

✧ CHAPTER 1 ✧

PUTTING A HUMAN FACE ON GANGS

Sylvie,¹ twenty-three, a “maximum security risk,” has been living in a ten-foot by ten-foot cell in an all-female correctional facility for four years. Although her cell was designed for one, because of overcrowding she has been double-bunking (sharing her cell with another inmate) for the past two years. The cell is the size of a typical bathroom, with a toilet and bunk bed. Sylvie is serving a lengthy sentence for violent offences and institutional infractions, and has spent time in segregation—“the hole.” She has been isolated for serious infractions and prolonged periods of suicidal behavior. She has been caught smuggling drugs, selling contraband tobacco, having sexual relations with other women, and stabbing members of rival gangs. Though she leads an all-female prison gang, she has been trying to get out of the gang for the past year. On the outside, she was a member of a male-dominated, violent street gang. Some of her offences came during the invasion of a rival gang’s house.

Sylvie has two young children whom she sees monthly during

supervised visits at the prison. A social worker brings them for the visits. She is frequently suicidal and hurts herself at least once or twice every week, usually by cutting her arms with just about anything sharp enough—pens, pencils, staples, paper clips, kitchen utensils. Sometimes she butts her head against the concrete wall of her cell. She sees life as hopeless and she sees no end to her misery. She is conflicted about seeing her children because she feels like a bad mother. Her children, both girls, are wards of the child welfare system. Sylvie is angry at her social worker for having begun an adoption process.

Sylvie endured years of abuse and spent most of her childhood and adolescence in foster homes and group homes—twenty-five of them. Her mother and stepfather were both intravenous drug users—crack cocaine and morphine, by choice. Sylvie describes a mother who was unable to protect her from six years of sexual abuse by a male family member, that started when Sylvie was five. Her mother first denied the abuse happened, then acknowledged that, yes, she had been aware of it but felt helpless because of her addictions and her love for her husband. Even when Sylvie was in care, this man would abuse her during visits with her mother and stepfather.

Both Sylvie's mother and stepfather also grew up in care, in "too many foster homes and group homes to count." Both suffered chronic physical and sexual abuse, in care and in their families of origin. Both had parents who were addicted to alcohol and drugs, and both had some family members who were gang-involved. Her stepfather never held a job for more than a couple of months, because of his drug use. Her mother suffered from borderline personality disorder and bipolar disorder, but hated the side effects of the medication her doctor prescribed, saying it made her feel like a vegetable. She self-medicated with illicit drugs instead.

Sylvie told me she felt abandoned and rejected. She never

wanted to go to foster homes or group homes. It felt like a revolving door, around and around from home to child welfare placements and back. She believed that her mother blamed her for being “out of control,” when she just wanted her mother to acknowledge the sexual abuse she had experienced and confront her abuser. She also wanted her mother and stepfather to quit the drugs. She told me she would run away from the foster homes where she was placed to go back to her mother because Sylvie felt she needed to take care of her mother, to make sure there were groceries in the house, and that her younger siblings got to school.

Intelligent and resilient, Sylvie loved reading and did exceptionally well at school until she dropped out after grade eight. Her grandmother had introduced her to books, and read to her frequently. But then, while she was in foster care, back on a home visit she tried to hang herself with a skipping rope from a ceiling joist in the basement. Her grandmother found her in time. She had neck injuries, but recovered after a one-month stay in the psychiatric unit of the local children’s hospital. She never disclosed the sexual abuse to anyone at school, in the hospital, or at the foster home. Her mother’s refusal to stop the abuse was humiliating enough. She did not need to have people thinking she was a liar.

Entering adolescence, Sylvie evaded child welfare workers and increasingly lived on the streets, engaging in survival crimes such as shoplifting, selling stolen goods, and trading sex with friends for food and a place to stay. She resorted to violence to defend herself on many occasions. She was incarcerated four times, in secure and in open young offender facilities, for a total of two years.

She searched for a family, for a sense of identity, and for protection from the violence on the streets. She thought she had found true love with a man in his mid-twenties. For about

a month, Peter bought her clothes and gave her cocaine and marijuana. He offered her a place to stay. They had sex often and she believed that this meant Peter, a member of an African gang, loved her. Suddenly, after four weeks of bliss, he demanded money for the drugs, clothes, and rent. Sylvie was shocked. She had never had a job. She offered to work at a drive-through restaurant, but Peter told her minimum wage was not good enough. He told her she would have to work the streets to pay him back. Although she tried to quit drugs, it was too late—by now she was addicted to weed, cocaine, and morphine. It was a vicious cycle. Her body craved the drugs, Peter had a steady supply, and she had no way to pay him back. He told her he would kill her if she was not paid up within two weeks. He began to beat her and force sex on her. She had flashbacks to the sexual abuse she experienced as a child. Her cutting escalated out of control. She used razors and a hunting knife to slice her arms.

Throughout her adolescence, Sylvie was sent to see psychologists and psychiatrists, usually after she had attempted suicide or had beaten somebody up. Sylvie estimates that she slashed her wrists, tried to hang herself, and overdosed at least twenty times. A string of labels was attached to her—Attention Deficit, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Conduct Disorder, Anti-Social Personality Disorder, Depression, Bipolar Disorder, and Borderline Personality Disorder. They made her feel blamed for being abused and rejected. The doctors prescribed medications, but she could not tolerate them. When she was twelve and on a home visit, her stepfather flushed all her medication down the toilet, saying, “You don’t need that shit.” By then Sylvie had reached the same conclusion; she was stockpiling her pills and selling them at school and to other kids in care.

Sylvie’s grandmother was one of her few positive adult role models. A recovering alcoholic, her grandmother said she saw Sylvie as a second chance—a chance to erase all the mistakes she

had made with Sylvie's mother. Sylvie often found comfort at her grandmother's apartment. She was never judged and could always count on a safe place to sleep, shower, and get fed.

Partly, she admired Peter and his role in the gang. He was a take-charge kind of guy, giving out orders to his soldiers and new recruits. He was also highly respected, because of his violence. She had seen him beat younger gang members when they tried to rip him off or when he believed they were flirting with her. But another part of her was confused and afraid. Although she had become accustomed to selling her body on the streets, she felt ashamed and wished she did not have to do it. She became increasingly violent with other young women in the gang, using her status as Peter's girlfriend to get what she needed.

After a while, Sylvie developed a plan. She asked Peter if she could run her own group of girls on the street and turn over the profits to him. In return, she would not have to sell herself. Much to her surprise, Peter agreed. Sylvie had a keen business sense and soon was making hundreds of dollars a night for the gang. Then, one night when the gang was partying, word arrived that a rival gang was having a house party a couple of blocks away. It seemed a good time to carry out a home invasion, steal the rival gang's drug money, and beat them up. Peter handed Sylvie a gun he had bought from a Hells Angels member. Five of them stormed the rival gang's house. Peter handed Sylvie the gun. She had never held a gun, let alone fired one, and started shooting wildly. Peter, Sylvie, and the rest promptly ran home. She threw the gun in some bushes on the way. Later that night, the police came knocking and arrested her, Peter, and the others. They were held without bail and, eventually, she was convicted of attempted murder. Peter and the others were convicted of weapons offences and assault.

By the time I interviewed her, she had been leading a prison gang since shortly after her incarceration began. She had

discovered that the centre was a violent place and that she needed to develop a network of women for her own protection. She also needed a constant supply of drugs to feed her addiction. Her gang was different from Peter's. Hers had a sense of companionship, support, and equality. The sex she had with other women was not forced, and it felt good. Many women inside had same-sex relationships while incarcerated, yet also had boyfriends on the outside. She was not allowed any contact with Peter—in fact, she had no idea where he was doing his prison time.

Sylvie's situation illustrates one of the key messages of this book: Gang members are not born bad. Instead, they are trained by the adults around them. Each gang member in Canada has a human face. Each is someone's son or daughter, sister or brother, nephew or niece. Many, like Sylvie, are parents of young children. They arrive in this world innocent and sweet, just children themselves. They leave in body bags, or are incarcerated deep in the bowels of correctional centres for most of their adult lives; they are outcasts. Given the nature of their traumatic lives, it is hardly surprising that they become involved in gangs. It should be no surprise when they kill others, or die violent deaths themselves.

NOT A NEW PHENOMENON

Gangs are not a new phenomenon. Organized groups of criminals have been around for centuries—pirates, smugglers, bootleggers, cattle rustlers, horse thieves, currency counterfeiters, hooligans. It is hard to know if gang membership and gang activity are on the rise in Canada because there has been little scientific research on the topic. Academics started to investigate the phenomenon of gangs seriously only in the 1990s, and there still has not been a comprehensive, Canada-wide study on the subject of gangs, based on accounts of themselves. Media and law enforcement reports are often the most authoritative sources available. A number of reports, however, suggest that there are an increasing number

of large and small cities, rural areas, and reserves where gangs have taken root. These reports also suggest that some types of gangs are becoming increasingly sophisticated and better organized. Correctional Service Canada also reports that the number of gang-involved inmates has increased over the past couple of decades.

Much of what is known about the history of gangs comes from other countries—the USA, Britain, and France, among others. In North America and parts of Europe, we can trace the history of gangs back to the Industrial Revolution. In North America, the immigration of European settlers brought class divisions based on race and ethnicity. Street gangs took root as a response to discrimination and poverty. Gangs rebelled against inequality, but they were also an important source of economic profit. As early as the middle of the eighteenth century, there were gangs such as the Long Bridge Boys and the Fly Boys in New York City, looking for identity, status, and pure economic survival. These gangs were not as involved in crime as modern-day gangs, but are thought to have been predatory fun seekers.² The Forty Thieves, an Irish-American New York City gang, were identified in the 1820s as a serious concern. During the nineteenth century, gangs quickly took root in cities such as Philadelphia and in parts of California, primarily in response to entrenched poverty and racism. By 1865, New York probably had the most gangs in North America, with Jewish, Italian, African, and Irish organized criminal groups.

In the twentieth century, gangs in America tended to evolve in impoverished areas, with economic differences taking priority over ethnic and racial problems. The Mafia also landed in the USA in the 1920s, having originated in Italy in the nineteenth century. The Great Depression brought more gang activity, primarily among Mexican and African groups, in cities such as Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, and Boston. After World War II,

motorcycle and prison gangs emerged as new threats.

American prison gangs emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in California, including such groups as the Aryan Brotherhood, the Black Guerilla Family, and La Nuestra Familia. The Crips gang was founded in Los Angeles in the 1960s, the Bloods gang formed in the 1970s in response to the Crips, and both expanded into the greater California area.

In Britain, criminal gangs can be traced back to the 1890s in London. The Scuttlers gang members were referred to as “hooligans.” In the 1930s, Glasgow was reported to be Britain’s most violent city, with gangs such as the Bee Hive Boys. Gang activity was also reported in other countries, including Germany, France, and Switzerland.³

THE RISE OF GANGS IN CANADA

The history of gangs in Canada has not been investigated in a comprehensive manner. Stephen Schneider provides one of the few historical accounts of gangs in Canada in *Iced: The Story of Organized Crime in Canada*. He traces the roots of these groups back to the sixteenth century, when pirates attacked fishing boats off the Grand Banks in Newfoundland. He then documents smuggling in the nineteenth century, by such groups as the Whisky Traders in Western Canada in the 1860s. In the late 1800s, criminal groups were involved in currency counterfeiting, cattle and horse stealing, opium smuggling, and the smuggling of Chinese nationals into the USA. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, British Columbia was a main importer, exporter, and producer of opium (which could be smoked). Bootlegging in alcohol followed in the 1920s. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Quebec was a main stopover point for heroin smuggling from Europe to North America. Biker gangs such as the Hells Angels originated after World War II.

The emergence of Canadian gangs can be traced to poverty and racism, proliferating under conditions of social inequality.

Criminal youth groups gained a foothold following World War II when the focus was on the reintegration of veterans, and youth issues were not high on the social policy agenda. Starting in the 1970s, Canadian gangs were documented in large urban centres, including Haitian gangs in Montreal, Jamaican posses in Toronto and southern Ontario, Warrior gangs in Winnipeg, and Asian gangs in Vancouver.⁴

One of the first street gangs in Canada was Winnipeg's Dew Drop Gang, which endured briefly from 1949 to 1950. Winnipeg had a number of other adult criminal groups after World War II, including some that robbed banks and jewellery stores. Criminal youth groups were also evident, primarily engaging in assaults and break and enters. *The Winnipeg Free Press* referred to them as "hooligans."⁵ In the mid 1980s, local media reported that active youth gangs in Winnipeg included the Rattlers, Maidens, Native Warriors, and the Rockers. In Toronto, the Beanery Boys Gang was active in the 1940s. Members were reported to be violent.

By now, there are pockets of youth gang violence across Canada. The rate at which young Aboriginal gang members are killing each other and committing suicide far exceeds the levels of such extreme violence in any other group in Canada. We cannot assume that gang activity is a "reserve problem," out of sight and out of mind. Aboriginal young people are rapidly exiting their reserves because of intolerable living conditions. Young people from sub-Saharan Africa and from other war-torn countries are also over-represented in gangs in Canada. These war-affected young people who have experienced atrocities and been forced into child soldiering arrive in Canada trained to violence and well suited to gang life. Gang leaders can spot these traumatized kids a mile away.

The Aboriginal birth rate is rapidly increasing—the child and youth population in many cities and rural areas will grow substantially within the next decade. The birth rate of many new

Canadian groups is likewise much higher than that of the mainstream population. This is critical information because young men in these groups are so over-represented in gangs.

The situation of gang-involved young women in Canada is not often considered. Often, these women are portrayed as cunning, manipulative, and “wannabe men.” There is a common myth that all-female gangs are abundant and that their violence is escalating out of control. In fact, this is not true. Comparatively speaking, male gang members far outnumber gang-involved young women. Those women who are gang-involved play very different roles than their male counterparts do, and their pathways into gang life are not the same. There are hundreds of missing and sexually trafficked Aboriginal girls and women in Canada, and every year some of them end up murdered. We do not need to look any farther than the Highway of Tears in northern British Columbia or the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Commercial sexual exploitation, the modern-day version of sexual slavery, is a common way for gangs to generate income in Canada. What kind of a country allows its children to be disposed of in this manner? Would things be different if it were white girls and women who were being killed? This is a complex issue that I shall explore in detail in Chapter Four.

Many people believe that the gang problem can be best understood by examining the individual characteristics of members. Statements like “he came from a good family,” “she was trouble from day one,” and “he always hung out with a bad crowd” abound. Why are these “explanations” so popular? Could it be because they let us off the hook? When the focus is on individual agency or pathology, social factors such as poverty, racism, and the impact of cultural violence are ignored. Families, schools, communities, and governments are not held accountable. Deplorable social conditions are ignored. Instead, we can lull ourselves by saying, “He was just a bad seed.” If only it were

so simple. There are far too many gangs and gang members to explain away the phenomenon in such a simplistic way. The gang problem does have an individual aspect, but social factors are just as important.

The vast majority of young gang members have survived severe child maltreatment and trauma. The vast majority suffer from serious mental health problems. Many youth become gang members as a result of being institutionalized in the very programs set up to help them—foster homes, group homes, and secure youth justice facilities. Aboriginal youth are at particularly high risk, given that one in ten is taken into the care of the child welfare system and many more end up incarcerated.

In fact, one of the best ways to become a gang member or become head of a gang is to be incarcerated. There is little rehabilitation in Canadian jails and prisons; instead, inmates become proficient, more hardened criminals and more sophisticated gang leaders. Getting the “bad guys” off the street is a short term solution. For every bad guy incarcerated, two more take his place in the ’hood. Many gang members come from what I call “super gang families.” They have parents as well as brothers, sisters, uncles, and aunts involved in the same gang or in rival gangs. Members of these families are responsible for a disproportionate number of homicides and other acts of extreme violence. Other young people form gangs with best friends they meet in elementary or high school.

When one takes the time to sit down with gang members and hear their stories—what life has been like for them in early childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood—a clear picture emerges. Instead of just seeing them as “gang members,” I see that these young people have endured tremendous suffering; yet many have hidden talents and skills. Some are talented singers and rappers; others are poets and writers. Many have highly developed business skills that could be applied in the business

world outside of gang life. Many are parents, struggling to raise children in impoverished and marginalized circumstances. Finally, most have serious health problems—brain damage, developmental delays, learning disabilities—or terminal illnesses, such as AIDS. If we could finally acknowledge the human face of gang-involved young people, we should find it easier to develop truly effective strategies for preventing gang involvement, for supporting the exit from gangs, and for implementing effective criminal justice system responses.

A FEW WORDS ABOUT MY RESEARCH

I have spent the past twenty-five years in the world of violent young criminals and gang members. As a certified social worker, I have counselled high risk children, youth, and families in the justice, social services, and child welfare fields. As an expert witness in gang trials, I have testified on issues related to gang culture and homicide. As an educator, I have delivered hundreds of keynote addresses and workshops for community members, corrections and policing professionals, policy makers, and school officials. As an evaluator, along with Sharon Dunn I have conducted multi-year projects investigating the outcomes of gang intervention and prevention programs. As a sociologist, I have conducted six studies across the country with young people, investigating various aspects of gang life.⁶ These experiences provide the foundation for this book.

In this book, I draw upon my in-depth interviews with 519 gang members over the past 17 years, 380 of which were male. The average age of these young people was 18 years (ranging from 14 to 30 years) and 24 per cent (127) had been convicted of murder or manslaughter. Sixty-nine per cent (360) had been incarcerated⁷ and 39 per cent (202) had grown up in the care of child welfare group homes and foster homes. The total sample size is representative of those gang members in large and

medium-sized cities and small rural communities in Canada⁸ and is many times larger than the average sample size used in previous Canadian studies.

It is important to understand that I use the term "youth gang" to refer to young people aged twelve to thirty years. I do not want to leave you with the impression that I am only concerned about teenagers.

In most of these studies, I spent time with gangs, getting to know the members, and building trust.⁹ After doing this for some time, I asked members if they would consent to participate in confidential, audio-taped, in-depth interviews, the purpose of which was to explore the meaning of various activities and gang culture.¹⁰ I wanted to understand gang members' use of violence and involvement in crime from their perspective. Another primary goal was to trace the lives of gang members, from infancy to adulthood. Semi-structured interview questionnaires were developed for each of the six qualitative studies and structured surveys were used in the two evaluation studies. The interview questions were modified from existing questionnaires used in a variety of studies having a focus on gang culture, severe violence, offending, and other aspects of gang life. Some modified scales were replicated in the qualitative studies.¹¹ Both evaluation studies used modified versions of existing surveys and scales used in other North American and European gang studies.¹² The average interview time in the qualitative studies was approximately five hours.¹³

The method I used to analyze the in-depth interview data was based upon the techniques of ethnographic data analysis.¹⁴ This is an approach that generates theory from observation.¹⁵ The quantitative data for the remaining 229 cases (those involved in gang project evaluations) were coded and entered into a database.¹⁶ Rigorous methods for assessing truth status have been previously described and were utilized in my studies; they include

triangulation of data sources¹⁷ and investigative discourse analysis.¹⁸ Twenty-four cases were excluded from the analysis because of concerns about accuracy and consistency (these cases were not included in the sample of 519 cases).

Ethics is a central part of any study involving young people who engage in criminal activities and high-risk behavior. In my studies, I had to make sure that participants were not harmed by virtue of being involved in studies, and that they did not harm others. This meant that I had to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of those involved in my research, yet at the same time make it clear that I had legal and moral obligations to inform the relevant authorities should I find out about serious crimes they were involved in or serious harm they had perpetrated on others. Child welfare officials had to be informed if I discovered that children were being abused. Mental health professionals had to be contacted if participants were suicidal or had indicators of serious mental illness. The police had to be informed if participants had engaged or were engaging in serious offending, such as carrying guns, home invasions, or assaults leaving victims with significant injuries. In cases where I had to report concerns to relevant agencies, I was surprised to find that the participants were often relieved to get these issues addressed. They did not want more children to suffer harm. They did not want anyone to commit suicide. They wanted to deal with their legal problems.

With the permission of the young gang members who participated in my studies, I have reproduced their narratives—their spoken words—to highlight key points. I have also included some of their poetry and other written work. In all cases, I have protected their identities. Each has a fictitious name. Because many have been involved in high-profile gang crimes, I have altered their stories in minor ways to protect them. Many of these young people have developmental problems, brain damage, or low levels of literacy. In order to improve comprehension

for you, the reader, I have slightly revised their accounts and enhanced the grammatical structure. It is important, however, to understand that these narratives remain as the voices of young gang members. They are not fictitious. Some are raw, violent, and explicit. The reader will find some of them disturbing, no doubt. The reader is not alone. I am haunted by many of their stories, and I have been immersed in their world for many years.