

# Pathways to Security Threat Groups: A Review of the Literature

*Social networks, marginalization, and childhood adversity are key risk factors for STG involvement.*

## Why we did this study

Previous research demonstrates that the prevalence of Security Threat Group<sup>1</sup> (STG) membership has increased in Canada.<sup>B</sup> Understanding the pathways<sup>2</sup> to STG involvement may assist the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) in addressing the needs of STG affiliated offenders. The following is a brief review of the literature examining pathways to STG involvement.

## What we found

Overall, the most common themes in STG pathways are *social networks*, *marginalization* and *childhood adversity*.

*Social networks*, such as family and friends, are incredibly influential.<sup>A</sup> Social networks introduce and encourage a criminal lifestyle and deviant behaviour as well as isolating the person from pro-social individuals.<sup>A</sup> For example, social networks are significant in Indigenous gangs as intergenerational membership is common and, thus, the gang lifestyle is normalized and recruitment may come from family.<sup>F</sup>

Social and economic *marginalization* has the impact of taking power away from communities such as visible minority ethnocultural groups and communities living in poverty, and can lead to low socioeconomic status, lack of cultural identity, and low employment opportunities.<sup>A,C,F</sup> STGs offer the opportunity to resist marginalization, through opportunities for financial gain and providing a sense of structure and hierarchy to the individual's life.<sup>F</sup> Racism and colonization are also important marginalization factors that result in the loss/lack of cultural identity, language, and spiritual practices and values.<sup>C,F</sup> The literature also suggests that STGs may be a way for people to feel more connected to others. While available research primarily focuses on Indigenous offenders, racism and colonization also impact the pathways of other visible minority ethnocultural STG offenders.

*Childhood adversity*, such as experiencing abuse, poverty, neglect and/or maltreatment, is prevalent among gang members.<sup>A</sup> Previous research shows that gang affiliated offenders were younger than non-gang affiliated offenders

at admission into custody.<sup>B</sup> Moreover, women joining gangs are younger than men and women are often seeking protection.<sup>E</sup> STGs offer an alternative to their home environment, a sense of belonging, and a way to survive.<sup>B,D,E</sup>

## What it means

Differential pathways were identified for STG affiliation. CSC does not have specific programming for STG affiliated offenders; however, holistic programming<sup>3</sup> exists to address criminogenic risks and needs of all offenders. Research is in progress to examine the specific pathways to STG involvement for CSC's federal offenders. Future research could explore the effectiveness of holistic CSC programming for STG offenders.

## References

- <sup>A</sup> Goldman, L., Giles, H., & Hogg, M. (2014). Going to extremes: social identity and communication processes associated with gang membership. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 17(6), 813-832.
- <sup>B</sup> Nafekh, M. & Stys, Y. (2004). *A profile and examination of gang affiliation within the federally sentenced offender population*. Ottawa, ON: CSC.
- <sup>C</sup> Preston, J., Carr-Stewart, S. & Bruno, C. (2012). The growth of Aboriginal youth gangs in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 32(2), 193-207.
- <sup>D</sup> Scott, T. (2012). *A profile of women gang inmates*. (Research Report R272). Ottawa, ON: CSC.
- <sup>E</sup> Sutton, T. (2017). The lives of female gang members: a review of the literature. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 37, 142-152.
- <sup>F</sup> Totten, M. (2009). *Aboriginal youth and violent gang involvement in Canada: Quality prevention strategies*. IPC Review 3: Public Safety Canada.

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**Prepared by:** Sarah Cram and Shanna Farrell MacDonald

<sup>1</sup> STGs include gangs (i.e. motorcycle outlaw, prison, Indigenous, Street and Asian gangs), terrorist organizations, traditional organized crime, white supremacy groups, subversive groups, cults, and other hate groups (Commissioner's Directive 568-3, 2016). As the majority of men and women offenders with STG affiliation are gang affiliated, this research review is focused on pathways to gang affiliation only.

<sup>2</sup> A pathway refers to the various factors that would lead someone to STG involvement. This does not refer to the Correctional Service of Canada's Pathways initiative for Indigenous offenders.

<sup>3</sup> The Integrated Correctional Program Model (ICPM) assists men offenders to address their criminogenic risk and needs while the Women Offender Correctional Program (WOCP) exists for women offenders.