never pulled back.

**Rob:** Rob’s turning point in life came after he was stabbed and his daughter pleaded with him to change his life.

I was in the music business and it was the day I got stabbed after an event. Everybody thought I was going to die. There were a bunch of cops in the emergency room, telling my daughter I was going to die. She was trying to get in and see me, she was only 13
years old. When they finally allowed her to come in she posed a whole bunch of questions to me. She was like, ‘Daddy, how come you always got to be getting in fights?’ or ‘Why are you like this? How did you get stabbed? What if you die? What about me?’ When she was finally done, I said to her, “You want me to do something different?” And before I could finish my sentence she was crying and shaking her head like yeah. When I got out of the hospital, I called the guys and said I was done. Something went off in me, it hurt me to see her like that. That was it. I never went back after that. I knew the possibility of me dying and my daughter living with that was enough for me to be like I don’t want that on her. She don’t deserve that.

Overall, only a small percentage of the men identified family as the driving force behind their change in behavior. And, even for this group, there were other contributing factors that solidified their cessation from crime including work, friendship, mentorship, and relationships with significant others. However, for those subjects who did identify family as a strong influence on their desistence, fatherhood played a large part. For Paul and Rey, and even more so for Gus and Rob, fatherhood was an important element that provided them with the inner strength and motivation to redirect the trajectories of their lives.

For fatherhood to truly influence change, structural transformations and subjective, identity-based changes needed to occur (Moloney, MacKenzie, Hunt, & Laidler, 2009, p. 321). All four subjects—Paul, Rey, Gus and Rob—took on these daunting challenges. First, they recognized that the only way to start a new life was to separate themselves from their past risky lifestyles. Accomplishing this was no easy task, considering their identities in life were synonymous with the gang and street life. Second, they all finally came to realize that gang membership was not their defining characteristic in life, and they started to understand that
people depended on them and cared for them (Moloney et al., 2009). Once they reached this moment of clarity, they were now prepared to leave the street life behind and move themselves forward in a new and positive direction.

Desistence through Work: Andy

Andy was the victim of extreme neglect and abuse as a result of his mother’s addiction to heroin. Raised by foster parents, he was confronted at age 15 with the devastating news that his mother had been murdered. Although Andy had two brothers and a sister, there was no relationship between them, thus he was alone and on his own. The gang became Andy’s family and he was committed to the gang lifestyle for 11 years. As Andy began the prolonged process of transitioning out of the gang life, it would be work, considered one of the most important agents of change for serious and violent offenders, that would lead him to desist from deviant and criminal behavior (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Uggen & Staff, 2001).

Andy was one of the more fortunate members of his gang since he was never the victim of gang violence and he spent little time in prison. “You have to be smart. It’s a tough playing field because you have so many adversaries to deal with, the police, crack heads, rival gangs, and stickup boys. You have to be very intelligent to really survive.” But, for many of his fellow gang members, their outcomes in life were much more grievous. “Very few are doing good. Some are in jail doing life. Some are just coming home after doing 10, 15, 20 years. A lot of them are dead and a lot of them are still on the streets and struggling.”

Overall though, Andy recalls his gang life in a positive light. “It was the best lifestyle. In looking back I don’t regret it, I really don’t. They were some of the most fun moments of my life. I had friends, I didn’t worry about bills, money was never a problem, and even with the
violence, they were good times. It’s funny, even today when I think back to those times I feel
alone and lonely because we had such a bond.”

Andy’s legitimate work career began in his early 20’s. “I was blessed with a job, it was
working in a methadone clinic as an intake officer. I had no degree and I was given a chance.”
An interesting aspect of Andy’s first job opportunity was that it was given to him by the same
woman who was his social worker during his difficult childhood years. “She gave me an
opportunity, and I went with it. I had to dress up, shoes, shirt, you know. It really paved my way
to a career and developing me into a man. I stayed there for seven years.” The fact that Andy was
working with drug addicts while still involved in the gang and drug lifestyle is both intriguing
and telling of his character. “I knew my job. I knew my clients. I was a drug dealer. So here I am
on the other end, now trying to get them help and it was kind of bizarre to me that I’m on this
end, that I was helping these guys.”

Andy’s transition from the gang and selling drugs to conventional life was anything but
easy, and even as new opportunities presented themselves, it still took him years before he was
able to leave his criminal life behind (see Hagedorn, 1998a).

I was slowly leaving it behind. That was the hardest thing, because selling drugs was so
easy and always available. That was the most difficult time for me, leaving the street life,
because I was so good at it. I struggled with it. I had a lot of mental talks with myself,
weighing the risks of getting caught versus the legitimate opportunity given to me. That
was my struggle, but I finally decided that once this opportunity came, I had to take it.
This was my breakout, God had something else for me, there’s something else in this
world for me.
Andy’s gang career ended at age 26, but it took him until his early 30’s before he finally stopped selling drugs. Over this time period he had continued to climb the ranks within the healthcare field and it was at this point that he was offered a new administrative position with added responsibilities. “It was an unbelievable opportunity and the chance to keep moving ahead, I wanted it bad.” Andy has been at his current job for the past 14 years and he has continued to do well. “I liked it so much I went back to school and got my certificate. I’m making more money and people know I’m good at what I do.”

**Analysis:** Work has played a key role in Andy’s life and the satisfaction he derives from it fits well with the criteria set by Sampson and Laub, (1993, 2003) with regard to job gratification and its positive influence on the desistance process. In Andy’s case, job satisfaction also included his knowing that he had the ability to prosper in the conventional work environment. Maruna (2001) suggests that this is an important component in the desistance process. “An ex-offender may need to experience some level of personal success in the straight world before they realize that they do not need to offend again to regain a sense of personal agency” (p. 125). Hughes (2013) also found that work was a powerful influencing factor in an individual’s life. “Thus a man’s work is one of the things by which he is judged, and certainly one of the more significant things by which he judges himself” (p.42). For Andy, legitimate employment combined with being recognized by his peers and supervisors as a capable and productive employee provided him with the confidence and inner strength to renounce his past criminal lifestyle. “I got a chance and I took it. I wanted to learn. I wanted to better myself. The opportunity to work a meaningful job and have the support of my employers, that was what I needed.”
Desistence through Education: Edward

It is well documented in the gang literature that gang membership can result from multiple and overlapping risk factors in a youth’s life. These risk factors include neighborhood, family, school, peers, and individual characteristics. Thornberry et al. (2003) suggest that “Failure in the educational arena can also be a major source of risk for gang membership.” More specifically, they state that “Poor school performance and low commitment to and involvement in school are correlated with gang membership” (p. 59). This describes the school experiences of Edward, who dropped out of high school because of poor attendance, behavioral problems, and the pull of the gang and the streets.

Edward: Edward’s early years in life were spent living in the Park Street projects, a neighborhood he describes as being poor and filled with drugs, with the majority of people unemployed and uneducated. Edward’s interest in learning was evident, even as a child, but seemed mismatched for the environment in which he grew up. “For a person like me, who likes museums, or science, or reading, it wasn’t a very supportive community in that regard. It wasn’t like you would get shunned for reading or liking some of those things, but there just wasn’t a lot of support for that kind of stuff. It was more like brains were not really valued or looked upon as a positive attribute. It was more like, if you can fight. So it was more brawn over brains.”

Edward’s family situation was disorganized and he lived with his aunt and grandmother. With little supervision and discipline in place, Edward spent much of his time in the streets. By his early teens, he had already made a name for himself in the drug trade by being one of the neighborhood’s top hustlers. By age 16, he was one of three leaders of one of the first street gangs in Boston and his reputation as a serious and violent gang member was quickly growing. In the school setting, he showed great potential. He was considered a high-performing student
and was in advanced classes, but he had no interest in school, resisting the efforts of his family and teachers to take advantage of his skills. The streets were now his primary interest in life.

Edward was a gang member from ages 16-30. His criminal history reflects a consistent and high level of serious and violent offending and incarceration that lasted for almost 15 years. Like most subjects in the study, gang membership was an important part of his life, but it also took its toll, both physically and mentally. “The violence aspect of the gang definitely affected my life. I changed best friends three times, because in each case my best friend got killed, so that alone made me numb to murder.”

In looking back on his gang life, Edward has no regrets. Today, he still identifies with his gang in a positive way and he is secure in knowing that his street reputation is solid with regard to the way he conducted himself as a gang member and the way he exited the gang life. “When I was a gang member I took care of my business and I never ratted, and when I got out it was in a respectable way. I had credibility.” But, consistent with the exiting strategy of other subjects in the study, this re-occurring theme of having to make peace with the past in order to move forward in life after the gang, was unfinished business for Edward.

Before I got out I went to other hoods to make sure there were no outstanding issues between us. It was important because you got people’s lives that were taken away, people whose freedom was taken away, whose ability to walk was taken away. I didn’t want to try and figure out who I had problems with, so I went to each neighborhood systematically and met with different dudes. I’d say, ‘Do we have any issues, if we do let’s figure it out.’ I’m looking dudes in the eye, we face-to-face, I’m reading body language, looking to see if he wants to do something or not. In the end, dudes were really
Edward identified two events in his life that he considered to be turning points. The first involved a book he read and the second involved an individual who would later become a mentor to him. Both of these events are related to the important role that education has played in his life, and both occurred within the prison setting.

I was given a book, Breaking the Psychological Chains of Slavery, by Na’im Akbar. The book touches upon psychologically how a lot of African Americans are still in slavery, by the way they think and act. So many aspects of it I connected with, it was like, I do that or I think like that or I say those kinds of things. So the book broke down some of the psychology behind why this is happening in the African American community and it resonated with me. It got me to think of things differently.

The second important turning point in Edward’s life occurred when he met “Big John,” his roommate in prison. Edward describes him as being 6’ 9” in height, weighing around 275 pounds, big, burly, and bald and an overall mean-looking guy.

First night in the room, the guy is snoring like a hurricane. So I put my shoes on, put my toothbrush in my pocket, my stamps, all my primary stuff that’s important to me, because when I wake this guy up, he’s going to want to fight and then we’re both going to the hole. I shook his bunk and said, ‘hey my man,’ he got up and was like, ‘What’s up,’ I said, ‘I can’t sleep because you’re snoring,’ and he said, ‘Pardon me, my brother, let me turn over for you,’ and he turned over on his side and stopped snoring.

Edward was clearly caught off guard by Big John’s response. Edward had been conditioned all his life through his gang membership and time in prison to know that conflict was
almost always resolved through violence. With Big John’s non-confrontational response, Edward was left standing there, not knowing what to do or say. “Even though I knew he could beat me, I was ready, but he shut me down. It was an aha moment for me, and I’ve used that approach in so many different situations since then. It taught me you don’t need to be a tough guy. All of that tough guy shit, you don’t need it.”

The more time Edward spent with Big John, the more he looked to him as a mentor. He credits Big John with talking him into going to college. Big John himself had a master’s degree, which he got in prison, and Edward, after offering up some resistance, decided he was going to follow this same path. “He talked me into going to college. Before him, I was like I’m not going, I didn’t want to go to college, for what; so I can get a good job, fuck that, I’m gonna make some money and hustle my way out. He actually talked me into going to school.”

Edward was in his early 30’s when he was released from prison. Once out, he applied and was accepted into college and started working towards attaining his bachelor’s degree. This would turn out to be a prolonged and time-consuming endeavor. “It took about 15 years to get a fucking four year degree, but I hung in there and I got it, then I got my master’s degree. Getting my master’s degree was important to me, in part, because it shows people that the stereotype they have of people like me, from my community is wrong. I’ve overcome that stereotype, and I love defying those odds.”

**Analysis:** According to Edward’s criminal history records (CORI), he has been crime-free for over 10 years. In addition to his high level of educational attainment, he has also established strong social ties in the areas of work and family. Edward has built a consistent work history in the health care and business sectors since coming home from prison in the early 2000’s. Work is both meaningful and satisfying for him. “My bosses are very, very supportive.
When I first started I was worried people would hold my background against me, but I didn’t encounter those things. I’ve not had a person who I felt held my past against me, in fact, sometimes I feel it’s been part of the reason they brought me onboard. Now that I have my degree, I feel like it’s going to take me to a different level in terms of what I want to achieve.”

On top of his full-time job, Edward also has his own side business. “I’ve got my own cleaning business. I clean toilets and I vacuum floors and I dump trash. After coming home from work I go out again and clean up office buildings. It’s sweaty in the summer and cold in the winter, but it allowed me to buy a house and a car. I work hard.”

With regard to family, Edward has two children in their 20’s and they are an important part of his life. “Even when I was doing negative things, it was really important for me to be in their lives. I was a single parent for a long time and they were always with me. When I was in prison they used to come visit me, so they know about my past. They even work with me in my cleaning business. I consider our relationship to be very strong.”

Whether you call it human agency, being strong-willed, or simple stubbornness, it is quite evident that Edward has taken control of his life in his adulthood years. When he came home from prison, he resisted the temptations of the street. “I was a successful drug dealer, I was a leader of a gang, and so when I came home, people were like what are you gonna do – I told them, ‘I’m done with the streets completely, I’m gonna take a different route,’ so I started working and going to school. Nobody questioned me about my decision.”

At the same time, he still identifies with his gang, frequents his old neighborhood, and stays in contact with his friends. Even today, he sees strong parallels between his past illegitimate gang life and current legitimate work life. “One of the main things I learned in getting my degree is that so much of what we did in the drug trade people pay thousands of
dollars to learn that. We ran a business and we were just 15 or 16 years old. We were either independent contractors or full out business owners. It’s just the business we were operating in was illegal, but all the concepts, all of the theories, they’re all there; they’re just called something different.”

Edward believes that his life has improved greatly from childhood and young adulthood, and over the next five years he is thinking about moving into teaching and owning a few more businesses. It seems safe to say that Edward is not done making his run at creating the best possible life for himself.

Persistence: Shon, Larry, Eric and Arthur

All of the subjects in this study experienced some degree of hardship and failure in many areas of their lives. While sharing similar backgrounds and experiences with those subjects who desisted from crime, the persisters were set apart by their level of difficulty in three particular areas. First, the pull of the neighborhood and the gang mentality was still ingrained in them and it was holding them back from being able to establish new pathways in life, free from the temptations of crime. Second, the important turning points of work, marriage, family, or other such influences of change were either not available to them or they did not take advantage of these opportunities when presented. Finally, at the time of their interviews, these subjects have been unable to summons that important component of human agency which is required for successful change. Unlike the desisters, they have not been able to take control of their lives nor have they exhibited the inner resolve necessary to overcome the obstacles that lay in their path.

As mentioned earlier, four of the subjects were classified as “persisters.” The life of one of these subjects—Shon—will be examined in full, while more abbreviated accounts will be
provided for Larry, Eric, and Arthur in the next section. The life experiences of all these individuals reflect stronger and more consistent patterns of persistence in crime versus a desistance from crime over their life courses. As compared with Reggie and Tony, their lives appear to be more convoluted and troublesome, not only with regard to the influence of neighborhood in their lives, but also in their lack of potent social ties. Combined, this set of conditions has created a hurdle which, to date, none has been able to overcome.

**Shon:** Shon grew up in a single-parent household. His father’s abuse of his mother forced her, Shon, and his brother to flee Boston and go to New York, where they lived with his grandmother. His mother worked two jobs, so it was his grandmother who really took care of him and his brother. Each summer, they returned to Boston to visit his father. “My mother would send us on the bus, me and my brother. We would get here and go to my grandmother’s house. He was never there. My grandmother wasn’t alive, so we just kind of took care of ourselves.”

Shon was 12 years old and back in Boston for the summer when his life took a dramatic turn. “I came to Boston for a summer job and ended up getting my now ex-wife pregnant. I went back to New York and I didn’t say anything. Her family contacted my mother and she sent me back here to handle my responsibility. I’ve been here ever since.”

The same year Shon became a father he also became involved in the crack cocaine trade. “I was already selling drugs, so I was kind of the financial guy. I bring the money home, but as far as changing Pampers or anything like that, I didn’t do none of that then, I did it later on in time with my other kids.” Shon was 16 when he had his second child, 20 when he had his third, and 24 when he had his fourth and final. He married his girlfriend, the mother of all his children at age 22; by the age of 36, he was divorced.
Shon was a member of the A Street Assassins from the age of 14 to 25. In his role as a shooter, he was quite active; this resulted in him being arrested multiple times. Shon’s first arrest for illegally possessing a firearm was at age 13. Subsequent arrests occurred at the ages of 16, 18 and 22. He did not serve any significant prison time for these offenses.

Shon’s gang was hard-hit by the proactive law enforcement efforts of the mid-1990’s. “Some guys are doing good, but the majority of guys are just coming home and for some of them it’s a revolving door. A couple of guys could not handle life on the outside and they went right back in. The majority of them did so much time that some of them are stuck there.”

When asked to describe his own gang experiences, Shon discussed both good and bad points:

First, being a gang member definitely affected my life. Even today, whenever I go out to eat, I never put my back to the door, I always keep my guard up, always looking around. I have to, and it’s not even that I get in trouble. It’s just in me to be that way. Being a gang member changes your outlook on life. Second, I always say that although I went through a lot of adversity and negativity, I feel that without that knowledge I’ve gained, I would not be the person I am. I feel that being a gang member added to my character. Would I have liked things to be different, to some degree, but I don’t regret it. I feel like what I’ve gone through will make me a better person.

Shon’s attempt at the desistance process started at age 20, when he got a job with a privately run youth outreach organization working with at-risk youth. The job lasted approximately one year and it was an experience he enjoyed. After that, he returned to the streets and was back selling drugs. At age 22, he got his second legitimate employment opportunity with another youth outreach organization, this time working with gang-involved youth. The
challenge with this new position, and one that would strongly influence his ability to successfully transition out of the gang lifestyle, was that he was assigned to work in the same neighborhood where he was still an active gang member. “I got hired as a youth outreach worker. Because of my gang involvement, they put me in the same neighborhood where I was a gang member, it was crazy. It was really tough because while I was working with a younger generation of gang members, there was still so much history in the neighborhood that I was part of. It took a lot, but I have to say that I really got to connect with the guys.”

Shon faced an even bigger hurdle because he had to also work with youth from his gang’s primary rival, whose turf bordered his gang’s. “These young gang members had no idea why they were feuding or what started it, but shootings and homicides were still going on. I remember one of the younger generation kids from my gang got shot and killed. I didn’t know how to feel about that, because I knew it was the kids from the rival gang. I knew they did it. The kid killed is from my hood, how do I deal with that, I had a lot of mixed feelings.”

Shon’s work assignment placed him in a difficult and unenviable position. Tasked with mediating the deadly violence taking place between the younger members of his gang and their primary rivals, he grappled with conflicting feelings of loyalty to his gang and his responsibility to provide services for all of the gang members in the neighborhood. In addition to this confounding dilemma, his family problems were coming to the forefront, which further complicated his life.

Shon and his family lived in a different neighborhood from where he worked and grew up. Gang members from that neighborhood had attacked his son several times, prompting Shon to respond. “I went looking for them with a gun and I got caught. My wife fueled a lot of it. To that point I was doing well. I was staying out of trouble, staying away from the gang stuff and
helping people. I felt good and then she called me and says, ‘They just jumped your son, what are you going to do, I know you are not going to let this go because they will keep coming back until he gets killed, what are you going to do?’”

At 28 years old, Shon was not yet completely out of the gang life. He reacted personally to the threats on his son as if he was directly being attacked and disrespected in the street. He was arrested for possession of a firearm and attempting to shoot four gang members. “I took it to trial and I beat it. I thought about how close I came to going to jail forever. I said to myself, ‘I’ve got to get myself together, I can’t continue to live the gang lifestyle.’ It fueled me to do better.”

Surprisingly, Shon did not lose his job and he was allowed to continue his youth outreach work. He promised himself that he would never risk losing everything again. Yet despite being an influential youth worker and working extremely hard, his life was so embedded in the street and gang culture through neighborhood, work, and family that it was becoming almost impossible to overcome. “I was doing better for the most part, but I’ve had bumps and bruises because again, just because you’re out of it, as far as doing criminal activity, doesn’t mean you don’t have brushes with it.”

By age 36, Shon was divorced. Then, at age 39, he experienced another major setback in his life when he was once again arrested for possessing a firearm:

I regret the whole experience, because when I got locked up, I became who I was all over again. I was in jail and they put me in a unit where there were six younger guys from my gang. Soon as I walked through the door, it was love from the hood all over again. I became the dude to look up to, because I’m the older O.G. from the neighborhood. They knew who I was and that was enough, they’re going to do whatever I ask them to do. It
definitely brought me back to those younger days and that feeling of camaraderie that you have from your hood.

At the time of his interview, Shon was home from jail and had just recently gotten off probation, but he was continuing to experience difficulty in overcoming his past lifestyle. He moved back in with his ex-wife because he didn’t have a place to live, returning to the old neighborhood and hanging out with his original crew. He worried that he might fall back into his old ways, but at the same time he vowed to recreate himself and fulfill his potential. “I’m just trying to work my way back at this point. It’s unfortunate the adversity I’ve been through and I’ve hit rock bottom. I’m going to work my way back, it’s a rebuilding stage.”

Analysis: Shon was a gang member for 11 years and, despite leaving the criminal component of the gang behind at age 25, he still identifies with his gang to this day. Gang membership was an important part of Shon’s life and during his interview, he spoke with pride about his gang experiences during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Even today, Shon has no regrets about his past gang life; in fact, he sees his gang membership as being an advantage for him, especially in the area of youth work.

Leaving the gang is a “complex process replete with pushes and pulls to conformity and back to the gang” (Sweeten et al., 2013, p. 473). Shon’s life in many ways is captured in this statement and reflects his struggles in being unable to fully desist from crime. An important contributor to his continuing persistence in crime was the effect of neighborhood. Shon joined the A Street Assassins in the late 1980’s at age 14. By the mid-1990’s, the gang controlled the neighborhood, which had now become known as a place of intense firearm violence and drug dealing. In urban settings, “it is the local gangs that dominate the scene” (Duran, 2013, p. 122);
thus the gang can be viewed as an “institution within the neighborhood, almost in the same way as a school or church, but without a defined building” (p. 141).

Harding (2010) posits that “A direct consequence of the neighborhood-based system of violence is that neighborhood is a powerful form of identity for many of Boston’s adolescent boys, a dividing line between insiders and outsiders” (p. 37). Shon’s life was centered around the gang. His role as a shooter empowered him and he wore the label of gang member as a badge of honor. In the neighborhood setting of A Street, he had respect and status. It was—and continues to be—his identity. Laub and Sampson (2003) contend that, “For too long, individual lives have been examined in isolation, even though it is now clear that historical time and geographic place are crucial for understanding lives in their full complexity” (p. 57). Indeed, the challenge for Shon—and an important reason why his pathway to desistance was decelerated—was that he never left the neighborhood and the gang mentality.

In the desistance stories of Reggie and Tony, it was separation from the neighborhood (albeit, Tony’s was involuntary) that allowed them to mature mentally, re-evaluate what was important in life, and implement the changes needed to move forward crime-free. Conversely, by his mid-20’s, Shon was already entrenched in the neighborhood gang culture for approximately eight years. His decision to pursue legitimate employment and become a youth outreach worker could have and should have provided him with a redirecting pathway out of the neighborhood and the gang. Instead it became a reinforcing agent of his gang identity because it was so closely tied to the neighborhood. Relegated to the neighborhood where he spent his most formative years involved in serious and violent offending, and now assigned to work with a new generation of A Street gang members as well as their primary rivals, Shon faced a situational context to which he never should have been exposed. Severing his ties to the gang now became much more difficult.
and it could be argued that work—possibly the strongest social control agency influencing desistance—had the opposite effect and actually strengthened his gang embeddedness, defined by Sweeten et al. (2013) as, “Individual immersion in enduring deviant social networks” (p. 470).

Evidence of the ingrained nature of the neighborhood and gang culture and its influence on Shon’s thought process and actions were evident in his violent response to the attack on his son by gang members and in his adaptation to jail after his arrest for firearm possession. Not until he was sitting in jail at age 39 did Shon finally realize the error of his ways: “I became who I was all over again.”

Shon’s inability to move forward was also affected by his lack of strong social ties, particularly in the area of marriage. His family background was one of dysfunction, marked by inadequate supervision, poor oversight, and weak parental attachment. This opened the door to independence for Shon and resulted in his involvement in selling drugs and impregnating his girlfriend by age 12, being arrested with a gun at age 13, and becoming a gang member at age 14. Augustyn and colleagues (2014) refer to these types of experiences as “Off-time transitions or precocious role exits exemplify disorder in the life course” (p. 254). Adolescent experiences such as dropping out of high school, gang membership, cohabitation, and teenage parenthood are all likely to “impact multiple domains including the ability to be good parents and caretakers” (p. 254).

Krohn et al. (2011) suggest that these precocious transitions experienced by gang members in adolescence can contribute to family problems in adulthood and potentially lead to an “increase [in] the probability of continued participation in criminal behavior and an increased likelihood of being arrested” (p. 999). In fact, Shon attributed some of his continued involvement
in crime to his wife’s mixed messaging on his role as father. “My wife was a double-edged sword. Just as much as she would tell me to go out and handle problems the way I knew how, she was the same one that told me that if I wanted to maintain my family, I had to leave the gang lifestyle alone. It was confusing.” Clearly, Shon’s relationship with his wife was contentious, and marriage failed to be an important component in his life.

The literature on the relationship between marriage and desistance, for the most part, suggests that “marriage inhibits offending and promotes desistance from crime” (Bersani & DiPietro, 2016, p. 511). But marriage, in and of itself, is not enough to invoke change. Marriage, with a strong and enduring attachment between partners, is what allows for a sustained change in behavior (Laub & Sampson, 2003). The role of marriage and its influence on the desistance process is also “vulnerable to contextual factors” (Doherty & Bersani, 2016, p. 700). Shon not only lacked a strong attachment to marriage, but the contextual factors of the neighborhood and the gang lifestyle appeared to have a more controlling effect on his life, thus negating the potential advantages of marriage as a turning point for change.

Shon’s story makes him one of the more interesting and perplexing subjects in the study. From childhood through adulthood, his life has been a series of trial and tribulations and his life is still in disarray today. Shon’s life experiences to date run contrary to his abilities and accomplishments. For those periods of time when he was completely focused on mentoring and providing services for proven-risk youth, he received high marks from both his peers and the youth with whom he worked. He has also attained his master’s degree, thus proving his willingness to work hard and his level of intelligence. But even with these strong personal attributes, Shon has not found the strength and capacity to separate himself from the pull of the streets and gang mentality.
**Larry:** Of all the subjects in the study, Larry has led one of the most troubled lives. Raised by his grandparents, he also spent time in foster care as a child. His father was not part of his life and he did not mention his mother or other siblings during his interview. Larry dropped out of high school in the eleventh grade, explaining, “The streets were my life.” He became a gang member at just eight years old. “I had no parents, I needed love, and my family couldn’t give it to me.” And only in the year leading up to his interview had he finally relinquished his gang membership.

Being a gang member has had a devastating impact on Larry’s life. He estimates that he has lost hundreds of friends and family members to gang violence. As a serious and violent offender, Larry was in and out of prison his whole life. To this day, he continues to be involved in violent crime, as evidenced in 2014 when he was shot. He has two children, both of whom are doing well in life, and he has a good relationship with them. His relationship with the mother of his children, however, can be best described as adversarial. Larry acknowledges that he has never had a job in his life and that he has battled alcoholism and homelessness as well. Most recently, he has tried to take control of his life. He has been living in a sober house for one year, has turned to religion as a support mechanism, and wants to open his own business. In evaluating his life to date, he stated, “Listen man, as you age in life, sometimes you got to suffer to get you to where God wants you to be.”

**Eric:** Eric was raised in a street-oriented family that was heavily involved in crime. Eric’s gang membership started at age 15 and ended at age 32. During that time, he accumulated multiple firearm and drug arrests, with his most recent incident of firearm possession occurring at age 32. While Eric’s life could be considered disorganized, there are some stable aspects to it. He has been in a long-term relationship with his girlfriend and they get along well. He has a
teenage son with whom he has a good relationship, and within the last year, he has been working at a job that he both enjoys and that pays him a good salary.

Eric’s challenge is his attachment to the neighborhood and the gang life. During our interview, it was clear that he was struggling with the push and pull of the gang lifestyle. “A lot of people wanted me to change, but I really didn’t want it. I’m going to be honest with you. I really didn’t want to change. My family has been doing this for years, my father, my grandmother, my aunts, uncles. They all sold drugs. I thought this was the thing to be. They died early in life, selling drugs, never had jobs, so I never had the idea of change. I was going to do this shit for the rest of my life.”

But Eric’s girlfriend has a strong influence on him and she wants him to break the cycle of crime that has existed in his family for a long time. Eric loves his girlfriend and wants to do the right thing; he know she has his best interests in mind. To start to move away from the gang life, Eric called his crew together. “I was like, I’m done. I’m out. I’m out of the game. I’m putting my jersey in. I’m retired. They was like, ‘You’ll be back.’ And ever since then, I ain’t come back and I’m not coming back. They didn’t believe me.”

Moving out of the gang life is a complex and sometimes daunting task that Eric is trying to fight through, but the temptations of money and walking away from past feuds will not be easy for him. “I got younger cousins in the life right now and they make a lot of money. They’re living the life. They have no worries in the world, and the temptation is there. The temptation’s there a lot, I’m not going to lie. As far as past beefs, I’m not looking for the violence, but if someone really initiates it with me, I go all the way with it. So, the violence thing, I just want to put it behind me, kind of.”
**Arthur:** Finally, Arthur was raised in a two-parent household with rules and discipline. He acknowledges that his parents provided him with the skills to succeed, but the pull of the streets was too strong. Arthur’s gang membership started at age 12 and ended at age 22, when he killed another gang member in a feud that started when a rival took his gang hat. After serving almost 14 years in prison, Arthur has been home for only two years. At the time of our interview, he had just become the father to a newborn baby girl, not yet five weeks old. But even with this joyful event, Arthur is having trouble adjusting to being home and now having the responsibility of caring for his girlfriend and baby. “I’m not working right now and it’s a fucked up situation. When I first came home I was working. I got a job, a shitty job, but I did it for a year, then moved onto another job for three months and then got laid off because there wasn’t enough work. So here I am, a convicted felon, murderer, with no job.”

In addition to the stress of not working, Arthur was starting to frequent his old neighborhood on a regular basis. “My girlfriend noticed I was hanging down the projects more than I had been. I was there more than I should be and she put me on notice, she didn’t want me down there.” Arthur knew his girlfriend was right and the more he hung around the neighborhood, the more temptation there would be to slip back into the past life. “Some of my boys are still out there selling. I even had a couple of them encouraging me to get back in the game, but I checked myself, I was the one in a cell for 14 years.”

Accompanying the challenge of being tempted back to the streets, Arthur also had to be aware of past rivals and unresolved conflicts. “It comes with the territory, it’s sad, but it is just something I’ve accepted. On one hand I really need to discard my gang image, but in the same breath, it’s who I am. On the other hand, the stubborn old gang part of me, the gang mentality aspect is like fuck them, I’m not letting nobody run me off.”
The struggle Arthur was going through was very real and the discomfort it was causing him was visible. “I was just talking to my girlfriend the other night telling her, ‘I’m fucking stressed, I don’t even know what’s wrong with me, but I’m just stressed. I got to put food on the table, I don’t have a job, all these things add up and on top of it, I could still get shot.” Yet even with the difficult times he is going through, Arthur feels like he is going to make it. “I always feel I can tackle any situation, I’m headstrong. I just need a break.”

**Analysis:** Laub and Sampson (2003) maintain that life-course persisters “exhibited chaotic lives in multiple dimensions (residences, work, family)” (p. 172). They further suggest that this disorganized lifestyle, in turn, negatively affects the offenders’ ability to access positive turning points that can assist them in their desistance from crime. Strongly contributing to the persisters’ instability are their patterns of long-term and short-term incarceration over their life course. As a result, any available desistance opportunities are lost (2003).

Larry, Eric, and Arthur exemplify how long-term and short-term periods of incarceration over the life course makes it extremely difficult to establish important social ties to individuals and institutions that can influence the desistance process. It is most obvious with Arthur, who went to prison at age 22 and came home at age 36. His road to desistance will have to be built from scratch. For Eric, periods of incarceration in his late teens and early 20’s, late 20’s, and early 30’s, plus the very real possibility that he will serve prison time for his current firearm case, puts his future in serious jeopardy. Larry’s incarceration periods are even more striking in that he estimates that he has spent at least 20 of his 38 years in jail. Adding in the debilitating factors of alcoholism and homelessness, his chances for a full recovery in life appear quite low at this point.
All three of these persisters are also being held back by the negative influences of their neighborhoods and their continuing adherence to the street code values that support the use of violence for conflict resolution. All three can still be found in their neighborhoods, hanging out with their friends. In this environment, they are fully exposed to the temptations of the drug trade and easy money. Peer pressure, combined with the need to provide for themselves and their families, puts heavy pressure on them to give in. With regard to encounters with past adversaries and unresolved grievances, it was apparent from their interviews and narratives that if approached or confronted in the wrong manner, they would quickly resort to violence as a means of dealing with the situation.

There appears to be no easy answer to the current challenges faced by Larry, Eric, and Arthur—other than suggesting that with age and maturity will come better decision making. It is hoped that at some point their inner will and personal strength will overpower the pull of the streets and the gang, and that they will find their way in attaining a life devoid of gangs, guns, drugs, and violence.

**Intermediate: Carlos**

Carlos best represents the group of subjects who fall into the intermediate category between persistence and desistance. He was born and raised in the Drexler Park projects. Both of his parents were drug addicts. He was brought up by his grandparents, whom he loved and respected. His grandmother died when he was six years old and by the time his grandfather passed when he was sixteen, he was already in the streets. Educationally, Carlos always thought of himself as smart and capable of doing well in school; he just had no interest. He lasted less than two years in high school before quitting for the gang and the streets.
Carlos became a member of the Drexler Park Ballers at age 13 and would stay active in the gang until he was 21 years old. Being a member of the gang was important to Carlos. “Early on, it meant the world to me. I really thought I was somebody early in life because I was a member of the Ballers.” Carlos’ gang career was violent and intense. He was arrested for his first firearm at age 14, armed robberies at age 15, and at age 16, he was arrested and convicted of murder in a gang-related incident. While Carlos was an active participant in gang violence, he also lost many friends along the way to gang violence. “The Drexler Park Ballers got a lot of different generations, so the list just goes on and on. We lost people from ’89, ’91, ’93, three in ’95, ’97, ’98, 2000, all young guys 15, 18, 19 years old.”

Gang membership has taken a heavy toll on Carlos’ life. The reputation he built and the violence he was involved in during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s still follows him today. “Being a gang member definitely affected my life and I still carry it today.” Carlos was convicted of murder at age 16 and committed to the Department of Youth Services until he was 21 years old. When he came home, he decided to stop being an active member of the gang. Carlos reasoned that to do this right he had to let his rivals know of his intentions.

The same aggression I had as far as being negative, it’s the same aggression I have as being positive. When I came home I wasn’t trying to deal with the drama no more. When I bumped into different people from different areas where I had problems, I would approach them and say, ‘I’m offering up peace.’ I’m stating first as a grown man, ‘I don’t want no more problems. I’m not trying to gangbang no more, so what’s up.’ I made sure I said everything positive that I was doing. In some cases I even apologized to certain people that I did wrong to with knives, and shooting at people, or just jumping people. I apologized to them, man to man. I offered up the olive branch and most guys accepted it.
This action of proactively addressing past grudges with rivals was an important step for several subjects in the study. Two potential reasons account for this decision-making process. First, it provided the subject with the opportunity to clear his conscience of the guilt and remorse he felt for inflicting harm and injury on other gang members. Second, and probably of more importance, was that by confronting past rivals face-to-face, they could verify if their feud was over or if lingering animosity still existed. If their hostilities were over, both parties could start to move forward with their lives. If not, the very real possibility existed that resolving their dispute would resort back to the old ways of dealing with conflict, and that would involve violence.

Today, almost 30 years after becoming a member of the Drexler Park Ballers, Carlos’ identity as a gang member is still very much a part of his life. “I still consider myself a member of the Drexler Park Ballers. I am not an active member, but I would say I’m a positive member. As long as I’m here in Boston, I won’t be able to shake the title and I don’t even try to shake the title, because that’s actually who I am.”

Carlos identifies the death of his best friend Ramin as the single most important event that changed his life. “Ramin, my best friend, my homie, got murdered. When we was growing up and my grandfather was still alive, Ramin was one of my only friends that he would let in the house, he threw all the others out, he was like a brother to me.”

At the time of Ramin’s death, Carlos was still working on getting his life in order. “I was trying to do so many positive things, but now I’m at a standstill.” This was truly a crossroads moment in Carlos’ life. The rules of the gang and the code of the street strongly put forth that there is no walking away from this type of situation (see Anderson, 1999). The only recourse available to Carlos and his associates was revenge on those who killed Ramin; anything less would jeopardize their reputation on the street. “When I heard what happened, my first reaction
was, I can’t let this ride, I have to take care of this.” Several close friends wanted to accompany him on his mission of retaliation, but he didn’t want this. During the interview process, I could clearly sense the anguish Carlos was going through as he recalled that point in time. “I had a decision to make, go get a gun and retaliate or just call it a day and forget it. So it was just like a headache that was just going to explode, it was overwhelming.” Carlos knew that if he picked up a gun and went looking for Ramin’s killers, it would start a path of destruction all over again.

In the end, he decided he did not want to return to his violent past. “As frustrated as I was, and as bad as I wanted to retaliate, I decided I was done with being the violent gangbanging dude I used to be. I didn’t want that life anymore. My decision haunted me for like two years before it finally kicked in that I made the right decision not to retaliate.”

**Analysis:** Carlos’ decision to not avenge the killing of his best friend showed great fortitude and restraint. Within the street and gang culture, there exists a “code of the streets” mentality (Anderson, 1999). According to this code, which is ingrained early in the mind-set of those involved in the street and gang culture, “violence is viewed as acceptable, appropriate, and even obligatory” when responding to disrespect (Stewart & Simon, 2010, p. 4). The murder of Ramin by rival gang members was the ultimate act of disrespect for Carlos. If he was going to abide by the rules that had guided his behavior for much of his life, the only available option for him was to exact revenge through violence. Carlos’ ability to defy the “powerful norms” of the street and gang culture displayed a level of maturity and rational thinking that was quite unique for a 22-year-old entrenched gang member (2010).

The challenge facing Carlos, and one he struggled with greatly, was how to carry over this same mental toughness into other aspects of his life as he attempted to transition out of the gang lifestyle. Carlos’ life experiences during his 20’s and 30’s did little to advance his move
forward with regard to the desistance process. With an inconsistent work history, a failed marriage, four children currently living in a shelter, and a felony arrest and conviction that resulted in a probation period of three years, at age 38, his future prospects seemed bleak. Yet despite his current challenges, Carlos demonstrated a positive attitude and demeanor, and he sounded determined that he would succeed in the future. He talked about the positive influences in his life and how he was going to use them as a foundation from which to build. In his 20’s, he was mentored by a successful and respected African American professional who instilled in him the importance of establishing a strong work ethic in life.

Mr. Hughes, he had a real positive influence on me. He knew my history and he still gave me a break and an opportunity to work. He cut me no slack and nothing was given to me. He told me, ‘If you’re late you get written up. If you’re late again, you’re written up. Third time, you’re gone.’ I had no work history, so it was just a struggle to get up every day, get on the bus, then get on the train to downtown. It was an extremely hard thing for me to actually do, but I managed it, and learned how to do work.

Today, Carlos works as a counselor at a shelter and he likes his job. “I’m a hard worker, I work the day shift, but I come in any time they need me. Last winter when we had all the snowstorms, I made it in no matter what to make sure we had coverage. Mr. Hughes taught me that if you want something you have to go get it.”

Building on the notion of “meaningful employment” as an important component of the desistance process, Carlos also cited his strong religious beliefs as helping him move forward in life. “Being in the church has kept me positive in dealing with the struggles in life. Being spiritual keeps me grounded and humble, I know right from wrong.”
Carlos appears committed to rebuilding his life. As a result of his recent criminal case, he lost all of his savings and is starting over. “It’s definitely a rough, hard hill. As far as me doing good, the more you do good, the better you get at it. Even last year, with no job and no money, the opportunity to move into crime was there, but I’m so far removed from that line of temptation, nothing can pull me back.” Carlos stated that his first priority was getting his kids back and after that he wants to work towards owning his own business. His assessment of his life to date is straightforward and realistic. “It’s definitely improved since childhood. Young adulthood was a rough stretch, and adulthood has been a process of learning, hard learning, and growing up.”

Case Study: Del

This case study focuses on the life of Del and his transition from entrenched gang member and drug dealer to an accomplished and respected public sector leader. Del’s early adolescence through young adulthood years were negatively influenced by neighborhood, family, school, peers, and individual characteristics. His experiences are a primary example of the risk-factor approach to gang membership, which suggests that “there are likely to be multiple rather than single pathways to adverse outcomes” (Thornberry et al., 2003, p. 57).

In his mid-20’s, Del began the arduous effort of changing the trajectory of his life from a destined persister to a successful desister. His desistance process included a myriad of mechanisms including prison, family, neighborhood, friends, education, work, marriage, and human agency. Del’s story concludes this chapter on persistence and desistance because it highlights the complexity of change and the multiple turning points, both traditional and non-traditional, that when combined can lead to personal and positive transformation.
Del grew up in New York during his early years in a household consisting of a teenage mother and a father who was a heroin addict. In the late 1970’s, his mother moved him and his brother to Boston, leaving their father behind. He remembers from about ages eight through fourteen his mother being involved in several relationships, none of which were healthy, and none bringing a father figure into his life. With regard to supervision, he considered himself a “latchkey kid.” “The neighborhood I grew up in, there was no YMCA. There were no childcare programs. People didn’t know the importance of afterschool programs at that time. I remember being eight, nine, and ten years old, walking home with a key in my pocket, opening the apartment door, and I had to fend for myself.”

Del’s mother raised him and his brother under a tough-love philosophy, because she knew she could not be with them much of the time. “Her definition of us being men was that we had to stand up and face conflict and not run away from it, and if that meant taking a punch, then you took a punch, because even if you lose the fight, at least the individual had to think twice about confronting you again. She wanted to make sure we had some kind of survival traits, something in our character to say that we can’t be messed with.”

By the time he reached early adolescence, Del’s mother was struggling and going through what he described as “her own social and emotional crisis.” This resulted in them being evicted from their apartment, moving to a shelter, and Del and his brother being placed in foster care for a short period of time.

Del’s school experiences were filled with frustration and failure. As a child in New York, he was a bilingual student. When he entered the Boston public school system, he was placed in the mainstream, English-speaking student program. “In middle school I suffered with the school work because of the fact that bilingual students are different and need different programs. So I
could never keep up.” Del would eventually figure out that he just needed to show up to school in order to pass and be moved from grade to grade. “I probably had perfect attendance, but I wasn’t comprehending anything. I was diving deeper and deeper, becoming mournfully illiterate by that point.” Once in high school, Del lasted only four months before quitting school. He remembers at one point being confronted by his English teacher about his literacy. “She showed little concern for my situation and stated I was like many other Latino kids. I was embarrassed and I left school for good. I just walked away from it. I didn’t want to deal with the reality that someone now knew my secret.”

Once outside the school environment, Del was in his element. He was already in the streets selling drugs and making a name for himself. “I was pretty sure I was making more money than a teacher in a week, so I thought financially, I was set for life.” Del committed himself to the streets and within a short period of time, he would face the harsh reality that the lifespan of a gang member and drug dealer was fleeting and its outcome negative. For Del, that outcome would be long-term incarceration beginning at the age of 18.

Del’s first exposure to the drug trade came in the mid-1980’s, when crews operated in the neighborhoods and before the re-emergence of street gangs. For Del, it was always about making money. He was smart and street savvy and conducted his business in a lot of different neighborhoods. Del’s strength was in the drug aspect of the gang, as opposed to the violence that would develop later. While Del is considered an original member of the E Street Gangsters, he was also older than many of the younger youth, including his brother, who would bring the gang to full-fledged status by 1989-1990. As crack cocaine, gangs, and guns flooded the neighborhoods during the late 1980’s, Del observed how the dynamics of the streets changed. “Gangs were forming heavy and guns came into play. Other gangs were coming through our
neighborhood and exercising their force on us.” In order to salvage their reputation and make a name for themselves, the gang decided they needed to get more guns and more members in order to push back on their adversaries. “We didn’t want to be a 20-person gang with one gun, we wanted to be a 20-person gang with everyone having a gun.”

By late 1988, law enforcement caught up with Del and he was arrested for drug trafficking; he would spend the next seven years in prison. Today, Del believes that his past gang involvement still affects his life:

In a way it does. It still impacts me because there are still individuals who haven’t helped themselves and who get angry at me because I can’t help them. I’ve done well in life and I worked hard, and this doesn’t sit well with some. They’ll say, ‘you’re a sellout. You went and got educated. You no longer really want to roll with us. You were never one of us.’ They would say things like that. Sometimes it bothers me and sometimes I get pissed off. They believe I abandoned the street life and they don’t understand it. That wasn’t a life, I have a life now.

When asked what events, if any, changed the course of his life, Del was clear that going to prison was not a turning point in his life. “I grew up in a neighborhood where going to prison and serving time and coming out, you’d be glorified. You’d be a hero. So to me, it was a rite of passage in my criminal manhood.”

It was in the prison setting where the first of two important turning point events took place that would play a significant role in Del’s desistance process. Two-and-one-half years into his prison sentence, Del found out that his younger brother—one of the leaders of the E Street Gangsters—had been shot and killed by police after he opened fire on them with a 12-gauge shotgun. Del recalls that for weeks after his brother’s death, other inmates would approach him:
They would say, ‘Your brother went out like a trooper,’ and, ‘You got to be proud of him.’ They were trying to make me feel good, but that was not the way I wanted to be proud of my brother. I think that for the first time, I realized how stupid my decisions were and how they surrounded me in a world of stupidity because I wasn’t trying to celebrate what he did. I was really sad about what he gave up and the potential he had because he was a good kid. It was at that point that I made a commitment to change what I had become. I made a commitment that when I got out I was going to stay out of trouble.

Del started his commitment to change by taking stock of his life. He asked himself questions like, “What got me into jail?” and “How do I better myself before I get out?” Del knew that making a real change required that he address his educational issues. “I needed to deal with one thing and that was my illiteracy. I figured that with the time I have to serve this sentence, I was going to leave with the capacity to learn how to read and write a sentence, because if not, then I’m never going to be able to get a job, get a license, do anything if I don’t have that ability. So I made a commitment to do that.”

In his remaining years in prison, Del learned how to read and write and he earned his GED. When he was released from prison in the mid-1990’s, he returned to his neighborhood and connected with Juan, a former member of the gang. Juan had been shot a couple of weeks after Del’s brother and, as a result, he was a quadriplegic and suffered from multiple health problems. Juan explained to Del that he was going around to schools and talking to kids about the dangers of gang life. “He invited me to go with him to talk to the kids. It wasn’t something I wanted to do, but I went a couple of times to listen. He would talk to the kids about my brother’s story, how he lost a friend. He talked about how he caught a bullet in his face. How it ricocheted off his
jawbone and came out the back of his neck, severing his spinal cord. I could see that he was making an impact on the kids and it got me to thinking, maybe I could do this.”

According to Del, it was what happened next that was the second and most critical turning point in life for him:

The big turning point for me and the moment I decided I was going to become a dedicated youth worker was the night before Juan died (as a result of complications from his original injuries). I went to visit him. His sister called me, she said, ‘He wants to see you, he’s been asking to see you, make sure you go see him.’ When I get there, I see he’s dying. He’s having trouble breathing, he says to me, ‘I need you to walk for me, I need you to keep this walk for me.’ And I said, ‘All right, don’t worry, I got you.’ The next day I woke up and got the news he passed away. That’s when I made the decision that his story and my brother’s story needed to continue to try to make an impact on other kids’ lives.

From that point on, Del began to rebuild his life. Like all of the subjects in the study, especially those coming home from prison, Del had to deal with and overcome the temptations of the street if he was going to make it in the conventional world. “When I first got out, there were times I thought about it. There were real struggles at the beginning, no job, nowhere to live, no money, and no car. But as much of a struggle as it was, I hung in there and vowed to myself that the only person who’s going to stop me from achieving what I want to be in life is going to be me.”

Del’s work career began as a youth worker—first as a volunteer and then paid full-time—in his neighborhood. Due to his growing reputation as a hard worker and effective change agent in the lives of at-risk youth, other opportunities opened up for him. Over time, he became
recognized as a leader in the area of youth outreach and he began climbing the ranks of management. Today, Del is in an executive leadership position in a youth outreach organization. “I saw the potential of what my life could be. I didn’t know that my life was going to be what it is now. I grew within the ranks of youth work, not because I had a desire to move up. I just kept doing my job well and that got me into the right positions.”

In addition to work, other strengths in Del’s life include marriage, family, and education. Del has been married for 14 years and he has five children. He has also continued his education by earning his bachelor’s degree and then his master’s degree. He credits his family for keeping him grounded and focused on the important things in life, and education for reinforcing his desistance process. “I went to college not because I wanted college to give me the job of my dreams. I went to college to make sure I never went back to the life I led before.” Del has come a long way in life and he recognizes how much he has accomplished. “I think it’s quite evident that my life has improved, it’s night and day. I think I now know where to pull the strength from within me whenever I think I have doubt in myself.”

**Analysis:** It is ironic that the structural and social institutions of neighborhood, family and friends, and school that failed Del early in his life were the same ones that saved him later in life. As a youth, the disorganized neighborhood context in which Del grew up influenced his attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and thereby contributed to his commitment to the street lifestyle and criminal and deviant offending (see Anderson, 1994; Stewart & Simons, 2010). Later, when he got out of prison in his mid-20’s, Del returned to his neighborhood and dedicated himself to working with the most troubled of youth. Over the next 20 years, he would play a primary role in the neighborhood’s re-emergence as a strong and vibrant community.
Raised in a single-parent household with little supervision or discipline, by a mother consumed with personal problems, Del and his brother were in the streets early in life and had to fend for themselves. In young adulthood, Del would identify the deaths of his brother and his friend Juan as being the two turning points in his life that motivated him to desist from crime. Now crime-free for 20 years, Del’s commitment to desistance is further strengthened by a family life consisting of a stable marriage of 14 years, a strong attachment to his five children, stable employment, and a commitment to pursuing an education (Del’s next goal: a Ph.D.).

Del’s story of revitalization is an impressive one, and it highlights the importance of understanding that both individual will power and a strong social support network are required in order for ex-offenders to sustain their long-term commitment to conformity and successfully desist from crime (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Conclusion

In 1988, within the larger confines of five Boston neighborhoods, came the re-emergence of the street gang culture. In no way a citywide phenomenon, the gangs that formed during the late 1980’s were a localized problem defined by public housing projects and sections of residential neighborhoods including street blocks, corners, and parks. Fueled by the introduction of crack cocaine and influenced by the popular culture, gangs named themselves after the streets and housing projects in which they grew up. They established and defended their turf against opposing gangs. As feuds erupted and violence increased, neighborhoods became clearly marked with murals mourning the loss of friends and family to street violence. Graffiti identifying the gangs’ turf covered sidewalks and buildings, and sneakers hung from trees and overhead wires sending a clear message of warning to outsiders.
In these settings, the gang became synonymous with the neighborhood, and in turn, the neighborhood gave the gang and its members their identity. For many of Boston’s former gang members, the status and respect that gang membership brought them almost 30 years ago is still an important component of who they are today.

This chapter examined the lives of 28 former gang members and two neighborhood street criminals to understand how gang membership and serious, violent offending affected their development over the life course. More specifically, it sought to explore and comprehend “how” and “why” their behavior changed (if it did at all) and the influence of structural turning points in that change. Life-history narratives made it possible to better understand the intertwining of formal and informal social control institutions, as well as the situational factors, that accounted for their continuity or change in deviant and criminal behavior (Laub & Sampson, 2003).

Interestingly, none of the men in the study indicated that they were subjected to pressures, threats, or personal violence when they decided to leave the gang (see Decker and Lauritsen, 2006). For most of the men in this study, the change process was a long and gradual effort filled with victories and defeats. Most of the subjects were able to move themselves forward in life, but some were not, and others continue to teeter in-between.

For those subjects who successfully desisted from crime, structural turning points played an important role in influencing their positive changes. In their study of the Glueck men, Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) identified marriage as a strong predictor of desistance. However, in the current study, marriage was not a strong contributor to desistance. Of the 30 subjects in the study, only 16 are either currently married or have ever been married. Nine subjects are currently married to their original spouse, two subjects are re-married, three subjects are married but currently separated, and two were married but are now divorced. Fourteen of the
subjects in the study have never been married; of these, 11 subjects are currently involved in relationships, while three subjects are currently single. Only one subject identified marriage as a critical component in his desistance from crime.

Fatherhood, for Boston’s former gang members, was a dysfunctional picture of complex and tumultuous personal relationships, involving procreation of multiple children with multiple partners. Of the 30 subjects in the study, 29 have children. Those 29 had a total of 88 children for an approximate average of three children per subject. Additionally, 18 subjects had children before the age of 21, with one subject having his first child at age 12. Complicating the situation even further is the fact that 18 of the subjects had children with more than one woman—including one subject who had six children with five different mothers.

Fatherhood was not a priority for this group of men and, in the majority of cases, they were unable or unwilling to carry out the role of responsible parenting. It would only be later in life, after they matured, that they would understand the implications of their adolescent decisions. Even then, only a small percentage of subjects identified fatherhood as playing an important role in their desistance from crime (see Moloney et al., 2009).

Work, on the other hand, was a critical component of the subjects’ change process. Based on their life-history narratives, work was consistently identified as being an important component in their desistance from crime. Of the 30 subjects, 27 recognized that if they were going to move their lives forward in a new and positive direction, legitimate employment was required. But work, on its own, is not enough to initiate and sustain change. For work to have a true impact on the individual’s desistance from crime, it has to be meaningful. When work means more than simply having a job, when it is tied to long-term commitment, and when it brings prestige and status and thus self-esteem and a positive attitude, it can be an important
restraint from crime (Matsueda & Heimer, 1997; Sampson & Laub, 1993). For the subjects who made the most significant strides in separating themselves from their past, this was the case.

A multitude of factors combined with a strong inner resolve led the desisting group of former gang members to reinvent themselves from serious and violent offenders to legitimate and law-abiding citizens. Their life-history narratives identified an assortment of elements that, to varying degrees, influenced their successful desistance from crime including age and maturation, family and friends, neighborhood, education, work, religion, prison, the death of someone close to them, and adult mentorship. Underlying all of these contributions was their commitment to improving themselves as individuals. They all made the choice to change and take control of their restructuring process, and in the end, it was their human agency that proved to be the crucial element that ultimately allowed them to overcome their past and recreate their futures (Laub & Sampson, 2003).
VII. Conclusion

Historically, the study of gangs and gang membership has focused on the onset and continuity of adolescent gang membership. Overall, little research has been dedicated to the gang member’s childhood and adult years and the implications of gang membership over the full life course. To fill this gap in knowledge, I combined the study of gangs and gang membership with the life course perspective to understanding human lives. Integral to this research strategy was the qualitative component of recruiting and interviewing former Boston gang members and having them “tell their story in their own words” (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996, p. 45). This approach made it possible to explore the complexity of human development and understand the influences that caused former serious and violent gang members to either persist in or desist from deviant and criminal behavior.

The present study sought to answer three questions that are critical to understanding the processes that led to the re-emergence of the street gang culture in Boston in the late 1980’s and the long-term effects of gang membership. The first question focused on the experiences of the youth who became involved in the gang lifestyle during that time period. The second question explored the turning points and events that caused gang-involved youth to either persist in or desist from criminal and deviant behavior. Finally, the third question examined the effect of gang membership on the trajectory of a youth’s life. Underlying the analysis of these questions was the effect and influence of neighborhood, family and friends, and education, as well as other forms of social control that influenced gang members’ entry into and exit from the street gang life.
To comprehensively study the lives of Boston’s former gang members, a life-history narrative approach was combined with in-depth, one-on-one interviews guided by a semi-structured questionnaire format. This methodology gave me the ability to smoothly navigate in and out of different areas of the subjects’ lives, enabling me to draw out their special knowledge, experience, and insights involving the world of gang membership (Singleton & Straits, 1999, p. 242).

Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) theory of desistance was an integral part of this study’s examination of how structural turning points and human agency can positively influence the lives of a group of serious and violent offenders from a different time period. The basic premise of Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory is that “crime and deviance are more likely to occur when an individual’s bond to society is weak or broken” (2003: 5-6). Their theory calls into question other theoretical perspectives that hold that individual characteristics established in childhood account for long-term patterns of antisocial behavior (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Moffitt, 1993). Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) do not dispute that some individuals cannot escape the abuses of their childhood years, but they also believe that changes influenced by structural turning points can redirect the life trajectories of individuals with criminal and deviant backgrounds toward prosocial behavior later in life. Testing their theory on the Depression-era Glueck men, Laub and Sampson (2003) concluded that, “‘turning points’ related to work, marriage, and military service were crucial for understanding the processes of continuity and change across the adult life course” (p. 6).

Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) original version of their Age-Graded Informal Social Control Theory came out in 1993. By 2003, they recognized that revisions were needed to better explain and understand the complicated process of change among serious offenders. Sampson
and Laub believed that the added components of historical context, the situational context of crime and violence, and human agency would provide a deeper and more thorough comprehension of the individual’s criminal behavior over the life course, especially as it relates to patterns of persistence and desistance (2003, pp. 53-54).

In this study, Sampson and Laub’s theoretical revisions and insights proved to be useful. By analyzing the life experiences of Boston’s former gang members through the lenses of historical context, the situational context of crime and violence, and human agency, a clearer picture emerged with regard to the structural and cultural challenges they faced starting early in life and the opportunities for change that presented themselves at different points over their life course. Applying Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) theoretical perspective of persistence and desistance to the lives of 28 former Boston gang members and two neighborhood street criminals produced rich and thick narratives of their entire life experiences and allowed me to reach several important conclusions.

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24 In Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) analysis of the Glueck men (born between the years of 1924 and 1932), they determined that military service was one of the turning points that influenced positive change in the men’s lives. They found that the military changed the men’s routine activities, implemented discipline and supervision into their lives, and allowed for the opportunity of identity change. For Boston’s former gang members (born between the years of 1960 and 1980), the role of military service as a potential factor in their desistance from crime did not present itself. Of the 30 subjects in the study, none were involved in the military, and military service was never mentioned by them as an option they thought about in regard to changing their lives.
A Review of the Findings

What were the experiences of gang-involved youth in Boston in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s?

The first key finding of this study was that the experience of gang membership in Boston during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s was consistent, for the most part, with the experiences of gang members who grew up in other re-emerging gang cities of that time period (see Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1998b). Additionally, the stories discovered through in-depth interviews of the subjects in the current study shed light upon and contribute to the gang literature with respect to two important and contested issues of that time: the origins of the gang and the relationship between gangs, guns, and drugs and the dramatic increases in firearm violence during the mid to late 1980’s (Blumstein, 1995; Hagedorn, 1998b; Kennedy et al., 1996).

The Origins of the Gang: In Boston, the re-emergence of the street gang culture was a neighborhood-based experience, built on the close-knit relationships of family and friends who, as children and young adolescents, participated together in many activities including school, sports, and other social events. Over time, these neighborhood friendship groups would transition into street gangs and become immersed in drug selling and firearm violence as they vied for control of neighborhood turf.

Three overlapping and intertwined factors played a significant role in this transition process. The first involved the migration of outside drug organizations into Boston’s neighborhoods during the mid-1980’s. These illegal enterprises originated from New York and Detroit, and were also represented by Jamaican Posses. Prior to their arrival, local neighborhood drug groups flourished in the residential and housing project settings where the subjects grew up,
but it would soon become evident that they paled in comparison to the experienced, highly structured, and extremely dangerous illicit organizations that were starting to set up shop in the neighborhoods. Their arrival would mark an important period that included the introduction of crack cocaine, increased levels of violence that to this point had not been experienced by Boston’s future gang members, and the realization that Boston had much to learn with regard to the illegal drug trade. As perceptively described by one of the subjects, the presence of these outside drug organizations divided residents and those involved in the street culture into three groups. The first group consisted of those in the community who were simply scared of the sudden rise in violence and aggressive takeover of their community. The second group was in awe of the new criminal element and wanted to be part of them. And finally, while those in the third group—represented by the individuals in the current study—may have initially either partnered with, or gave deference to these big city drug dealers, they ultimately took a stand and vigorously defended and reclaimed their neighborhoods with an intense level of their own violence. By the late 1980’s, these outside organizations would fade away, but their influence on the sophistications of the drug trade and use of firearm violence to assert control would leave a lasting imprint on Boston’s future gang members.

The second factor that preceded the formation of street gangs was the proliferation of neighborhood-based groups of youth who referred to themselves as “crews.” Crews were not gangs. They were affiliations of youth involved in activities that were both criminal and non-criminal. The Kangol Crew was one of the more prominent crews that emerged during this time. Made up of young teens who would later become the leadership and core of the gang culture in Boston, they separated themselves from others by the Kangol hats they wore. At their peak, they were a unified group that exuded a sense of pride and they had status across the city. And they
were a criminal group, traveling citywide, fighting, robbing, and wreaking havoc. By the late 1980’s, they would also fade out of the picture, but the core components of what would define the gang were now set in place, especially as it relates to the hat as a primary symbol of gang identification.

Finally, the third and final component of the street gang formation process came in the form of Anthony James and the Warrior Clan. Considered by all of the subjects in the study to be the first street gang in Boston, this Mattapan-based group were older and in their early adulthood years, and many of the subjects referred to them as men among boys. Their reputation for intimidation and physicality made them feared citywide. Their leader, Anthony James, while no less imposing, was also a charismatic individual who was college-educated, an athlete, and respected in all of the neighborhoods. As the late 1980’s approached, he attempted to be a unifying force across different neighborhoods and groups, and he is credited with personally forming the second street gang in the city after the Warrior Clan. His efforts were cut short in June of 1988, when he was murdered by rivals. His death sent a wave of shock and fear across the neighborhoods and the strong sentiment on the street was that if this can happen to Anthony James, it can happen to anyone. With Anthony James now gone, a sense of paranoia enveloped the neighborhoods. Youth retreated back to the safe havens of their neighborhoods and they started to arm themselves. There was no unifying force now; everyone was on their own.

The relationship between gangs, guns, and drugs and the dramatic increases in firearm violence during the mid to late 1980’s: Boston’s street gang culture came into its own in 1988. Spurred on by the elimination of the outside drug organizations, the fading away of the Kangol Crew, the death of Anthony James, and the introduction of crack cocaine, approximately 15 street gangs with a membership of almost 450 self-identified gang members quickly formed
in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End. In order to control the local drug trade, neighborhood boundaries were established and fiercely defended. The proceeds generated from the lucrative illegal crack markets were used to purchase firearms, which would become the primary tool for initiating and settling gang conflicts. The volatile combination of gangs, guns, and drugs almost immediately started claiming lives in all of these neighborhoods, and over the next two years, shootings and homicides would increase to record levels in the city.

As was the case with many re-emerging gang cities of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, the influence of popular culture including movies, music, and both print and electronic media played an important role in helping to establish and solidify the identity of the gang. All of the gangs in Boston at some point in time adopted the names and wore the apparel of professional sports teams. Drug money was used to purchase clothes, sneakers, jewelry, and cars. Of all of the garb that gang members wore, it was the hat that signified the strongest symbol of the gang’s identity—and that could initiate the most violent of conflicts.

The early days of the gang life were marked by a sense of pride, camaraderie, and loyalty. Gang members flaunted their early success in the drug trade and their gang status through the nice clothes they wore and the arrogant manner in which they carried themselves. Their gang strategies were contradictory in that their primary purpose in life was to make money through the illicit distribution of drugs, yet the violent conflicts they incited with other gangs resulted in heightened attention from law enforcement on their illegal street activities. This period of infamy would be short-lived before the downside of gang membership started to set in. Being consumed by the drug trade and committed to a culture of violence to resolve conflict resulted in short and long stints in jail, having to deal with the deaths of family and friends, and
personal victimization. As the gang structure began to implode and long-time friendships fell victim to greed, mistrust, and betrayal, many of the subjects started to consider shedding their gang careers in favor of a different and more conventional lifestyle.25

What are the turning points or events that cause gang-involved youth to either persist in or desist from criminal and deviant behavior?

The second key finding of this study was that structural turning points combined with the element of human agency were important components in the desistance from deviant and criminal behavior for this group of serious and violent former Boston gang members.

While it would seem highly unlikely that a group of hard-core gang members who grew up experiencing dysfunction in many aspects of their lives and who committed themselves to drug dealing, and carrying and using firearms, could change the trajectory of their lives, this was the case for many of the subjects in the study. For those subjects who tipped the scales from a life of crime to one reflecting more conventional beliefs and behaviors, multiple structural turning points with varying degrees of influence accounted for their change.

Breaking away from the gang and attempting to move to a more mainstream lifestyle was a long, gradual, and painstaking process for the men in this study. For most of the men, the decision to leave behind the drama associated with the gang life did not necessarily mean leaving the street life. Their desire for change would prove to be a prolonged clash between starting over and rebuilding their lives or succumbing to the temptations of the easy money of the drug trade.

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25 See Matza’s (1999) description of drift: “The delinquent transiently exists in limbo between convention and crime, responding in turn to the demands of each, flirting now with one, now the other, but postponing commitment, evading decision. Thus, he drifts between criminal and conventional action” (p. 28).
The desistance process for all of the former gang members in this study involved a constant state of struggle. Their embeddedness in the gang life over a long period of time had significant ramifications on their developmental processes, and resulted in many of them not committing to fully changing their lives until they were in their late 20’s and early 30’s.

Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) theory of change informed the findings of this study, but only to a point. For those men who successfully transitioned from serious and violent gang members to upright citizens, a wide array of formal and informal social control mechanisms aided them in their change process. Structural turning points including age and maturation, neighborhood, family and friends, education, work, marriage and long-term relationships, religion, prison, and adult mentorship all proved to be important components for creating positive change. Also consistent with Sampson and Laub’s theoretical model was that those men who did not successfully desist either failed to take advantage of structural turning points made available to them or did not have access to them in the first place. For these men, persistence in crime has continued to control their lives.

While some subjects identified particular turning points as taking precedence over others in motivating their change, in the end it would require multiple turning points working in conjunction with one another to overcome their crime-filled pasts. Of all of the structural turning points identified by the subjects as assisting them in their change, work—specifically, legitimate and meaningful work—was the most consistently mentioned, providing the subjects with the structure and sense of accomplishment that was needed to keep them focused and committed to the desistence process.26

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26 According to Hughes (2013), “a man’s work is one of the more important parts of his social identity, of his self” (p. 43).
In their study of the Glueck men, Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003) found that the historical context of growing up in the Great Depression Era and World War II “heavily influenced the objective opportunities and the subjective world view of their subjects” (2003, pp. 56-57). The post-World War II era was a time of prosperity in the United States. Low unemployment rates, less crime, expanded occupational opportunities, and an overall increase in national wealth and national pride strongly suggested that life was good.

This was not the situation for the men in the current study; instead, they grew up during an extremely violent period of time. Scholars have described the mid-1980’s through early 1990’s as an epidemic of violence, unprecedented in intensity, and narrowly focused on young African American and Hispanic males as being both victims and perpetrators (see Cook & Laub, 2002, p. 1). This description accurately represents the experiences of the men in this study. They were pulled into a violent lifestyle by the introduction of crack cocaine, the proliferation of firearms, and the re-emergence of the street gang culture. This volatile combination led to the dramatic increase in youth homicide rates in Boston during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s—a level of violence that has not been experienced since in the city (Cook & Laub, 2002).

One would think that with this level of dangerousness all around them, Boston’s former gang members would have considered changing their lives sooner. However, we know that historical time and geographic place shape the attitudes of the individual, and that “choices are always embedded in social structures” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 282). For Boston’s former gang members, their early socialization into crime and violence and the rules that guide behavior on the street would only become more strongly ingrained as they moved into adolescence and young adulthood. The alluring and exciting nature of gang life was all-consuming for this group. During this period of time, their worlds were narrowly defined, limited in scope, and structured
around selling drugs, carrying and using firearms, and being immersed in the criminal justice system. Their exposure to violence as perpetrators and victims—both being victimized themselves and watching those close to them being victimized—was so commonplace that the normalcy of it became a fixed aspect of their daily lives (see Lauritsen, Sampson, & Laub, 1991).

Underlying the structural aspect of desistance was the critical component of human agency. Most of the men in this study had to reach a low point in their lives before they were able to tap into their own inner determination to make change. It was only through this combination of social capital and human agency that they would be able to break through the entrenched social and historical contexts that had defined a large portion of their lives. This is consistent with Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) study of the Glueck men. Those Glueck men who were successful in desisting from crime drew upon their own personal agency in combination with supporting informal social control structures, situations, and persons (Sampson & Laub, 2003, pp. 279-280).

However, unlike the experiences of the Glueck men, the road to desistance for Boston’s former gang members was done without the “knifing off” of their pasts—which, I would argue, made it more difficult for them. The element of “[knifing] off the past from the present” was a key aspect of Laub and Sampson’s theoretical framework (2003, p. 148). In the current research, only one subject decided that he needed to separate himself from his physical environment, peers, and family in order to have a chance at a positive future. The remainder of the subjects stayed closely connected to the same neighborhoods, peers, and families throughout their life course, with incarceration being the only separating factor. Many subjects seemed resistant—if not altogether unwilling—to separate themselves from their old environments. For Reggie, the decision to leave the 37th Street neighborhood behind was the right choice for him, and proved to
be a positive turning point in his life. Edward, on the other hand, defied the “knifing off” process and was adamant that while he was committed to changing his life, he would not do it at the cost of leaving his neighborhood, friends, and family. Edward clearly knew the pitfalls of staying within this criminogenic environment, and on many occasions those around him tested him with lucrative criminal opportunities. But, Edward knew the potential he had within himself to do positive things with his life and he was strong enough not to succumb to the temptations put before him. For the former gang members who successfully desisted from crime, it was not a matter of trying to escape their pasts, but accepting their past lives and reconciling those experiences with the knowledge that they had the drive and fortitude to create a future that was devoid of crime and violence.

How does being in a gang influence the trajectory of a youth’s life?

The third and final key finding of this study was that youth gang membership produced far-reaching and consequential repercussions not only for the men who led Boston’s gang movement in the late 1980’s, but also for the neighborhoods in which they carried out their deviant and criminal behavior, and for the generation of youth that would follow them.

From an individual perspective, gang membership has impacted the entire life course of the men in this study. Their initiation into the gang lifestyle started in their late childhood years (ages 9-12) as they watched, learned, and dabbled in criminal activity and the illegal drug trade. Being a gang member, selling drugs, carrying and using firearms, and being deeply involved in the criminal justice system dominated their adolescence, and in many cases, their young adult and adult lives. Today, regardless of the level of success or failure experienced by the subjects in their personal and professional lives, their gang membership continues to follow them. Their
narratives are filled with descriptions of the unrelenting and nagging feelings that past rivalries and unresolved grievances could resurface at any time; of accounts of the men seeking out old adversaries and making peace so they could move forward with their lives; of acknowledgment of certain neighborhoods and other places they will not venture into because of past incidents; of continuing to mourn the loss of past and present family and friends to street and gang violence; and of acknowledging the failures and missed opportunities that resulted from their stubbornness and unwillingness to let go of their past lives. For the subjects in this study, there is no denying or escaping the reality that gang membership has indelibly marked their lives.

The re-emergence of the street gang culture in the late 1980’s also had long-term collateral effects on the neighborhoods where gang members carried out deviant and criminal behavior. From a neighborhood perspective, Boston’s gang culture began influencing the structure of inner city neighborhoods in the late 1980’s. Driven by the illegal crack cocaine trade and the formation of street gangs, this realignment of neighborhood borderlines clearly identified the gangs’ turfs and drug territories, which were intensely defended against all rivals in order to protect the neighborhood’s underground economy as well as their status among other gangs. Today, many of the borders established by gang members almost 30 years ago still exist in some form. In the minds of many inner city youth—both gang-involved and non-gang-involved—violence continues to be synonymous with certain neighborhoods because of the long-lasting influence of the gang culture in the late 1980s.

Lastly, the re-emergence of street gangs in the late 1980’s led to the continuation of the gang culture in Boston through future generations. By the early 1990’s, street gangs were growing at an accelerated rate in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End. By 1995, approximately 1% of the city’s youth were involved in 61
gangs, with an estimated 1,300 total members (Kennedy et al., 1996). Homicides continued to be concentrated among this group of chronically offending youth who were responsible for 60% of all youth homicides in the city (1996). The most significant change to the gang picture during this time was the development of street gangs comprised of Cape Verdean youth in the neighborhoods of Roxbury and Dorchester, starting around 1994.

Today, street gangs continue to negatively impact the neighborhoods of Boston. A number of subjects suggested that while there are similarities between today’s gangs and those of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s—particularly with regard to the neighborhoods of origin, family connections, intergenerational influences, and the continuation of original gang feuds—there are also differences. They uniformly agree that Boston’s contemporary gang culture is a devolved version when compared to their era of gang membership. They believe that the reduction of the crack cocaine trade has taken away a great deal of the motivation and purpose of today’s gangs, thus creating a more chaotic structure and a gang culture comprised of chronically violent youth. While it can be argued that the point of view of Boston’s former gang members is self-serving with respect to their own gang legacy, their sentiments should not be ignored for they are, in many ways, the historians of the gang culture in Boston.

In summary, this study of the life experiences of Boston’s former gang members has advanced our knowledge of gangs and gang membership in three important ways. First, the experiences of gang membership in Boston closely resembled the experiences of those youth who became gang-involved in other re-emerging gang cities of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s (Decker & Van Winkle, 1996; Hagedorn, 1988). Additionally, through in-depth, retrospective interviews of former Boston gang members, we became better educated on the origins of the gang and the relationship between guns, gangs, and drugs, and their role in the unprecedented
level of violence during the late 1980’s in Boston (Blumstein, 1995; Kennedy et al., 1996). Second, informed by the work of Sampson and Laub (1993, 2003), we learned that structural turning points combined with the individual’s inner determination to change (human agency) influenced serious and violent gang members to desist from deviant and criminal behavior. Finally, we learned that the decision of these subjects to become gang-involved not only had long-term effects on their entire life course, but also on the neighborhoods they controlled and the generation of youth that would follow them. For those who led the re-emergence of gangs in Boston in the late 1980’s, their adolescent decisions and actions proved to be long-lasting in impact.

Limitations

While I have strived to take due diligence in being thorough and complete in my analysis of the lives of Boston’s former gang members, several limitations still persisted. First, this study utilized a non-probability, purposive data gathering design. This approach was the most appropriate and practical, but nonetheless, it still created two immediate weaknesses: researcher bias in subject selection, and the inability to make generalizations to the population being studied. With regard to researcher bias and subject selection, the subjects in this study were chosen because they had a relationship with a BSGAG member or myself and they were accessible to participate in the study. Therefore, based on my strategy, there were segments of the late 1980’s gang culture that were missed by this study. Examples include gang members who were incarcerated at the time of the recruiting process, former gang members, who if approached, would have refused to participate in the study, and lastly, those former gang members who successfully “knifed off” their pasts by moving away. It is possible, then, that
individuals from these different groups may have had different experiences and different perspectives on gang membership in Boston in the late 1980’s than those described in this study.

Compounding the risk for subject selection bias is the issue of sample size. Generally speaking, the larger the sample, the more accurate the findings. Thus, it could be argued that a group of 28 former gang members and two neighborhood street criminals is insufficient for arriving at reliable conclusions. Given the size of my group and its non-representativeness, my intent was not to generalize about gangs, but to provide an in-depth and detailed account of the experiences of gang membership and its long-term effect on the trajectory of a youth’s life.

Another limitation involves the data collection process. When the interview is the primary means of data collection, there are inherent weaknesses to which the researcher must pay close attention. One important area requiring heightened awareness is the truthfulness of the respondent. This issue was especially applicable to this study, as it involved individuals with long histories of serious and violent offending. Given this situation, it is highly unlikely that the information shared during the interviews was entirely true. Respondents may have been unable to recall past events, reinterpreted past events, and/or lied about past events. Additionally, respondents may have overstated and exaggerated individual and gang exploits, as well as redefined negative situations into positive ones, in order to enhance their stature. Lastly, in order for the interview to be successful, it was crucial to provide the subjects with a comfortable and stress-free setting that put them at ease. This was accomplished by working with the BSGAG member and/or the subject to identify the location where they were most comfortable. Notwithstanding these challenges, the interview proved to be a successful data collection process for the present study, producing robust narratives of deep individual experiences and making it possible to explore areas of inquiry that other methods could not have reached.
Another limitation involved validating the reliability of the data collection process. My initial strategy was to combine the life-history narratives of the subjects with their criminal history records to strengthen the integrity of their life experiences. Criminal record information was requested through email and telephone communications to the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security’s Department of Criminal Justice Information Services (DCJIS) for each of the 30 subjects. Unfortunately, the CORI’s for 12 of the subjects came back with either no record of a criminal history or with criminal histories with significant time periods that were not accounted for. To overcome this loss of validation data, I returned to the subject’s life history calendars and narratives, as well as my own personal experiences as a police officer working much of my career in the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End on gang-related issues. While this re-examination process allowed me to strengthen the timelines of criminal incidents and incarceration periods in order to validate the subject narratives, there were still periods of time that could not be accounted for.

Finally, in preparing for this study, I was well aware that being a police officer had its strengths and weaknesses. One of my main concerns was that my law enforcement background would inhibit the subjects from talking about their past lives and the deviant and criminal activities in which they had been involved—thereby limiting my ability to fully explore their life stories. These worries persisted even with the support of the Boston Street Gang Advisory Group (BSGAG) and my reputation as being fair and respectful in my dealings with this population over the years. It was not until the pre-interview process got underway—when I began gathering the subject’s personal information—that these feelings of doubt began to dissipate. Credit for managing this potential limitation belongs to the BSGAG, a well-thought-out and detailed instrumentation process, and the commitment of the subjects who participated in this study.
Despite all of these limitations, the current study provides a strong and thorough integration of different methodologies including the interview, life-history calendars, and the criminal offender record information (CORI) to arrive at a full picture that accurately chronicled the entire life experiences of Boston’s former gang members.

**Policy Implications**

One important purpose of this study was to emphasize the complex set of issues associated with inner city crime, particularly as it relates to gangs and gang membership. In order to make meaningful and sustainable change among society’s most at-risk youth, a more comprehensive and holistic approach is needed—one that takes into account all aspects of a youth’s life, including neighborhood, family and friends, school, historical context, the situational context of crime and violence, and the formal social control institutions that are intertwined in their lives.

The time period of the late 1980’s and early 1990’s was not a time of intervention and prevention efforts in the BPD. With the challenges of addressing record levels of firearm violence among Boston’s youth, strategies to combat crime were narrowly focused on the suppression of violence being driven by the street gang culture. By the mid-1990’s, the BPD started to think differently about how to address the issues of youth gang violence. Partnerships with multiple agencies and a commitment to outreach by offering positive alternatives to gang-involved youth started to make a difference in the lives of some gang members and in reducing crime. For many of the subjects in this study, turning points later in life involving work, incarceration, and family played an important role in changing their lives. As stated early on in this research, I, along with the police officers I worked with, believed that some of this cohort of
gang members had the potential to succeed if given the opportunity. This begs the question: If intervention programs involving work, reentry, and early family intervention had been offered to this group of serious and violent gang members during their adolescent years, would they have made a difference in their lives?

The following policy recommendations are based on the current best practices in addressing community gang problems, my experiences in developing gang intervention and prevention strategies in the BPD, and the findings derived from the current study—all of which suggest that if programs like these had been offered during the late 1980’s and early 1990’s, they might have made a difference in the lives of some of the men who participated in this study.

“If you want me to leave the gang, give me some alternatives” (Andy). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention’s (OJJDP) Comprehensive Gang Model identifies the “Development of a variety of specific education, training, and employment programs targeting gang-involved youth” (OJJDP, 2010, p. 2) as being a best practice in addressing youth gang membership. Specific to this strategy is the access to economic opportunities for youth who are at-risk for gang involvement or are already gang-involved. Key to this approach is the commitment of the business community in mentoring, preparing, and connecting at-risk youth to job opportunities.

In 1994, I was one of several police officers who initiated the idea of creating a comprehensive youth violence prevention program aimed at Boston’s most at-risk youth, many of whom were gang-involved. The thought process behind this concept was that if youth who were gang-involved or prone to gang involvement were offered legitimate economic opportunities during the summer months, their time would be put to valuable use and they would move away from the temptations of the street and gang life. The BPD, in partnership with the
John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company and Northeastern University, created the Summer of Opportunity Program (SOO), designed to provide 40 youth, ages 15-17, primarily from the neighborhoods of Roxbury, Dorchester, Mattapan, Jamaica Plain, and the South End, with life skills training activities while earning a weekly stipend. Through a series of workshops, program participants learned a number of practical skills including communication skills, time management, dressing for success, and resume writing; they were also exposed to adult mentors from diverse backgrounds. Successful summer students were then eligible for fall job internships. One of the primary goals of the program was to assist youth in bridging the gap between the neighborhood and the world of work.

Over the next 20 years, hundreds of youth participated in the SOO program, and I personally observed adolescent gang members who had been well on their way to serious and violent criminal involvement start to change their lives with the support of a wide range of individuals and services. One of the primary findings of the current study was that the structural turning point of meaningful employment could change the life trajectories of entrenched gang members. By investing in programs like SOO, which provides life skills and job readiness training to gang-involved youth, positive changes in behavior can happen that can influence and possibly negate the long-term effects of gang membership (Pruitt, 2005; Boston Police Department, 2006).

“If you want me to put the gun down, give me a tool to pick up. If you want me to stop selling drugs, position me so I can make money and take care of myself. I can do it if you give me a chance.” (Edward). According to Greenberg (2007), “In order to be effective, reentry interventions for gang-affiliated individuals should be 1) targeted and tailored and 2) sustained and intensive” (p. 1). OJJDP (2010) research suggests that successful reentry programs for gang-
involved youth focus on some of the following areas of intervention. First, because gang members are often involved in a continuous cycle of incarceration and release, services for gang members should start while they are incarcerated. Second, reentry programs should “be aware of the influence of incarcerated gang members returning to the community and develop policies to address these individuals (2010, p. 28). Third, gang members—particularly those who have been convicted—reentering the community are in need of housing, drug and alcohol treatment, and job training and placement (p. 28). Fourth, gang members are often under the supervision of probation and parole agencies. Reentry program representatives from these agencies can not only provide supervision, but can also educate and connect recently released gang members with available services in the community (p. 28).

A youth’s decision to join a gang leads to an increase in deviant and criminal behavior, involvement in the criminal justice system, and, in most cases, incarceration. This is well established in the gang literature (e.g., Thornberry et al., 1993), and was a prominent feature in the lives of the subjects in this study. Out of the 30 subjects, 29 had been incarcerated at least once in their lives. Among these subjects, the shortest period of incarceration was approximately one year, and the longest continuous period was approximately 17 years. At some point, all of these offenders had to re-enter into society, all returning home to the same places where they had lived prior to incarceration—where they were faced with the same temptations and beefs that they’d left behind. Given this situation, prisoner reentry programs that focus specifically on gang members is an important area of policy discussion.

In 2001, I played a pivotal role in developing the Boston Reentry Initiative (BRI), a reintegration program involving a partnership between the BPD and the Suffolk County Sheriff’s Department (SCSD). The BRI focuses on offenders who are considered to be at the highest risk
for involvement in violent crime upon release. These individuals usually have extensive criminal backgrounds, including a history of violence, gang involvement, and firearm offenses. This community-wide project involves the collaborative partnership between social service providers, faith-based organizations, and law enforcement agencies. Using a public safety and social service strategy, the BRI seeks to prevent high-risk offenders from re-offending by offering them comprehensive and effective transitional resources and by vigilantly monitoring their reentry process.

Central to the BRI’s strategy is direct communication with these offenders soon after their commitment to the house of correction. BRI participants are given the message that there are institutional programs and community resources that can aid them in their successful reintegration, but they will also be accountable if they continue to be involved in violent crime (Boston Reentry Initiative, 2003). In 2009, a rigorous evaluation of the BRI found that BRI participants had recidivism rates that were 30% lower than the subjects in the comparison group (Braga, Piehl, & Hureau, 2009). This led the researchers to conclude that, “Not only is it possible to provide services to this tough-to-reach population, it is possible to do so effectively” (p. 428).

More work is required to measure the success and effectiveness of prisoner reentry programs. But, considering the amount of time gang members spend incarcerated in county, state, and federal prisons, criminal justice policy strategists should continue to study and invest in prisoner reentry programs, with a specific focus on those individuals who are gang-involved.

“It all starts with the family” (Rey). Welsh and Farrington (2007) state that early childhood intervention efforts are critical in order to save children from a life of crime. At the family level, this translates into developing effective programs that provide parents with educational opportunities through home visits and parent management training. The benefits of
this approach include “improved school readiness and school performance on the part of the children, greater employment and educational opportunities for parents, and greater family stability in general” (2007, p. 874). Initiatives of this kind are complicated and involve multiple agencies with different philosophies and practices to address the challenges of family dysfunction. Required for the success and sustainability of these intense interventions are the development and implementation of policies and procedures that result in the most effective use of available and potential resources within and across agencies, a team approach that means a maximum sharing of information, and establishing case management systems to effectively track and measure program effectiveness (OJJDP, 2010, p. 11).

In this study, some sort of family disruption—be it single-parent, female-headed households, substance abuse, mental illness, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, unemployment, or parental criminal involvement—was present in the lives of over two thirds of the subjects. For many of Boston’s former gang members, the dysfunctional nature of their families was at the center of their challenges in life. Today, family disruption continues to be a critical risk factor that influences gang membership. In 2002, I was involved in developing the Comprehensive Community Safety Initiative (CCSI), a cutting-edge program that focused on engaging and supporting families prone to multigenerational involvement in the criminal justice system and other social service agencies. In the seven-year span that the CCSI was operational, all of the families that were identified for intervention had strong elements of gang membership among family members in addition to other multiple risk factors. The objectives of the CCSI were to identify these high-risk families and engage them in direct services, to deter family members from future deviant and criminal behavior, and to support and empower these families to improve their family functioning (CCSI Program Narrative, 2007, pp. 13-14).
The CCSI was an important undertaking in several ways. First, through a detailed analysis of neighborhood crime issues, it became clear that for some inner-city families, gang membership was multigenerational and resulted in long-term and devastating effects on family members and the communities in which they live. Second, these families were not only deeply involved with the criminal justice system, but they were also well-known to a wide array of other social service agencies. Lastly, the CCSI highlighted the need for criminal justice agencies and social service agencies to work together to analyze and craft solutions to better address the needs of these “multi-system” families and reduce their intergenerational involvement in the criminal justice system (CCSI Program Narrative, 2007).

The CCSI offered a new way of understanding the complexity of crime as seen through the lenses of multigenerational family dysfunction. The implications of this viewpoint on crime would suggest that crime policy strategists should move away from their historic reliance on the criminal justice system as the sole focus of crime policy. Instead, they should take a more complete view of the in-depth nature of crime that connects formal social control agencies with informal social control institutions such as family, school, and community. Only in this way can the opportunity for lasting, long-term change be realized (see also Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Pattillo, 1998; Rose & Clear, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993, 2003; West & Farrington, 1977).

**Future Research**

The experience of gang membership and its long-term effects on a youth’s life have been largely unexplored in criminological research. Recently, scholars have started to focus their attention on the consequences of gang membership, but there still remains much to learn. The current study found that gang membership influenced the entire life span of the subjects.
involved. Therefore, future research requires a more comprehensive approach, starting with the risk factors that lead to gang involvement and continuity, but also extending into the critical area of life after the gang.

Several areas of research warrant more study. First, for all of the subjects, neighborhood was an important factor in the decision to enter and remain with the gang lifestyle. Thus, gang research should continue its traditional focus on the role of community in the onset and continuity of gang membership. Future research should also explore the impact of neighborhood on the gang member’s transition out of the gang. For the vast majority of subjects, the neighborhood was one of the most consistent aspects of their lives. Except for periods of incarceration, the subject’s childhood, adolescent, and adult life experiences all took place in and around the neighborhoods in which they were raised. Many of the subjects in this study were incarcerated for short and long stints of time over their life course and upon release would return to their neighborhoods. There is still much to learn about how returning offenders deal with criminogenic social networks (many times involving family and friends), how they access resources like housing and employment, and how they adjust to neighborhood attitudes that can either be accepting or stigmatizing with regard to their past gang membership. In order to reduce recidivism rates of ex-offenders returning to the community, future research should focus on developing comprehensive collaborations between criminal justice agencies, human service agencies, and community partners who are supportive of returning prisoners and their families (see Leverentz, 2011).

Second, more research is needed regarding the criminal justice response to gangs. It is well established in the gang literature that gang membership represents a period of disproportionate involvement in serious and violent crime (e.g., Thornberry et al., 1993). As
evidenced in this study, Boston’s former gang members were fully invested in the illegal crack cocaine trade and were more than willing to carry and use firearms to initiate and resolve conflict as well as protect themselves from victimization. By their own accounts, they were committed to the gang lifestyle and there was nothing that society could offer to stop them from the violence and criminal activity that defined gang membership.

Today, gang involvement is still synonymous with violence and crime. This raises important and challenging questions for the criminal justice system and for the police in particular. For almost 30 years, law enforcement has been grappling with ways to address gang activity and control the negative behaviors that create an atmosphere of fear and hopelessness in gang-infested neighborhoods. The “get tough,” stop and frisk, and zero tolerance policies first established in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s to combat gangs are still used today in many jurisdictions. But over time, these strategies have been consistently criticized by residents, community organizations, and policy advocates for doing more harm than good, even in the most violent of neighborhoods. In all neighborhoods, regardless of socio-economic status, being safe from crime and violence is the overall goal—but it cannot not be accomplished without fairness and respect, balancing safety with individual rights (Sampson, 2002, p. 107).

While significant strides have been made by criminal justice practitioners and policy makers in thinking differently about the complexity of gangs and gang membership, more work needs to be done that continues to focus on creating comprehensive strategies that integrate the elements of enforcement, intervention, and prevention, as well as open and honest dialogue with residents and activist groups. This approach will prove valuable in establishing meaningful relationships and building trust and legitimacy with residents living in communities adversely affected by gang violence.
Third, for those subjects who successfully navigated their way out of gang membership and into a more prosocial lifestyle, turning points involving family and friends, education, marriage and long-term relationships, religion, incarceration, and adult mentorship assisted them in changing their lives. This outcome is consistent with Laub and Sampson’s (2003) findings that, “The majority of men we interviewed desisted from crime largely because they were able to capitalize on key structural and situational circumstances” (p. 279). But, of all the informal social control processes that influenced the change process in the lives of Boston’s former gang members, it was legitimate employment that had the most positive effect on their lives. Work provided them with structure and a set of routine activities, fulfilled their need to be productive in life, helped them develop a sense of pride and self-esteem, and motivated them to resist the temptations of crime. There is a strong need to construct a better knowledge base to educate criminal justice agencies on what works in supporting successful transitions of gang members being released back into the community. It is important that future research on gang membership and the desistance process focus on strategies that provide former gang members with the skills necessary to transition into the work force and that can lead to long-term behavioral change (2003, p. 278).

Finally, this research produced a set of rich and thick narratives based on the life experiences of a group of serious and violent former Boston gang members. Utilizing a life-history narrative approach contributed greatly to this outcome. Just as it did with Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2003) study of the Glueck men, this methodological approach was beneficial to this study in many ways including: capturing the subjects’ full life experiences; being able to recount the processes that contributed to the subjects’ entry into and transition from gang membership and criminal and deviant behavior; explaining the intricacies of gang membership;
understanding how social and historical context influenced the subjects’ decisions and actions; and finally, bringing to the forefront the human side of the subjects (2003, pp. 58-59).

An individual’s life cannot be understood based on a single time frame of his life. This is a gap in the gang literature that future research should seek to address. To fully understand why some men desist from deviant and criminal behavior while others persist requires a more comprehensive picture of the individual’s life—one that captures all of life’s phases, from childhood through adulthood. The life history approach is a valuable method for exploring the complexity of the offender’s life and should be the focus of future research. Only through this methodology can we link the events in life that influence the offender’s continuity and change in deviant and criminal behavior based on their own words and experiences.

Closing

Street gangs, guns, and the lethal levels of violence associated with these groups are one of society’s most challenging issues. Their deviant and criminal activities have a negative effect on neighborhoods, families, schools, the vast majority of youth who are non-gang involved, and a wide array of criminal justice and social service agencies. Yet, with the significant impact that gangs have in inner city settings, relatively little is known about the lives of gang members. Academic research, for the most part, has focused its efforts on the onset and continuity of gang membership during the adolescent years, with almost no attention being given to the pre- and post-gang years.

The goal of the current research was to explore the gang member’s full life experiences, including the influences that led to gang membership, the gang experience, the transition out of the gang, and the long-term impact of gang membership on the individual’s life. Through the
words and experiences of 28 former Boston gang members and two neighborhood street
criminals, I was able to connect all of their life phases, capturing along the way the tragedies
they endured, the crimes they committed and the penalties they paid, and the successes and
failures they faced in their journey to conventional life. From an academic perspective, the
findings of this study have advanced our knowledge about gang membership over the life course.
From a personal perspective, it filled a gap in my experiences of working with gang members
over much of my police career. Prior to this study, I had a respectable, but incomplete level of
knowledge of Boston’s street gang culture. Now, as a result of hearing firsthand the life stories of
the subjects in this study, I have a better understanding of how change happens in the life of a
gang member, when it happens, and the mechanisms that influence the change process. Knowing
that people can change and lives can be remade, even under the most arduous of circumstances,
brings a sense of satisfaction and closure to my experiences of working with the men who led the
re-emergence of street gangs in Boston almost 30 years ago.
Bibliography


Boston Police Department (2007). *Comprehensive Community Safety Initiative (CCSI) program narrative*.


Appendix A: Gangs Map

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td>East Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A15</td>
<td>Charlestown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Roxbury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Mattapan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>South Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>Dorchester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4</td>
<td>South End / Back Bay / Fenway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D14</td>
<td>Alston / Brighton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5</td>
<td>West Roxbury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E13</td>
<td>Jamaica Plain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E18</td>
<td>Hyde Park</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B: Snowball Sampling Chart
Appendix C: Life History Calendar

| Subject                                      | 10 and under | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 32 | 33 | 34 | 35 | 36 | 37 | 38 | 39 | 40 | 41 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 45 | 46 | 47 | 48 | 49 | 50 | 51 | 52 | 53 | 54 | 55 |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Reference Years Before                         | Birthday: | 10 and under | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 29 | 30 | 31 | 32 | 33 | 34 | 35 | 36 | 37 | 38 | 39 | 40 | 41 | 42 | 43 | 44 | 45 | 46 | 47 | 48 | 49 | 50 | 51 | 52 | 53 | 54 | 55 |
| Residences #                                    | In Boston        | In Mass         | Outside Mass     | Institution    | Education      | Elementary      | Middle          | High School     | College         | Other           | Gang Membership | Age Joined    | Age Left        | Arrest Gang Specific #: Violence | Drug | Property | Other           | Other Arrests: Violence | Drug | Property | Other           | Supervision | DYS | Prob | Parole        | Federal          | Detention- DYS | Convictions | Incarceration #: County | State | Federal | Marriage       | Date | Living with Spouse | Children #: Births/Deaths | Family | Parent Death | Other/Family | Employment #: Full Time | Part Time | Unemployed         | Turning Point(s)   |