

**Making a way when there is no way:**  
**The experiences and challenges of gang affected young adult**  
**refugees in Winnipeg**

**by**

**Matthew Fast**

**A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of**  
**The University of Manitoba**

**In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of**

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**Department of Peace and Conflict Studies**

**University of Manitoba**

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**Abstract**

This study explores the perceptions, and life experiences of formerly gang-involved young adult refugee men living in Winnipeg. In doing so, this study examines both the negative experiences and challenges of these young men that led to their involvement with gangs, and the positive and life changing events that provided the catalyst for these young men to leave their gangs. If positive support mechanisms are insufficient, and if their basic human needs cannot be satisfied, refugee young people become at-risk of involvement in antisocial behavior and criminal activity. In order to assist refugee young people in their successful transition into a foreign culture and society it is essential to understand how their perceptions and experiences inform their identity and behavior. This study contributes to this understanding, which will inform policy and future approaches by government and community-based organizations to assist them in their transition.

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## **Chapter One - Introduction**

### **1.1 – Introduction**

Ongoing protracted conflicts in various regions of the world have led to annual increases in the number of people living in refugee situations. Increasingly, Winnipeg, Canada is becoming home to many of these refugees. Refugees, and in particular refugee young people, are vulnerable as they face challenges integrating into their new environment (Kanu, 2008; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010). As well, refugee young people are exposed to various forms and degrees of violence, that can have negative consequences for their personal development (Kaplan, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010). If positive support mechanisms are insufficient, and if their basic human needs cannot be satisfied, refugee young people become at-risk of involvement in antisocial behavior and criminal activity (Chekki, 2006; Kanu, 2008; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010).

This study explores the perceptions, and life experiences of war-affected refugee young adult males living in Winnipeg with regards to their challenges, struggles and coping strategies. In particular, the focus of this study is on four young adult refugee males who have previously fallen into a pattern of anti-social behavior where they have engaged in gang life and criminal activity, and who have now decided to make positive changes in their lives. This study also includes the perspectives of five community workers, three of whom are males, and two of whom are females. As well, this study also includes the voices of one community elder, and a Winnipeg Police Service officer.



## **1.2 – Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of the impact of the various life experiences and challenges on these refugee young people, which have ultimately contributed to their antisocial behavior and gang involvement. I also identify some of the positive experiences, catalysts and motivations, which have initiated positive changes in their lives. Learning how these experiences and perceptions inform the identity and behavior of refugee young people is essential for community agencies, social workers, educators, mentors, and policymakers in providing the necessary inputs required for their successful transition into a foreign culture and society.

## **1.3 - Significance of the Study**

As the number of refugees coming into Canada, and Winnipeg in particular continues to rise, research on refugee young people is becoming all the more important (Carter, Polevychok, & Friesen, 2006; Kanu, 2008; Neumann, 2011). This thesis highlights some of the significant and complex challenges young refugees face when integrating into a new society. When young people do not have the necessary support mechanisms, the challenges they face can put them at-risk of taking part in antisocial behavior and criminal activity.

It is my hope that this study will contribute to the growing research and literature about refugees and refugee young people. This contribution will add to the already existing theory on the relationship of access to basic human needs both physical needs such as food, clothing, and shelter, as well as social needs such as belonging, love and self-esteem and the root causes of anti-social behavior, and various forms of violence.

Furthermore, this study not only highlights the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of refugee young people, but it also identifies coping strategies, and turning points which reflect these young people's decision to make positive changes in their lives. This knowledge can inform government and non-profit policy with regards to funding and appropriate programming for these young people and their families.

Moreover, this study contributes to the literature on youth gangs, and in particular youth gangs in Winnipeg of which there is very little available literature. The recent gang related shooting death of an individual in Winnipeg on February 15<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in which a young Sudanese man was arrested (Turner, 2013), underscores the relevance, timing, and importance of this study. The knowledge gained from this study will also be useful in informing the development of any gang prevention or gang-exit programs for other areas with similar demographics and challenges.

Finally, and very importantly, this study provides refugee young people with an opportunity to have their voices heard and listened to. This process in and of itself can be considered an empowering and liberating experience as these young people have the space to tell their stories, and to feel heard by myself (the researcher) as well as by community workers, law enforcement officers, policymakers, and academics who will have the opportunity to read this study.

#### **1.4 - Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations to this study. First, the young men who participated in this study were all of African descent. The study was not intentionally designed this way however, the key informants used in this study were more connected to the various

African communities within Winnipeg. This obviously leaves out the perspectives, experiences and challenges of other young adult refugees from places like Afghanistan and Myanmar (Burma).

Second, none of the participants in this study knew how to speak English or French prior to coming to Canada. French speaking refugees from Democratic Republic of Congo or Sierra Leone for example, may have a completely different experience settling into Winnipeg given Winnipeg's large French speaking community in St. Boniface, and the many French speaking schools that young people have the opportunity to attend. It would have been beneficial to note whether French speaking refugee young people have an easier time adapting and integrating into Winnipeg as opposed to their counterparts who only speak Arabic in addition to their mother tongue. Several attempts were made to locate appropriate participants with the help of a Francophone new-comer organization and a Francophone school however, these attempts were fruitless.

Third, the refugee young people who participated in this study were all males. The original design of this study called for female participants to be included as well. Finding female participants who not only fit with the criteria of the study, and who were also willing to share their stories with the researcher proved to be a difficult task. Two potential female participants were contacted and interview times were arranged with both of them. However, both of the young women failed to show up for their interviews. The interviews were rescheduled, and neither of the young women managed to show up. As a result, I decided to proceed with the study including only having male participants. The participation of females in the study would have provided a well-rounded and more informed thesis.

Fourth, although this thesis includes the perspectives of four young refugee men as well as five community workers, a police officer, and a community elder in order to provide a more layered analysis of some of the experiences and challenges of young refugees, it does not include the perspectives of school teachers or family members. Again, including school teachers and family members would have provided a fuller and more informed thesis.

## 1.5 – Context

### *1.5.1 – Refugees in a Global Context*

*I don't know if anyone really knows war until it lives inside of them. A person can come in and see the war, fear the war, be scared of the violence – but their life, their very being, is not determined by the war. This is my country, the country of my parents, my family, my friends, my future. And the war has gotten into all of these...for I can never leave the war. I will carry the war with me.*

– *A woman from Mozambique* (Nordstrom, 1997, p. 7-8)

In 2010 the United Nations (UN) reported that there were 25 protracted conflict situations in 21 different countries (*United Nations 65th General Assembly Report*, 2010). The continued presence of protracted conflict situations has impacted people worldwide who are forced to flee their homes in greater numbers. By the end of 2010 the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reported the second highest number of refugees on record, stating that there were 10.55 million refugees under its care, an increase of 153,000 refugees from 2009 (UNHCR, 2010a). Ongoing conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa, and in particular the continued volatile situation in Somalia account for most of the increase in refugee populations globally (UNHCR, 2010a).

Recently, the UNHCR declared that nearly half of the refugees under its care are children (UNHCR, 2010b), underscoring the importance of understanding the challenges

and vulnerability youth face within the refugee context. In many cases, refugee youths' schooling is disrupted as a result of being displaced by war (Kanu, 2008; UNHCR, 2010b). As well, thousands of war-affected youth, most notably in the African context, are forced into becoming child soldiers or sex slaves (Beah, 2007; Kanu, 2008; Wessells, 2006; Wilkinson, 2002). The unimaginable atrocities either committed or incurred in these situations leave refugee youth with lingering memories and traumatic scars of their experiences (Kanu, 2008). These experiences create a fear and distrust among refugee youth of the police and other authority figures in society (Macdonald, 2007). The negative perception of authority figures among many refugee youth compounds the barriers and challenges they face upon arrival in a new host community. Winnipeg is increasingly becoming a host community for many young refugees who face these same challenges.

### *1.5.2 - Refugees in a Winnipeg Context*

In previous decades the make-up of immigrants coming to Winnipeg reflected the largely European source countries. However, statistics have drastically changed over the past several years. Kanu (2008) states that a 2006 Manitoba Labour and Immigration study noted that in the last five years leading up to the study, seven of the top ten refugee home countries were in Africa. The past several years have also seen a general increase in immigration, including refugee intake in Manitoba. Between 1998-2005 the number of immigrants who came to Manitoba increased from 3,000 to 8,200 (Carter et al., 2006). Kanu (2008) again cites the 2006 Manitoba Labour and Immigration study, noting that in the same time period between 1998-2005 the number of refugees among the immigrant

population was 8,190, half of which were between 0-24 years-of-age (Kanu, 2008). This figure highlights the need to acknowledge and recognize the unique experiences, vulnerabilities, challenges and needs of young refugees. In 2010 the number of new immigrants to Manitoba reached 15,803 (Neumann, 2011), and 70-80 percent of these new immigrants choose to settle in Winnipeg (Carter et al., 2006; Neumann, 2011).

### *1.5.3 - Refugees in Winnipeg's Inner City*

Winnipeg's inner city has increasingly become home to many people in the refugee community (Carter, 2009a; Stewart, 2011). In 2009 the population of Winnipeg's inner city was 120,000 making up 19 percent of the city's population (Carter, 2009a). Within this same year, 24,000 people living in Winnipeg's inner city were classified as "visible minorities" and 4,500 were identified as "recent immigrants" having arrived within the last five years (Carter, 2009a). In addition, a 2006 study found that 22 percent of Winnipeg's inner city population were foreign born, and 20 percent of its new arrivals were refugees (Carter et al., 2006).

Winnipeg's inner city has faced an era of urban decay alongside pronounced marginalization and poverty for many who live there. A 2009 study indicated that 33 percent of families in the inner city live below the poverty line, well above the city average of 19 percent (Carter, 2009a). As well, a recent study on the resettlement experience of privately sponsored refugees showed that 68 percent of privately sponsored refugees lived in poverty, more than 3 times the level of average Winnipeg households (Carter, 2009b). The same study found that there has not been a significant increase in income with time spent in Winnipeg as poverty and inadequate employment levels

remain high among refugees no longer considered 'new arrivals' (Carter, 2009b). Although many refugee households have cited concerns over their personal safety within the inner city, as well as their desire to move to safer neighborhoods, they often lack the financial resources and professional skills that would empower them to lift themselves out of poverty and move to a more desired neighborhood (Carter, 2009a).

The socioeconomic marginalization experienced by many refugee families living in Winnipeg's inner city leaves refugee youth vulnerable to gang recruitment. A 2004 study carried out by *The Winnipeg Foundation* identified a correlation between the area where most gang activity occurs and the representation of ethnic minority youth in the area (Neumann, 2011). Moreover, a 2002 study on youth gangs within Canada suggests that 82 percent of the youth involved in gangs are visible minorities representing African, Asian, Hispanic and East Indian ethnic groups (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

#### ***1.5.4 - Challenges for Young Refugees in Winnipeg***

Life in the inner city and socio-economic marginalization are not the only factors that create challenges and vulnerabilities for refugee young people. The successful integration of refugee families into Canadian society is essential to the future success and opportunities available to them. However, settlement issues and discrimination are major stress factors, which prevent the successful integration of refugee families (Shakya, Khanlou, & Gonsalves, 2010; Stewart, 2011). The youth of new refugee families who struggle to integrate into Winnipeg are at risk of marginalization and alienation making them more vulnerable to becoming involved with the criminal justice system (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). The importance of successful social integration and the positive

influences of families and communities on young refugees is underscored in the practices of the Winnipeg street gang the *Mad Cowz* who have reportedly recruited refugee youth as young as 10 years old into their street gang organization (Macdonald, 2007).

Educational barriers such as English literacy and inappropriate grade placement based on age rather than competency have a significant impact on young people's feelings of depression, isolation and in not fitting in locally (Kanu, 2008; Macdonald, 2007; Neumann, 2011; Shakya et al., 2010). In particular, literacy and language skills are important factors in self-direction, social mobility, and integration, as well as providing opportunities and success in school (Carter et al., 2006). Conversely, those who are unable to develop English and/or French literacy skills are found to be disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009).

Past experiences of extended periods of disrupted schooling in regions where there is continuous warfare makes it difficult for refugee youth to adapt to and to keep up with expectations of the new host country's educational system (Kanu, 2008; Stewart, 2011). These barriers create increased stress among young refugees who are already coping with the stress and trauma of their past experiences as well as the stress of adapting to a new country and culture (Kanu, 2008; Neumann, 2011). Young refugees who are unable to adapt within the educational system may end up dropping out of school. They are thus at a disadvantage for future employment and will most likely face further socioeconomic marginalization (Carter et al., 2006). Experiences of discrimination based on race, religion, language and culture also account for the school drop-out rates of refugee youth as well as their continued feelings of social alienation in society (Kanu, 2008; Neumann, 2011). Further, young refugees who do drop out of



school are at a higher risk of becoming involved with the criminal justice system (Stewart, 2011).

It is these cumulative experiences of discrimination and feelings of isolation that attract refugee youth to criminal activity and antisocial behavior. A former member of the *Mad Cowz* street gang in Winnipeg explained that refugee youth want to be around others who have shared their same experiences, who know what they are going through and to whom they can relate (Macdonald, 2007). He expressed how difficult it is for refugee youth to fit in to their new society (Macdonald, 2007). The former gang member explained that there is nothing for refugee youth to relate to, no place to go, and nothing to do other than get themselves into trouble (Macdonald, 2007).

It is clear that the challenges faced by refugee youth are numerous and complex. As a society, if we fail to address these challenges the likelihood of a successful transition for refugee youth into mainstream society remains minimal. By understanding how various forms of violence and social change may negatively affect people we gain a deeper insight into the challenges faced by refugee youth and the behavior, which may result from these challenges.

## **1.6 – Framework of the Study**

This thesis is divided in five distinct chapters: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Discussion and Results, and a Conclusion.

Chapter one introduces the study by stating its purpose and explaining the study's significance. Further, Chapter one also acknowledges the study's limitations by highlighting areas not covered in the study. The opening chapter also provides contextual

information with regards to refugees and their various struggles and challenges living in Winnipeg. Finally, Chapter one outlines the study's framework.

Chapter two presents a literature review based on relevant concepts and theories from a variety of disciplines including: psychology, education, politics, peace and conflict resolution studies. The literature review is divided into four sections: Youth and Warfare, Experiences with Direct Physical Violence, Structural Violence, and Basic Human Needs.

Chapter three presents the methodology used in conducting this study. Using a qualitative semi-structured interview approach, this study sought to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences and perceptions of young adult male refugees living in Winnipeg with regards to their challenges, coping strategies and influences.

Chapter four presents the first chapter of results and discussion on the research findings. In particular, this chapter focuses on the key themes that emerged throughout the course of the research that my participants identified as factors that contribute to their gang involvement in Winnipeg. The key themes in Chapter four are organized into six categories: Adapting to School, Perceptions of the Neighborhood, Peer Group, Challenges in the Family, Perceptions in the Ethnic Community, and Perceptions of Law Enforcement. Following these categories will be a section on Key Findings

Chapter five presents a second chapter of results and discussion on the research findings. The key themes of chapter five focus on factors relating to young refugees' positive experiences and point to the respondents' ideas about how to find a way out of gang life. The key themes in chapter five have been organized into four categories: Influences and Role Models, Turning Points, Coping Strategies, and Addressing the

Issues. As well, a Key Findings category was added which highlights and discusses the key overall findings of the research.

Chapter six is the conclusion which summarizes the thesis. This chapter ties the key findings back to the literature while also exploring identified gaps in the research. Further, chapter six includes recommendations for future research within the context of young refugees and gangs which are beyond the scope of this thesis.

### **1.7 - Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced the study and has provided an outline for the study and shown how this thesis is to proceed. As indicated, the following chapter, chapter two provides the theoretical foundation, which frames the study.

## Chapter Two – Literature Review

### 2.1 - Introduction

A theoretical framework provides structure for the analysis of the violent life experiences of refugee youth and the dramatic social change they have undergone. Further, this framework assists in explaining their perceptions based on their lived experiences. The literature and theory are organized according to four main areas. The first section explores the experiences of youth in war. The second section examines the potential impact of *direct physical violence* on refugee youth. Third, Johan Galtung's (1969) theory of *structural violence* is explored. This section is followed by a discussion of John Burton's (1990) *basic human needs theory*. This knowledge is synthesized in a discussion about how these concepts inform our understanding of young refugees' identity and behavior. Our understanding of how exposure to various forms of violence, be they physical or structural, and one's ability to satisfy basic needs impacts on identity and behavior provides this study with a solid foundation and an informed lens through which to examine how young refugees in Winnipeg respond to these experiences. This approach also provides an understanding as to why young refugees may become involved in gangs, and what motivates them to leave gangs.

### 2.2 - Youth and Warfare

Many refugee young people have witnessed the massacre of family or community members during the chaos of war (Beah, 2007; Hyder, 2005; Kaplan, 2009; Macdonald, 2007; Wilkinson, 2002). As well, many have been forced to carry out violent acts as

child soldiers (Beah, 2007; Cairns, 1996; Hyder, 2005; Kanu, 2008; Kaplan, 2009; Wessells, 2006) while others are victimized through sexual violence (Kanu, 2008; Kaplan, 2009; Wessells, 2006). Garbarino, Kostelny, and Dubrow (1991a) put it bluntly by stating that "real war is the end of childhood" (p. 8)

However, Wessells and Jonah (2006) explain that although youth are often forced into becoming soldiers, there are also cases where youth have voluntarily joined armed struggles. For example, in places like South Africa, Palestine, and Northern Ireland, youth have willingly participated in political violence (Cairns, 1996). As Michael Wessells (2006) explains:

Children who grow up in war zones might not see any positive place for themselves in society; in their situations they are oppressed, have little or no access to education, feel powerless and alienated, and have been denied positive life options. As a result, they may see violence as an acceptable way to replace the existing social order with one offering social justice and positive economic and political opportunities. Finding meaning in the struggle for liberation and social transformation, they may be drawn into armed groups without explicit coercion (p. 3).

Children affected by war may also join armed groups to fulfill a need for family, respect, belonging, and to gain access to valuable resources such as food and shelter, which they may otherwise be denied in "civilian life" (Wessells, 2006). In fact, joining an armed group may be "the only means of meeting basic needs" for youth in a war zone (Wessells & Jonah, 2006, p. 33). Further, Wessells (2006) and Wessells and Jonah (2006) explain that some youth join armed struggle out of a sense of responsibility to defend their families and communities. In the violence of war many youth lose one or both of their parents (Wessells, 2006; Wilkinson, 2002). The loss of a family member leads some youth to take up armed struggle in order to avenge the death of that family member (Wessells, 2006).

War as Garbarino et al. (1991a) explain is more than killing and maiming. War deeply affects the social and economic fabric of a society (Garbarino et al., 1991a). The destruction of infrastructure and loss of income for families in a war zone increases poverty levels and prevents youth from accessing adequate food and healthcare (Beah, 2007; Hyder, 2005; Wessells, 2006). Wessells (2006) asserts that war can negatively affect the "physical, cognitive, emotional, social and spiritual" well-being of youth (p. 23). Hyder (2005) agrees that the violence of war can have a behavioral, spiritual, and psychological impact on youth. Youth are also vulnerable to increased violence in the household as the stresses of living in a warzone manifest themselves through family violence (Wessells, 2006). In spite of these challenges Wessells (2006) argues that youth in war zones have shown resilience where support mechanisms such as "social networks, kinship ties, traditions, teachers and religious leaders, elders, and local women's associations and youth groups" (p. 29) were maintained.

In some cases, youth have not only shown resilience in times of war, but they have been active in advocating for peace. For example, Helsing, Kirlic, McMaster, and Sonnenschein (2006) note young Israeli conscientious objectors such as Haggai Matar, who was among four other young men who "spent almost two years under detention and in jail as conscientious objectors, arguing that they could not serve in an occupation army" (p. 196). The authors state that nonviolent acts of defiance in the name of peace such as conscientious objection to military service by Israeli young people have inspired Palestinian youth to turn away from violence (Helsing et al., 2006).

### 2.3 - Experiences with Direct Physical Violence

Direct physical violence can be described as "any form of violence that directly impacts on the human body" (McCutcheon, 2004, p. 182). Byrne and Senehi (2012) explain that violence is used as both an action to dominate over a perceived competitor, as well as a response to feelings of fear and insecurity. Bombings, killing, rape, and torture are some of the ways direct physical violence is expressed and experienced (Kaplan, 2009).

Continued exposure to direct physical violence increases the likelihood that youth will not only perceive violence as normal, but they will also likely engage in violence and anti-social behavior in the future (Byrne, 1997; Oppenheimer, Bar-Tal, & Raviv, 1999; Senehi & Byrne, 2006). According to Kanu (2008) and Byrne and Senehi (2012) continued exposure to direct physical violence as a normal part of life desensitizes violence for refugee youth. Violence in various forms of the entertainment media can also desensitize youth and socialize them to accept violence as a normal way of life (Grossman, 1996; Miranda & Claes, 2004). Violence, as Carolyn Nordstrom (1997) argues, is not inherent within people or their communities, but rather is "socially and culturally constructed" (p. 7).

Without positive role models teaching youth non-violent methods of problem-solving, many of them view direct physical violence as an appropriate and a normal method of confronting difficulties in their lives (Bemak & Keys, 2000; Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Coles, 1986). Further, Byrne and Senehi (2012) argue that young people who witness direct physical violence at home will have the opportunity to model it resulting in negative behavior. This argument is validated by Garbarino (2001) and Macdonald

(2007) who both draw direct connections between youth violence, and the direct physical violence they have witnessed either in their homes or communities.

In addition, the trauma associated with violent experiences can have a detrimental affect on the cognitive functions of youth (Garbarino, 2001; Wilkinson, 2002). For example, Garbarino (2001) argues that there is "considerable empirical evidence for an association between trauma, violence or neglect and school achievement, including intelligence test and performance" (p. 8). Coping with trauma can be very challenging for refugee youth as they experience stress in integrating into and adapting to their new society (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Senehi & Byrne, 2006). Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) also argue that youth who have been exposed to violence and trauma prior to migration are vulnerable and at greater risk of becoming involved in violent criminal activity. As well, many youth may use direct physical violence as a coping mechanism when faced with stressors in their everyday lives (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010). Instances of direct physical violence carried out by refugee youth highlight the need to fully understand their behavior which at times may not be acceptable in public settings such as the school (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010).

#### **2.4 - Structural Violence**

Many refugee young people and their families have experienced various forms of institutional exclusion, racism, or ethnic prejudice in their countries of origin (Cairns, 1996; Stewart, 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Wolff, 2006). Sadly, refugee young people and their families continue to experience exclusion here in



Winnipeg with regards to their access to suitable education, opportunities for higher education, adequate housing and employment (Carter, 2009a, 2009b; Carter et al., 2006; Kanu, 2008, 2009; Stewart, 2011). By understanding the role and impact of structural violence we are provided with a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences refugee young people have with different forms of hidden violence, social change and exclusion.

Unlike direct physical violence where one person or group causes direct harm, or pain to another person or group, structural violence is indirect in that there is no one person causing physical pain or hurt upon another (Galtung, 1969). Rather, structural violence is embedded within the very structure of society's institutions and is identified as unequal power relations, unequal opportunities, and unequal distribution of, and access to resources (Galtung, 1969; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). Galtung (1969) stresses the importance of recognizing the stratification of society's class structure to fully understand structural violence. Moreover, Byrne and Senehi (2012) argue that in order to better understand the causes of violence the structural conditions of society must also be understood. They assert that violence is often the result of social divisions based on race, power, ethnicity, class, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion, as well as other identities and contrasting ideologies.

According to Galtung (1969) actors within the system interact in a hierarchical order so that the higher one is in the system, the more central that person's position of power is within that system. Those who hold a lower position within the system are deprived of realizing their potential (Galtung, 1969). For Galtung (1969) violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental

realizations are below their potential realizationsö (p. 168). In this sense, violence is öthe cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what isö (p. 168). For example, the denial of starving peopleø access to food when in fact there is enough food to feed them (Galtung, 1969).

Arendt (1970) argues that rage and violence will arise if peopleø expectations that oppressive conditions could change in fact never happens. öDifficult life conditionsö make people feel threatened as they are unable to care for themselves or their family (Staub, 1989; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). These threats as Staub (1989) asserts, can be both physical as in the protection of oneø own life, and psychological as in the protection of oneø values, self-esteem, and identity. However, ödifficult life conditionsö may not in and of themselves lead to violence (Staub, 1989). Staub (1989) argues that öhostility is especially likely to arise if people regard their suffering as unjust, as they often do, and especially if some others are not similarly affectedö (p. 16).

## **2.5 - Basic Human Needs**

Closely associated with the concept of structural violence is John Burtonø that basic human needs deprivation constitutes violence. Basic human needs include physical needs such as: food, clothing and shelter, and also include self-esteem, love, belonging, opportunity, security, employment, and freedom from fear, violence and marginalization (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Jeong, 2000; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). These needs are universal and cannot be negotiated (Burton, 1993; Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Jeong, 2000; Roy, 1990). Basic human needs can be accessed and satisfied through human interaction and participation in community life (Jeong, 2000) .

Unequal opportunities and a corresponding inferior social status can prevent people from satisfying their basic needs (Jeong, 2000). The literature cites several significant challenges refugee youth face in realizing their basic needs: family instability, inferior socioeconomic status, poor physical and mental health, lack of language proficiency, inadequate social skills, lack of social networks, inadequate employment opportunities, racism, and neighborhood settlement that are all barriers to satisfying their basic needs (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010). Further, Neufeld-Redekop (2002) argues that the satisfaction of needs, which seek to fulfill meaning, connectedness, action, security, and recognition have been shown to be important in developing identity for the human Selfö (p. 164). When these needs are satisfied a sense of well-being is achieved that is built upon self-recognizance, self-respect, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-actualizationö (Neufeld-Redekop, 2002, p. 164-165).

Failure to satisfy basic needs may result in anger, sadness, depression, fear, and shameö (Neufeld-Redekop, 2002, p. 165). As well, the failure to fulfill young people's basic needs may breed resentment and violence as they unsuccessfully struggle against the structure to satisfy those needs (Burton, 1993; Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Galtung, 1969; Gilligan, 1996; Jeong, 2000). Thus, hopelessness, lack of opportunity and feelings of social injustice make gang involvement an attractive option for disadvantaged youth (McCluskey & Torrance, 2003; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007). Refugee youth may join gangs for social and psychological benefits as gang membership may meet unfulfilled needs such as: economic benefits, respect, dignity, identity, belonging, opportunity and security (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007).

Basic human needs theory rejects the notion that violence is embedded within the very nature of human beings (Jeong, 2000). Gilligan (1996) also rejects the notion of an inherent evilness within human nature. Rather, Gilligan (1996) argues that violence is a public health issue whereby the causes of the illness (in this case violence) are examined in order to cure the illness and prevent its spread. Through a similar lens Prothrow-Stith and Spivak (2004) explain youth violence as an "epidemic" in which violence is a result of "complex problems" that require "complex solutions". Further, Garbarino (2001), Vorrasi and Garbarino (2000), and Howard and Jenson (1999) also argue that the advent of youth violence is not due to a singular cause or challenge, but rather is the result of the accumulation of multiple risk factors. Where multiple risk factors exist, Garbarino (2001) states that the prevalence of youth violence "tends to be overwhelming" (p. 173). Prothrow-Stith and Spivak (2004) argue that it is critical for society to pay attention to these risk factors in order to reduce youth violence. Acknowledging the "complex problems" and "complex solutions" notion put forth by Prothrow-Stith and Spivak (2004) Byrne and Senehi (2012) state that any youth violence and youth gang prevention/intervention approach "must engage at all levels to transform the underlying nature of youth conflict over time" (p. 62).

An examination of the literature reveals the potential for challenges and risk factors for refugee youth in four key areas:

1. The school (Bemak & Keys, 2000; Byrne, 1997; Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Davis, 1999; Howard & Jenson, 1999; Kanu, 2008, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wilkinson, 2002; Wortley & Tanner, 2007)

2. The family (Bemak & Keys, 2000; Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Byrne, McLeod, & Polkinghorn, 2004; Davis, 1999; Howard & Jenson, 1999; Kanu, 2008, 2009; Kaplan, 2009; Molix & Bettencourt, 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wilkinson, 2002)
3. The community (Bemak & Keys, 2000; Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Byrne et al., 2004; Chekki, 2006; Davis, 1999; Howard & Jenson, 1999; Kanu, 2008; Molix & Bettencourt, 2010; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007); and
4. The peer group (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Davis, 1999; Howard & Jenson, 1999; Kanu, 2008, 2009; Molix & Bettencourt, 2010; Neumann, 2011; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007)

These social institutions ō shape young adults behavior as they acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in the communityö (Byrne, McLeod and Polkinghorn, 2004, p. 15).

### ***2.5.1 The School***

Education is essential for refugee young people to have a smooth transition into a new society and so that they can access opportunities (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Wilkinson, 2002). Refugee young people whose schooling was interrupted, and who lack the necessary language proficiency are at a disadvantage for completing high school, and also for their employability after graduation (Kanu, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Wilkinson, 2002). In their study of disadvantaged Aboriginal youth within the school system in Winnipeg McCluskey and Torrance (2003) found that many youth simply find

the extra challenge of school too much to cope with and end up dropping out. Similarly, Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) discovered that 46-74 percent of immigrant and refugee youth whose native language is not English fail to complete high school.

Unfortunately, schools and teachers often lack the experience and understanding, as well as the necessary resources to meet the unique needs and challenges of refugee young people (Kanu, 2008; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010). Without the appropriate training for teachers and the much needed resources, the behavior of refugee young people is often misunderstood, and as a result they may be labeled as "trouble makers." This label and the stigma that comes with it may push young people into association with other similarly labeled youth effectively increasing their risk for gang involvement or other criminal behavior (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Kanu, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007).

Schools have the ability to play a significant role in the socialization of young people through which their understandings and perceptions of the world are informed and shaped constructively to empower them (Byrne, 1997; Senehi & Byrne, 2006; Sersli et al., 2010). Further, the way that young people, therefore, understand their interpersonal and intergroup relations within their sociocultural milieu impacts their perceptions of conflict, violence, and peace, and conflict management styles (Polkinghorn & Byrne, 2001, 25). Jay MacLeod (2009) argues that schools need to rethink their role in the social reproduction of the class system through the way they value the cultural capital of students, which tends to favor the "upper classes." As MacLeod (2009) states, "[t]he assumption of some mainstream sociologists that the problem must lie with the contestants, rather than with the judge, is simply unfounded" (p. 101). In other words,

MacLeod is suggesting that schools need to reexamine the way they educate to better suit the needs of the students, rather than forcing students to fit into a particular banking system of educating.

In order to reduce the risk factor, refugee young people need to be engaged and empowered at school through sports, tutoring, culturally appropriate teaching and mentoring, while also learning problem-solving and anger management skills (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Byrne et al., 2004; Kanu, 2009; McCluskey & Torrance, 2003; Sersli et al., 2010). The appropriate educational inputs to engage with refugee young people will provide them a greater sense of self-esteem and a more positive outlook on education making them more likely to be successful in various avenues of life (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010).

### ***2.5.2 – The Family***

Many refugee families settling in a new country continue to face difficult life circumstances, which may present challenges and substantial factors for refugee youth. As well, the parents of refugee youth themselves are often dealing with trauma and struggles such as finding suitable employment to support the family (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Shakya et al., 2010). In many cases refugee parents may have to work more than one low-income job as they often do not have adequate education, language proficiency, or professional skills that would empower them to obtain a career (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010). The need to work multiple jobs especially in single parent households pulls parents away from the family and leaves young people to supervise themselves putting them at risk of becoming involved in

crime, gangs and violence (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Davis, 1999; Kanu, 2008, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Stewart, 2011; Wortley & Tanner, 2007).

The struggle to meet the basic needs of the family may require refugee youth to also seek employment, which could negatively affect their performance and attendance at school (Kanu, 2008, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Stewart, 2011). The risk of failure becomes greater when parental attitudes towards education are negative or indifferent (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010). The drive to make money may attract some youth to criminal activities where money may be more lucrative and faster to earn (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Stewart, 2011).

Other family risk factors include the adjustment gap that develops between refugee youth and their parents. Children learn English with more ease than their parents, which prevents parents from assisting their children with after school work (Kanu, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Wilkinson, 2002). As well, strain is created between parents and children as parents tend to hold onto traditional views and values while their children are more exposed to the influences and values of their peers and the society around them (Chekki, 2006; Kanu, 2008, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wilkinson, 2002).

Sustained support mechanisms such as skills training and support groups for refugee parents and families throughout the settlement process are essential for diminishing the risk for youth involvement in criminal activity (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007). The importance of family support programs is highlighted by Sersli et al. (2010), and Wortley and Tanner (2007) who



indicate that it usually takes a few years of struggling before refugee youth succumb to gang involvement. Byrne, McLeod and Polkinghorn (2004), and Molix and Bettencourt (2010) assert that when families are able to offer the necessary support to their children, it is more likely their children will show resilience when faced with violence and other challenges.

### ***2.5.3 – The Community***

Community environment both in terms of geography and culture plays a significant role in the level of risk associated with refugee youth. Due to the socioeconomic challenges that many refugee families face they often reside in low-income and high crime neighborhoods where they lack the resources of other wealthier neighborhoods (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010). Studies conducted in the United States found that the majority of youth who commit violent crimes also live in low income inner-city neighborhoods (Vorrasi & Garbarino, 2000). Living in these crime ridden and impoverished neighborhoods puts refugee youth at risk of gang involvement, as well as exposing them to violence (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007). Thus, there is a correlation between the neighborhoods where ethnic minority youth live and the level of gang activity occurring in these areas (Neumann, 2011).

Community organizations need effective programming that promotes training, education and social capital for refugee youth and families (Chekki, 2006; Sersli et al., 2010). As well, culturally appropriate trauma reduction programs and resources for

refugees dealing with trauma need to be promoted and be accessible as many refugee families report not receiving any trauma related treatment (Kanu, 2008).

The existence of cultural and faith-based institutions can also provide a stabilizing factor for refugee youth (Chekki, 2006; Sersli et al., 2010). For example, Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) found that those refugee youth who had a strong sense of cultural identity were at less risk of becoming involved in illegal activities and showed a greater interest in school. Further, they were also found to have superior decision-making skills. Chekki (2006) also asserts that cultural and ethnic organizations can help meet material, and spiritual needs as well as satisfy the need for belonging. Further, communities lacking these types of organizations may lack the leaders and positive role models necessary to steer youth in the right direction (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Without positive adult role models to assist refugee youth in feeling secure, some youth may turn to gangs to gain a sense of safety (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Byrne and Senehi (2012) also stress the importance of community leaders such as elders who can offer positive values and ideas while nurturing young people in the community.

#### ***2.5.4 – The Peer Group***

Refugee youth who struggle with feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, discrimination, exclusion and loneliness often are attracted to other disenfranchised youth and become vulnerable to negative influences resulting in antisocial behavior (Kanu, 2008, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Wortley & Tanner, 2007). Byrne, McLeod and Polkinghorn (2004) state that "the individual's desire to belong to a particular social group is usually motivated by a desire to enhance self-esteem" (p. 16).

Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) also argue that refugee youth face pressure to fit-in and gain acceptance from others. When the schools, family, and community fail to meet the needs of refugee youth, local gangs are ready to fill the gap (Sersli et al., 2010). For example, Sersli et al. (2010) point out that youth who join gangs feel a sense of empowerment, security, belonging, and are able to access economic opportunities that they are unable to receive through other institutions. To counter the attraction of gang involvement, Sersli et al. (2010) argue that support is needed for recreational programs that get refugee youth involved in their communities and provide them with positive sports mentors.

### ***2.5.5 - Identity/Behavior***

Refugee youth who experience life in a new country are faced with an identity crisis as they struggle with fitting into a new culture and a new value system (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010). The resulting "culture shock" leaves refugee youth straddling two worlds and not fully belonging to either as they walk in between (Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009). Fisher (1990) stresses the importance of identity when he states that "identity is a fundamental need that influences a great deal of social interaction at the group, intergroup and international levels." (p. 95).

Research shows that minority groups are often devalued and experience stigmatization and discrimination within mainstream society (Molix & Bettencourt, 2010). Feelings of isolation and exclusion feed into negative stereotypes held by both minority and dominant groups (McCluskey & Torrance, 2003). McCluskey and Torrance (2003) argue that as minority groups search for their identity they often take on stereotypes, which may lead them to express themselves through antisocial behavior such

as participating in illegal activities. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) refer to this behavior as *Negative Social Mirroring* whereby identity and behavior is shaped by how others perceive us and how they project that image back on to us as we then take on that identity. The authors state that as frustration grows within these youth they can begin to react with anti-social behavior. "For these youth, the response is 'you think I am bad? Let me show you how bad I can be'" (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001, p. 100). Similarly, when young people live in the inner city they may feel the need to reflect a "tough guy" image in order to gain respect from their peers and others in the community (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Howard & Jenson, 1999).

Young people's perceptions and experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and oppression shape their identity and are passed along through storytelling (Jeong, 2000; Senehi & Byrne, 2006; Sersli et al., 2010). The Rwandan Genocide is a well known example of how young people's identity was shaped through storytelling. In the lead up to the genocide poets, singers and school teachers told stories harkening back to historical conflicts between the Hutu and Tutsi people (Batiskunda, 2009). The storytelling of past wrong doings was so successful Batiskunda (2009) notes that "most of the killers during the genocide were people who were not even born before the 1959 Hutu Revolution" (p. 149). He added that many of the killers had never personally experienced "anything negative from Tutsis but absorbed the hatred ideology as gospel" (p. 149). As identity becomes entrenched, younger generations take on their group identity and behavior as their own (Byrne & Senehi, 2012; Senehi & Byrne, 2006). For example, Macdonald (2007) found that some refugee children in Winnipeg's inner city mimic the behavior of gang members from their community in their play. As children learn this type of

negative behavior, the importance of positive behavioral role models from family, schools, peers and community becomes important to prevent their transition into violence (Byrne & Senehi, 2012).

## **2.6 – Conclusion**

As evidenced by the literature refugee young people face a multitude of risks and challenges, which could negatively affect their behavior and lead them down the path to anti-social behavior and criminal gang activity. However, where positive support mechanisms exist refugee young people have a greater chance of showing resiliency when faced with these challenges. Discovering the challenges and support mechanisms that exist in Winnipeg for refugee young people is important for service providers and young refugees to better understand how these challenges inform their identity and behavior and why they would potentially choose to join a gang or leave a gang once they are members. In order to acquire this information and knowledge my research methodology is outlined in Chapter three.

## **Chapter Three – Methodology**

### **3.1 - Introduction**

Young people's experience as refugees living in a new milieu is a challenge and informs their perceptions, attitudes, and behavior. This study uses a qualitative research method to explore young refugees' perceptions, challenges and experiences as newcomers living in Winnipeg. In particular, a semi-structured interview approach was used when interviewing the study participants.

### **3.2 – Research Location**

As noted by Carter et al., (2006) the majority of refugees who settle in Winnipeg, settle in the inner city. Not surprisingly then, this study was conducted in Winnipeg's inner city Central Park downtown neighborhood where all the young men participating in this study settled upon arriving in Winnipeg.

Home to people representing over fifty countries (Carter, 2009a), the inner city of Winnipeg is a culturally and ethnically diverse area of the city. The Central Park neighborhood in particular is one of the most ethnically diverse neighborhoods in Canada (Kirbyson, 2012). Appropriately, many immigrant and refugee service organizations such as Immigrant Centre, Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council, Immigrant Refugee Community Organization of Manitoba, and Newcomer Employment Education Development Services are all located within or near the Central Park neighborhood. As well, many of the small grocery stores, clothing stores and restaurants in the area reflect the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood. Moreover, Central Park itself becomes

transformed into a global market on summer weekends where customers can purchase everything from handicrafts to food that reflects the diversity of the neighborhood.

Although Winnipeg's inner city is the most affordable area of the city to live in (Carter et al., 2006), it also has had its share of challenges. Characterized by high levels of poverty (Carter, 2009a), and "unsuitable, overcrowded and unsafe housing" (Carter et al., 2006, p. 53) Winnipeg's inner city is marginalized. Not only do the residents of the inner city face high levels of poverty along with inadequate housing, as Fitzgerald, Wisener and Savoie (2004) note, the inner city, and particularly the downtown area of Winnipeg where the Central Park neighborhood is located, has the highest rates of violent crime and property crime in the city of Winnipeg.

Recently the Central Park neighborhood has undergone some positive changes. Thanks to a 5.5 million dollar development initiative, Central Park is transforming from an area once infamous for its crime and drug use to a family friendly area hosting a toboggan slide, soccer pitch, and the city's largest spray park (Kirbyson, 2012). This influx in community development has contributed to a fifty percent decline in crime for the area over the past few years (Kirbyson, 2012). However, outspoken *Winnipeg Sun* columnist Tom Brodbeck (2013) questions these statistics claiming that city officials are redrawing boundaries and cherry picking their statistics. Instead Brodbeck claims that crime has actually gone up in the downtown area by 13.5 percent (Brodbeck, 2013). Regardless of these statistics it remains clear that although the Central Park neighborhood has experienced some positive developments recently, the residents of this neighborhood still face multiple challenges.

### 3.3 Qualitative Research Strategy

The use of qualitative interviews can greatly expand the depth of information collected in the field (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Qualitative interviews are different from the very rigid and structured survey type research and tend to be less structured, more flexible, and more focused on the interviewee's experiences and points of view than the very rigid and more structured survey type research (Bryman & Bell, 2007). For example, Druckman (2005) notes that one of the advantages of a qualitative research method over a quantitative research method is that it can "provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon" (p. 8). As well, Druckman (2005) points out that a qualitative methodology empowers the researcher to identify nuances which are missed in quantitative methodology. Bryman and Bell (2007) also support this point explaining that by providing the opportunity for the interviewee to speak freely deeper insight is given to what he or she feels is relevant and meaningful for a particular topic. Further, Bogdan and Knopp Biklen (2003) note that the open-ended responses allowed for in qualitative research provide the researcher with an opportunity to collect "unexpected dimensions of the topic" from the participant (71). However, Johnston (2005) warns that "there needs to be balance between what the researcher wants to ask about and what the interviewee wants to talk about; the balance will dictate what is important in the interview" (p. 282).

Smith (1999) asserts that by providing space for people to tell their stories many individual truths can be revealed. This constructivist method seeks to uncover the multiple perceptions and experiences of the study participants (Druckman, 2005). Consequently, Johnston (2005) explains that in narrative analysis it is not the researcher's



goal to ÷validate the accurateness of the person's story, but rather to discover the meaning of itö (p. 282). Lederach (2005) stresses that when we listen to people's stories we must look for ÷deeper social story and meaningö (p. 147). When we listen to people's stories and gain a deeper understanding of their perceptions and experiences we can also begin to understand how their behavior has become influenced by these perceptions and experiences (Johnston, 2005).

Johnston (2005) states when people tell their stories, they are the experts. This process of expression allows marginalized people in particular to dictate how they will be represented in society, thus providing a counter-image to the dominant discourse (Smith, 1999). In addition, Senehi (2009) explains that ÷when only those in power have access to producing knowledge, authoritative-discourses may serve the interests of power rather than truthö (p. 203-204).

If we truly want to address the violence and marginalization the young people in Winnipeg's inner city are experiencing, it is imperative that concerned persons seek out and listen to their stories because they live through these experiences on a daily basis. During the research process I sought to follow this approach.

### **3.4 - Semi-Structured Interviewing**

Unlike structured interviews in which ÷interviewers must ask questions in the exact order and with the exact wording in which they are written in advanceö (Rubin & Babbie, 2011, p. 233), in semi-structured interviewing the researcher generally has an interview guide outlining the topics and issues, which should be covered during the course of the interview. This less regimented approach allows the interviewer to be

flexible, informal, conversational and to adapt the style of the interview and the sequencing and wording of questions to each particular interviewee (Rubin & Babbie, 2011, p. 233). This flexibility within the interview process allows the interviewer to ask new questions as deeper insights are provided during the course of the interview as sharing of their experiences and stories that capture their perceptions of events (Bryman & Bell, 2007; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) state that the goal of the interviewer is to encourage the interviewee to share as much information as possible, unselfconsciously and in his or her own words (p. 316-317). Further, Barriball and While (1994) point out semi-structured interviewing allows for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents (p. 330). As interviewees share their experiences and perceptions with the interviewer, probing questions can elicit valuable information and make for more complete and informed research (Barriball & While, 1994).

### **3.5 - Role of the Researcher**

The purpose of using a semi-structured interview technique is to allow participants to freely share their own perceptions, experiences, and stories with the researcher. Consequently, I took on the role of independent interviewer.

Within the flexibility of the semi-structured interview process it was my intent to elicit stories from my study participants. This is not to say that semi-structured interviews and storytelling are one and the same, rather stories can unfold within semi-structured interviews as the participant shares his or her life experiences with the researcher. This participatory process humanized the research subject as an active

participant in the research process by providing a space for my participants to share their experiences and stories with me. Storytelling, as Senehi and Byrne (2006) point out, is a way to empower youth as they can express their own experiences and perceptions while also having the power to choose what they share, and how much they share. It is the sharing of these stories that creates a better understanding of young people's perceptions and circumstances. For example, Senehi (2009) states that "storytellers often invoke the past to comment on problems and needs in the present in order to affect the future" (p. 203). Smith (1999) points out that storytelling is often a way for indigenous and other marginalized groups to voice their struggles and challenges, yet it is also an opportunity to determine their own solutions without the "paternalism" of government or non-governmental organizations.

Lederach (2005) asserts that when people are prevented from telling their stories narrative becomes broken. Moreover, he states that when the narrative is broken "meaning, identity, and a place in history are lost" (p. 146). These insights help the listener understand the importance, meanings and perceptions attached to certain events or circumstances. In particular, the storytelling process helped me gain a richer and deeper understanding of the participant and how he perceived his life experiences.

### **3.6 - Data Gathering Techniques**

I used face-to-face semi-structured interviews to collect the data for this research study. In my research questions I kept the questions broad so to allow the interviewee to really express his or her own thoughts and ideas. Probing questions were used as a guide to encourage the interviewees to share more deeply about their experiences, perceptions,

and challenges (see Appendix A). I purposely avoided using direct questioning regarding violent events, which may have been experienced by some of the study participants. Bogdan and Knopp Biklen (2003) assert that in qualitative research, a good interview "takes on a shape of its own" (p. 95). Therefore, it was my hope that as each participant felt comfortable in the interview process, his or her personal experiences and challenges would emerge in the stories that he or she shared.

All of the interviews except for one were recorded on a digital audio recorder and then transferred to a computer hard-drive from where they were transcribed verbatim and analyzed by me. The importance of audio recording during the interview process is stressed by Bryman and Bell (2007), and Barriball and While (1994) who also note that audio recording ensures that the interviewer captures the exact words of the interviewee. Furthermore, Barriball and While (1994) state that audio recording reduces the potential for error in transcribing interviews. The sole interview that I did not audio record at the participant's request was instead recorded using hand written notes. For each participant the interview process took approximately 60 to 80 minutes depending on the depth to which each participant shared his or her stories with me.

### **3.7 - Data Analysis**

Using a Grounded Theory approach, I used inductive analysis as themes emerged from the data. Grounded Theory refers to the "discovery of theory from data" (p. 1). Using this approach means that "most hypotheses and concepts not only come from the data, but are systematically worked out in relation to the data during the course of the research" (p. 6). Data analysis refers to the "process of systematically searching and

arranging the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findingsö (Bogdan & Knopp Biklen, 2003, p. 147). As various themes and patterns emerged throughout the data analysis, a coding system using colored pencils was used to identify each theme. Once the coding of the data was completed, significant thoughts, ideas and quotations were identified to be used in the two discussion and results chapters of this thesis. Further, within the two results and discussion chapters of this thesis, the literature was referenced in order to give a deeper understanding and analysis of the various findings within the data.

### **3.8 - The Study Participants**

This study has a total of eleven participants. Four of the participants are young males aged 19-27 who settled in Winnipeg as refugees. In particular, this study sought out young male refugees who had previously been members of gangs, and who have since left the gangs and have made positive changes in their lives. These young men were selected in order to gain a better understanding of young male refugees' challenges, experiences, coping strategies and turning points as new-comers.

Three out of the four young men are former members of a Winnipeg street gang and have all spent time in prison. Although none of the men are currently behind bars, two of them have deportation orders filed against them and if they fail to meet their court ordered probationary terms, they may be deported. The fourth young man was never an official gang member, yet he nonetheless associated with gang members and participated in anti-social behavior.

Three of the four men are from countries in East Africa and one of the men is from a country in West Africa. The refugee experience of all four of these young men varied: only one participant spent time living in refugee camps, another participant fled with his family when he was still a child and settled in a city of a neighboring country, and the other two participants were both born in neighboring countries after their parents fled their country of origin and thus they have never visited their country of origin. Three of the four men came to Canada when they were thirteen years old and one of the four men came to Canada when he was seventeen. The length of time each participant has resided in Canada ranges from 4 years to 15 years. These four young men were given the pseudonyms Bashir, Ermias, Okot, and Emmanuel to protect their identity.

In order to provide a more informed and in-depth analysis of the various challenges and experiences encountered by young refugees, this study also includes five community worker participants, three of whom are male, and two are female. Although the focus of this thesis is on the perspectives and experiences of young male refugees living in Winnipeg, the community worker participants also added valuable data as they shared their own personal experiences and stories about refugee young people in Winnipeg. All three men had themselves originally come to Canada as refugees and were from East African backgrounds whereas both females were both born and raised in Canada and come from European backgrounds. All five community workers work for organizations, which provide programming and services to refugee young people and their families. The three male community workers were given the pseudonyms Hassan, Sadiiq, and Saalim; the two female community workers were given the pseudonyms of Jennifer and Heather.

As the interviews unfolded and participants shared with me some of their challenges, two particular themes emerged from the interviews which spoke to the perspectives participants held of the local police force as well as leaders in their respective ethnic communities and the refugee community in general. As a result of these emerging themes, an officer from the Winnipeg Police Services who has experience working with gang-involved refugee youth was added to the study as a participant. Further, one community elder representing one of the East African communities was also selected to participate in this study. The community workers, the police officer and the elder added valuable data to the study because they shared their own experiences about working with refugee young people in Winnipeg. The community elder came to Winnipeg as a refugee and is from the same ethnic community as one of the young male participants in this study. The community elder is an active leader in his ethnic community and has many years of experience working with his community's youth and their parents.

The Winnipeg Police Services officer was simply given the pseudonym Officer Smith, and the community elder was given the pseudonym Abraham. I thought it was important to add these two additional participants as the young men interviewed, as well as some of the community workers in this study had strong feelings in these two areas. Therefore, it was necessary to include a voice from the police as well as from an elder in order to gain further insight about how they perceive the challenges and issues regarding refugee young people within the city of Winnipeg.

In the original proposal I stated that a mix of male and female young adult refugee participants were going to be selected for this study. However, as the research

process developed it became evident that finding suitable female participants was going to be a real challenge. Several attempts were made at meeting with two different potential female participants. However, after they both failed to attend several scheduled, and then rescheduled meetings, it was decided to refocus on male participants as I had access to that group.

The study participants had sufficient understanding of the English language so I did not need interpreters. All of the study participants were selected based on recommendations from three key informants. Two of these key informants were community workers who participated in the study as such. Having either worked with or come from the same ethnic community as my refugee young adult participants, my key informants had a preexisting relationship with my participants, and therefore were aware of their status as ex-gang members or former gang associates. Further, my key informants were able to direct me to the community worker participants as well as the community elder participant, and the Winnipeg Police Services officer participant. The key informants were identified through preexisting relationships I have with members of the refugee community, as well as a preexisting relationship I have with staff members of the Immigrant Refugee Community of Manitoba (IRCOM). IRCOM is a community based refugee serving organization located in Winnipeg's inner city where I have spent considerable time as a volunteer. Having an established relationship with the key informants allowed me to rapidly build relationships with the participants. Further, seeing as the participants also had trusting relationships with the key informants, this provided me with the credibility and trust needed to engage with these young people. As Wilson (2008) notes, "shared relationships allow for a strengthening of the new



relationship. This allows you to become familiar or comfortable with the personö (p. 84). I used the snowballing sampling technique with my young male participants whereby they would use their social networks to refer to me other potential and suitable participants for the study (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995). However, this was unsuccessful due to the suspicion and caution the friends of my young male participants held toward me.

I applied for and received human ethics approval from the University of Manitoba for the project prior to contacting potential study participants. All of the participants were provided with a consent form prior to the interview informing them of the purpose of the study and the topics to be discussed. All participants in this study are at least 18 years of age and all of the participants have lived in Winnipeg for a minimum of four years. The actual names of the study participants and their countries of origin will remain confidential and do not appear in the transcripts and will not appear on any reports based on the research. As noted earlier, in place of their actual names, pseudonyms are used to identify the participants within the research. The use of pseudonyms effectively addressed any concerns over identifying and exposing a participant in cases where they shared information with me that may be sensitive.

Throughout the duration of the research all of the transcripts were kept in a locked room in my apartment that was only accessible to the researcher. Digital voice recordings of the interviews were stored on a password protected computer hard-drive only accessible to the researcher. All transcripts were destroyed after the completion of the study.

Following the transcription of the interviews, each participant had the opportunity to receive a transcript of her or his interview. This process provided the study participants with an opportunity to clarify any remarks as well as request that I delete any remarks if they did not feel comfortable keeping them in the transcripts. The importance of accurately representing people's knowledge the way they want to be represented is underscored by Smith (1999) when she discusses the misrepresentation of the Maori people within western based research. Smith (1999) states that "[t]his in turn has entrapped Maori people within a cultural definition which does not connect with either our oral traditions or our lived reality" (p. 170). During the course of the interview process I have not deliberately or knowingly deceived any of the participants.

### **3.9 – Conclusion**

The use of semi-structured interviews and the storytelling which can unfold within them fits well with my own worldview and experience. Having spent several years working with community-based organizations in Uganda and in Winnipeg, I have worked with marginalized members of society including refugees. During this time I have come to understand the importance of listening to the voices of those usually silenced by the dominant society. We can begin to build peace, and we can begin to undertake appropriate and sustainable models of development by listening to these voices. When we have power *with* and not *over*, when we *do with* and not *do to*, we can begin to work together to mend the fractures which cripple our societies. This qualitative research study is an attempt to better understand the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of refugee young people living in Winnipeg. It is my hope that through

the stories shared with me by my participants that the information and knowledge will inform future programs and policies aimed at these young people.

## Chapter Four – Down the Path to Gang Life

### 4.1 - Introduction

During the interview process the participants had the opportunity to share their experiences and challenges as well as offer insight and perspectives with regards to the state of young refugees living in Winnipeg. During this process several interesting themes emerged which highlighted the negative factors that contributed to the gang involvement of my participants.

Prior to coming to Canada many refugees tend to believe that their new country will be somewhat of a promised land, where the struggles and challenges of their current situation will be replaced with opportunity and hope for a brighter future. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez Orozco (2001) note for example, that “while anticipating migration and during the first weeks in the new country, many experience a sense of euphoria. Expectations are often high, for many the anticipated possibilities seem boundless” (p. 72). Both Ermias and Emmanuel stated that they thought moving to Canada would provide them with a better education and a better life. Bashir also expressed his expectations upon coming to Canada as follows:

When you see it in the T.V. it’s different from here. I thought I would live in a house, not an apartment.

As well, Ermias expressed his high expectations prior to arriving in Canada:

I thought Canada was gonna be the best life ya know? It was gonna be like everything I ever wanted, you know what I mean? I thought it was gonna be like heaven!

Sadly however, the opportunities and the promises of a better life all too often remain out of reach for many refugee young people and their families as they now face a

new set of challenges such as adapting to a new life, a new culture, and a new society that is quite often very different from their own. When writing about the stresses of immigration Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) noted:

Indeed, by any measure, immigration is one of the most stressful events a family can undergo. It removes family members from many of their relationships and a predictable context: community ties, jobs, customs, and (often) language. Immigrants are stripped of many of their significant relationships ó extended family members, best friends, and neighbors. They also lose the social roles that provide them with culturally scripted notions of how they fit into the world. Initially, without a sense of competence, control, and belonging, many immigrants will feel marginalized. These changes in relationships, contexts, and roles are highly disorienting and nearly inevitably lead to a keen sense of loss (p. 70).

The experiences and challenges shared by the participants in this study reflect the feelings of isolation, marginalization and loss noted by Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001).

This chapter discusses the results of each of the six themes that emerged from the research namely: Adapting to School; Perceptions of the Neighborhood; Peer Group; Challenges in the Family; Perceptions in the Ethnic Community; and Perceptions of Law Enforcement. These are negative experiences and perceptions which influenced the gang involvement of my participants are discussed.

#### **4.2 - Adapting to school** – *“They weren’t interested in what was going on with me.”* – *Okot*

All four refugee young men who participated in this study expressed having challenges adapting to the school setting here in Winnipeg, Manitoba. In some cases, the challenges these young people face at school can be directly linked to their experience as refugees displaced by war. For example, Kanu (2008) and Stewart (2011) state that those

refugee youth who have experienced disrupted schooling due to war have a more difficult time adapting to the new educational system of their host nation. This is because quite often newcomer youth are placed in classes according to their age and not their level of competency. As he reflected on his experience growing up in a warzone and how it affected his schooling, Ermias lamented that:

My only experience is war, the only thing you learn about there is war. [I] could've gone to school there and learned good things. Actually, I was a smart kid, but when it comes to school my brother helped me learn to read and write just at home. When I came here they just put me in Grade 8. I thought I was a dumb kid, everyone is speaking English and I don't know anything, ya know? School was the biggest challenge school was the hardest.

It is important to also note that Ermias was 13 when he arrived in Winnipeg and he did not have any prior education. Emmanuel also reflected on his experience on how living in a warzone affected his schooling:

We did school, but as we had to move looking for refuge in different countries there was a huge gap in between that we didn't have a chance to go to school. So when we came here I was 13 and my level of education was grade 4, but the school that we were going to they had to put me in grade 8. My reading level and everything was so poor ya know? So that was a struggle too for me. And never mind the fact that I wasn't really accepted in school ya know? Trying to fit in it was a hard time.

These experiences can stir up feelings of isolation, depression and of not fitting in (Kanu, 2008; Macdonald, 2007; Neumann, 2011; Shakya et al., 2010). Bashir also expressed his experience of trying to adapt to school in Winnipeg:

Even if you sit [in class] they [the teachers and other students] just keep talking and you're just going to be listening to them nothing [not understanding anything]. And some people make fun of you ya know? Like they make fun of you, like your English, they way you talk. It make me feel bad. Sometime I don't go to class if you're pissed off at someone.

Many of the community worker participants also shared their perspectives about the challenges refugee young people face at school. For example, Sadiiq who also came

to Canada as a refugee expressed his thoughts about the challenges refugee young people have in adapting to the school system:

If you cannot communicate with anybody, then that disconnects you from the rest of society. It became an obstacle for me to do the things I wanted to do even in sport or at school. If a kid cannot understand what is happening in the class then they are more likely to drop out of school.

Echoing some of the same challenges, Hassan who also originally came to Canada as a refugee shared his experience and views in the following manner:

Language was the biggest obstacle. At age 15 they place you in grade 10. In a lot of classes I couldn't talk I didn't have the right language to talk in conversations. Even though I really was motivated to do very well and get a high school diploma, it was very challenging. I quit, I quit after 3 years I dropped out of high school. The school system is not working, kids cannot read. Education is the only system that has the kids 6 hours everyday, and what are they doing with it? Kids often feel they don't belong there, they feel dumb, they feel stupid.

Community worker, Jennifer claimed that from her experience working with refugee youth in after-school homework programs, language comprehension coupled with a lack of attention from teachers at school were both key challenges facing refugee youth. Community worker, Saalim acknowledged the improvements that have been made in the school system over the past few years with regards to meeting the needs of newcomer youth however, he also asserted that more work needs to be done:

So you go to this kid, you bring him here they go to school and then they are placed in an age appropriate class. For example, if you are 15 you go to grade 9 for example and you sit in a class and the teacher will tell you "read this chapter" and as a newcomer kid you're quite embarrassed ya know because you're just looking at the pictures because you can't read anything and you find the whole environment strange.

The issues and challenges these young people faced within the school system proved to be too great for them to handle at the time, and all of them were eventually

expelled from school. For example, Bashir shared how his expulsion from school affected him:

When I got kicked out of high school that's the time when I gave up, I gave up already like in life, to go find a job again or go back to high school.

Ermias also reflected on his life shortly after being expelled from school:

I got kicked out all the time, and then I started selling drugs. People say to you "fuck school man" they give you money, they were buying me everything, and I was happy right? Because I got what I want. So why do I need school for what I want? I need to follow the love for that moment, ya know what I mean? But I didn't know that in the future, that it affects you. If I did I could've made the right choices. In six years I messed up the whole thing, in six years I could've done a lot of good things.

In addition, Okot shared the following with me about his challenges coping with the school system:

In 2003 that's when it started to get really bad at home and I started getting into a lot of trouble at school, they wanted me to do anger-management, then I started getting a lot of detentions, I got a lot of absents, getting into a lot of fights and hanging around. So they were like this guy is skipping all these classes, he has passed sixteen absences. They tried to work things out with me, but I wasn't complying so they ended up saying "well you can't come back to school" They ended up kicking me out.

Emmanuel described the events which eventually led to his expulsion from school. This is what he had to say on the issue:

I tried to be strong, but what I was carrying around with me was more deeper than people wanted to fight me, they would say things to me, ya know, but I would just keep it to myself. It was tough, ya know? I felt all this anger inside of me, sometimes I wouldn't go to school because guys want to fight me, ya know? I live downtown and come to school in St. Vital so I didn't really have much friends in St. Vital, ya know? I had so many fears that I couldn't stand up for myself. I didn't want to ruin things for my Mom and brothers and sister so I let these guys pick on me and do whatever they wanted to. Until I was about 14 I think I was fourteen, with all this anger that I had inside of me from trying to deal with all these bullies I didn't know what to do. My mind just changed and I was like "whatever, I'm going to school and if anybody do anything to me today that's it!"



After beating up one of his bullies, he was suspended from school. However, when he returned to school he found he was now accepted by his peers. He reflected on his new found popularity in the following manner:

All these guys that were like bullying me, and people that were staying away from me were now trying to be my friend, ya know, cause now they were like ðh man you can stand up for yourself, you can fightø So I felt more welcome, ya know? I felt ðhey these guys kinda like me, ya know? So thatø all I had to do was fight, so Iøm gonna do more. So I started getting into so many trouble, and before you know it I started smoking and drinkingóI was fourteen when I started smoking marijuana, ya know? I started skipping school, I didnø care anymore about anything, ya know?

Eventually Emmanuel was expelled for some of the ðactivitiesø he was involved with in school. The expulsion of these youth from school affirms Rossiter and Rossiterø (2009) assertion that as refugee youth face challenges in school including bullying, they may develop violent responses which in the end only compound their original problems.

Feelings of isolation and of not ðfitting inø at school led to a change in behavior among my study participants which ultimately resulted in their expulsion from school. The violent reactions of Okot and Emmanuel to their challenges reflect the assertions of Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) and Sersli et al. (2010) who argue that refugee youth may use violence as a way to cope with various stressors in their lives. Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) note that behavior changes such as these among refugee young people are often misunderstood and dismissed as being troublesome. Indeed, Okot reflected this notion when he described some of his trouble at school as follows:

They seen me more as an issue when I started hanging out with the wrong people [there were] a lot of fights at school. They were not trying to tackleóI donø think they were interested in what was going on with me, they were basically looking at how to prevent this [the fighting] from the school population.

Okot's story draws attention to how he felt devalued by school authorities, who saw him as an "issue", a problem. Further, Hardy and Laszloffy (2005) state that "devaluation occurs when an individual or group's dignity and worth are assaulted or denigrated" (p. 25-26). Drawing on the link between a lack of education and gang involvement among refugee youth, Okot noted that despite their lack of formal education these youth still possess valuable life social skills:

If you imagine if you've been in there [a gang] since you were 9 years old and now you're 18 how much school you have missed. These guys can't read, I know some of my friends who can't read, like literally can't read, ya know? But they know how to count money and get the right things.

Community worker, Hassan spoke further about how troubled youth are devalued within the school system:

We don't value what they already know. Kids that sell drugs have a lot of skills, we often make them dumb, and think they don't bring anything. How can the school system teach, but also validate their skills and experiences? When schools don't value these kids, when they don't value their skills and experiences or care whether they come to class or not, that is the perfect breeding ground for gangs. That's where a lot of these kids met. In gangs they're valued, someone is using their skills.

The statements by both community worker, Hassan and Okot underscore the importance of valuing young people and their various lived experiences regardless if such young people fit into the traditional notion of what it is to be a "good student". Hardy and Laszloffy (2005) have identified "devaluation" as one of four aggravating factors that contribute to youth violence.

Polakow-Suransky's (2000) research on zero-tolerance policies in American schools sheds light on the negative impact of expulsion from school on youth. The author notes that zero-tolerance policies leave youth feeling isolated and doomed with few options for education elsewhere. In fact, Polakow-Suransky (2000) notes that

Perhaps the most disturbing data trend is the sheer number of expelled students who do not receive an education after being removed from school (p. 107). The educational status of the four young people who participated in this research reflects Polakow-Suransky's concerns. Three of the young men never returned to school after their expulsion. The fourth participant only recently received his grade 12 equivalent several years after he was originally expelled from school. This finding underscores MacLeod's (2009) point, that perhaps schools need to reexamine their role in reinforcing social structures and instead change how their systems operate in order to better meet the needs of these young people.

It is clear that the challenges of inappropriate grade placement and inadequate English language resources left my participants feeling isolated and ostracized from their school peers. Further, their violent reactions and subsequent expulsions from school signal a turning point in their lives in which their violent and anti-social behavior intensified resulting in gang involvement. The fact that only one participant eventually completed high school after they were all expelled highlights the powerful affect expulsion from school can have on a young person.

#### **4.3 - Perceptions of the Neighbourhood – “Why do they put us in this area?”- Okot**

All four young people who participated in this study live, or at least were living in the Central Park area of Winnipeg's inner city when they first arrived in Canada. As noted in the literature review when refugee and new-comer families arrive in a new country they are often placed in neighborhoods already submerged in poverty and crime. When speaking of immigrant families in the United States Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-

Orozco (2001) noted that "Immigrant families who survive the violence of their countries and the crossing ironically often find a new form of violence as they settle in their American neighborhoods." All too many immigrant children experience disconcertingly high levels of violence in their new neighborhood and school settings (p. 71). Indeed, as in their experience with the educational system, the participants in this study also described negative experiences and identified forms of violence in their neighborhood.

When asked how well he adapted to his new neighborhood when coming to Canada Bashir responded as follows:

Ah not well cause you have a problem around here [in Central]. First of all people come and fight you, like you can't walk at night time, especially if you're walking alone. I never seen that till I came here. I never got jumped or I never see someone get beat up or something. I seen that when I just moved, I started hanging out around here [Central], I started seeing all that.

Further, Ermias identified a direct link between living in the Central Park area and the trouble he found himself getting into:

At the end I blame the government because they put me in Welcome Place. They say it's "welcome", they tell you "welcome", but that's where the gang territory is right? That's where all the evil things happen, so why would you want to put an immigrant that doesn't know anything, to put him in there and then tell them "welcome".

The government can spend \$20,000-\$30,000 on someone who is locked up like me. Imagine if they spent that money on me, but put me in St. Vital, or Tuxedo when I first came to the country. Put me in the good area, instead of the bad area, ya know what I mean? When you live in a good area, you always learn the good and the bad so you make good choices, you know the consequences. In a good area no one will force you, but if you live in Central you see the same people every day and you're going to have to do something ya know? This guy got shot, this guy got stabbed when your friend gets stabbed you have to do something because you're living in this territory where there's gangs, ya know?

Ermias' tit-for-tat attitude towards the invasive physical violence in his neighborhood and the perception of having no other option but to participate in it, normalizes violence. The

normalization of violence occurs as people become desensitized towards it as a result of continued exposure to it (Byrne and Senehi, 2012; Kanu, 2008). Similarly Emmanuel described how easy it was for him to get involved in criminal activity when his family moved to the Central Park area of Winnipeg:

All I had to do was hang out on the streets and sell product, ya know? I felt like that's all anyone does, ya know, it kind of feels normal when that's all everyone does around you. So that's easy, it drew me, ya know it became a part of me. When we moved to Kennedy there was guys [selling drugs] all over the place and I had nothing to do so I just hung around. I think if we were to come here and they were to put us in a different community that is nice and not influenced by the drugs and crime, we would've turned out differently.

Contrary to the perspectives of these young men that being settled in a different neighborhood would have protected them from being drawn into crime and gang life, community worker, Heather dismissed that point as follows:

That excuse falls flat on its face um'when you look at the demographics now because all of the areas [of Winnipeg] have immigrant and youth gang involvement. None of them are safe places at this point if you want to say there's no gangs or no negative - there's no place like that.

However, a look at the City of Winnipeg's crime statistics website suggests that there may be something to what these young men are saying as the majority of police reported crime in Winnipeg takes place in the Central area where these young men live (The crimestat website, 2013).

It is interesting to note the importance the participants placed on the social environment of their neighborhood with regards to how it influenced their anti-social behavior and negative life choices. All of the young people who participated in this study were settled in the Central area of Winnipeg. Consequently, a comparative study examining the experiences and challenges of young refugees settled in other areas of Winnipeg such as St. Boniface where many French speaking refugees settle may provide

further insight about the role one's neighborhood plays in influencing one's attitudes and behavior.

#### **4.4 - Peer Group** – *“I never had good friends since I came to this country.” – Ermias*

All of the young people who participated in this study stated that when they arrived in Winnipeg they befriended other young people who had also previously come to Winnipeg as refugees. This seemed to be a coping strategy for the participants as they noted the people whom they befriended often spoke their native language and had lived in Canada for a longer period of time and thus were able to show them around the city. The vulnerability and naiveté of the participants also became a common thread as they spoke about their peer relationships. For example, Ermias reflected on his experience with the friends he met:

There's good friends and there's bad friends, I didn't know these people were bad right? All I know is they speak my language, they know the city good, they know more than me. Some people show you the good things, ya know, and some people show you the bad things, but I didn't know they were bad people. They don't tell you it's going to be bad they showed me drugs and money, taught me how the drug game goes. They told me they would help me, give me money, buy me a car and they did, ya know?

Now a community worker, Sadiiq shared a similar experience about finding friends when he first came to Winnipeg as a refugee:

They would give me \$100 just to buy lunch, ya know? They would take me to Footlocker and buy me jeans and shoes, ya know? Buy me MP3, ya know, and then simply tell me that I belong to them, ya know?

The extreme vulnerability, naiveté, and dependence of young refugees when they first come to Winnipeg was underscored by community worker, Heather when she related the story of one young boy on his very first day in Winnipeg:

His cousin who had been here longer and his cousin's friend said 'let's go to this store, so they went to this store and they lifted some stuff, and they told him, 'ya know you don't have to pay for everything here in Canada you just walk out with it' and then they said 'we're going this way, you go that way'. And what happened? He got picked for shoplifting. So he was right away on the radar of police immediately, and from there it went downhill.

Okot was lured into the gang life by the attraction of how much money his friends were earning compared to him. He reflected on the day a friend approached him with the opportunity for some 'work' as follows:

He was like 'hey man why don't you come drive me around for three hours, I'll give you \$250.' And I was like 'what?! Are you serious?!' He was like 'yeah man I just need you to drive me around for a little bit I gotta go bust a couple of chops.' So we all jump in my car and I drive them around and I see like wow his phone is always ringing, he's always talking to people, he's always making money, and I was like wow it's not even like small money, ya know? I think back then people were selling pieces [of crack] for like \$40, ya know, and he was selling like ten or fifteen pieces at a time, times forty that's a lot of money, ya know? And I was like 'wow, this is serious' and he was like 'yeah man, you should come work for us.' At the time I was making like \$8.50/hr, I was making like \$500 after taxes and this guy makes like \$500 in two hours! It was just not making sense to me right, to sit at work all day when I have a vehicle and I can make money with these guys but it was a choice right? It was a choice for me to go and deal cause it didn't make sense to me to work for eight hours and make \$500 every two weeks when I can make \$500 in two hours, it's just a choice.

Emmanuel's experience with his friends also reflects a desire to make money and to be able to provide for himself:

Some were already dealing drugs and making money, having nice shoes, they didn't have to depend on their parents, they all come to school they got money, ya know? For me, my parents, my Mom didn't give me any allowance cause she didn't have any. So I was like 'man, I want some of this' so I just hung around with them to see what they do, and they told me everything, ya know?

The stories shared by both Okot and Emmanuel speak to the desire to fulfill one's basic needs (see Burton, 1993). These stories also highlight what should be a major area of concern for those who work with refugee youth who are new to Winnipeg. That is the importance of teaching these young people the dangers that are around them, how to

identify these dangers, and also the consequences of engaging in certain activities. The desire to make money reflects a need for skills training and employment opportunities, which can provide these young people with decent jobs and a wage large enough to sustain their needs while also providing an alternative to earning money illegally on the street.

#### **4.5 - Challenges in the family** – *“Being with the family is still a problem.” – Bashir*

All four of the young adults who participated in this study identified family conflict as being an important issue in their lives. In-line with what Chekki (2006), Kanu (2008; 2009), Rossiter and Rossiter (2009), Sersli et al. (2010), and Wilkinson (2002) suggest, the conflict in these families seems to stem from the cultural, social, and economic stresses of trying to adapt to new surroundings within a new culture and system of living. In many instances the conflict between parents and children is more pronounced because of the differing speeds at which parents and youth seem to adapt to the new culture.

For example, community worker, Sadiiq reflected upon some of his observations working with refugee families:

The family has a certain way of thinking and certain expectations and if kids don't meet those expectations they are jeered and ya know stigma, and all of this drives kids out of the house and once kids are out of the house, what is next? You're going to be in the streets, and in the streets what are you going to do? So these are some of the challenges which kids we work with today face.

Similarly, community worker, Saalim shared his views on parent ó child dynamics within refugee families in the following way:

Another thing I find is that when the kids come here they catch up with the culture very quickly ya? And the adults are stuck in the old mindset. It's very difficult



because parents overreact. One parent sent their kid to Calgary to stay with the uncle for smoking weed and now the kid is even worse. They overreact and it drives the kids nuts! The kids say ðya know, if you're preventing me from doing this and you're pushing me, then I will do it!ö

Bahir's experience with his parents reflects both the notions of expectations and stigma also noted by community worker, Sadiiq, and he also expresses the same reactionary attitude as observed by community worker, Saalim:

Being with the family is still a problem. When they see you hanging out with someone bad they'll be like ðh you're bad! And inside you, you're not bad right? But because you're hanging out with those guys they think you're bad and so you get mad. And I'll be like ok if I'm bad, even though like you didn't do it, but people are talking like you did, so I'll be ðok, I'm going to go and do it then! Since I dropped from high school everything started changing. As soon as I dropped from high school that means they think you're bad already.

Bashir's attitude of taking on negative behavior because others already perceive him to be bad reinforces McCluskey and Torrance's (2003) argument and Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco's (2001) notion of *Negative Social Mirroring* that as people search for their identity they may adopt the behavior of the negative stereotypes projected upon them by others. Similarly, Okot noted the following in his story:

If you have no one looking after you and people always telling you you're bad, then maybe you will actually go and do something bad even though you weren't originally a bad kid.

There are also many other family dynamics that have affected the behavior and attitude of these young people. For example, Ermias reflected on conflict within his family and the influences that led him away from living at home:

I never stayed at home since I got to know all those people. At the age of 14 I left home. Those people were feeding me, giving me clothes, money, ya know? My older brother would tell me to come home. Me and him had a bad fight, I was so young, but I tried killing him because he was telling me to come home for curfew. Since that day he just said ðlet him do whatever he wantsö, ya know? And I did, and I fucked up.

Cairns (1996) notes that instability within the family can affect the resiliency among war-affected youth.

In addition, Ermias also shared with me how living in a single parent household (his Dad died back in Africa) contributed to his negative behavior:

If my Dad was here, trust me he would lay it down, he would do everything he could to change me, ya know what I mean? My Mom is always busy and she's a lady, ya know what I mean? What can she do? She's always scared if she says no to me I'm going to call the cops, or if she beats me I'm going to call the cops. She doesn't want her kids to be taken away so she has to give what I want, ya know what I mean? Cause the rules is so much she has to play within the rules right? But my Mom did a lot of things for me man. When I was a kid she actually bowed down to me, ya know what I mean? She bowed down and cried to me 'please don't do this son' she cried and cried, and do you know what I did? I walked out when she was crying I walked out. That curse has set me back till right now, ya know what I mean? If I would've listened I wouldn't be in this position right now, ya know what I mean?

Ermias mentions a number of factors within the make-up of his family that negatively affected his behavior. First, he noted that he did not have a father. According to Hyder (2005) 'In some refugee groups it is not uncommon to find that a disproportionate number of households are headed by women' This again has an impact on children, as the emotional impact of living in exile and in isolation, with a lone parent, may well be very difficult to deal with' (p. 35). The observations of community worker, Saalim highlight the implications of growing up in a single-parent family for refugee youth and stresses the importance of a two-parent household for positive development:

Kids who are in gangs, kids who are involved in the justice system are kids whose families have single mothers. Of all the kids I know who have joined the gangs, I don't know of a kid who has both parents here.

Community worker, Heather who works exclusively with new-comer justice involved young people in her program also noted that "the vast majority were from single parent households."

Second, Ermias mentioned how busy his mother always is. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) note that "migration often reduces the amount of time that parents and children spend together. Many immigrant parents (particularly those coming from poorer backgrounds) work several jobs. These and other obligations make them less available" (p. 75). Indeed, Emmanuel whose father was killed in his country's vicious civil war shared with me what it was like growing up with only his mother around:

It was hard. It was hard man for my Mom, ya know, in the new culture, ya know? At times she was working two jobs just to put food on the plate and I was 13 and I would be the one to take care of my little brothers and sister.

Third, Ermias made a reference to the lack of authority his mother had over him simply because she is a female. Community worker, Saalim also identified this gap as an issue which needs to be addressed within families and their communities:

When you are the eldest boy in the family you assume the role of the father ya? And you're the oldest boy in the family, you speak English very quickly, you can't listen to your Mom. You assume for yourself the head of the family and you make decisions for the family and it's very difficult for you to listen and be led by your Mom.

Further, he noted that:

Here there are different role models, parents have less control. Back home if it's a single mother it takes a village to raise a child, all the neighbors, all the uncles ya know? Everybody takes care of the kids, but here if you're a single mother, a poor single mother you have no one else to support you, the only thing is you and your kid who over runs you.

Community worker, Saalim touched on something which Ermias also mentioned when he shared with me his difficulties at home, and the loss of control refugee parents have over

their children when they come to a new country. Moreover, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) note that child disciplining techniques used by immigrant parents which may be acceptable in their country origin may not be acceptable in their new country.

The authors state that:

As parents are frustrated and feel increasingly threatened by the encroachment of new cultural values and behaviors among their children, they often attempt to tighten the reins. But the children, wise to the ways of the new land, may use against their parents the threat of reporting them to state agencies. This further debilitates parental authority (p. 77).

Saalim a community worker, observations regarding discipline within refugee families reflect the above statement of Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) as follows:

Kids at school are told that no one can beat you, they are told to call the police. And the single mother who is so scared of losing her kids the kids say "I'm going to call 911 if you tell me anything, I'm going to come home anytime." And the mother submits to this because of fear.

Community worker, Hassan also shared with me the very same ideas as community worker, Saalim, and added that "we educate the kids, but we don't do anything with the parents." As evidenced by Ermias' story of how he threatened to call the police on his mother, community worker, Heather asserted that for many young refugee boys "their adjustment to the system, if you will, is to take total advantage of it."

Yet another issue with regards to family conflict and its impact on the behavior of young people has to do with how well the parents are adapting to the new culture and their new surroundings and circumstances. For example, community worker, Heather noted that although most of the young people in her program came from single parent families, those families which had both parents "were in serious crisis as a family." In particular, she noted that:

Fathers have lost their status, the fathers are not adjusting well. For a professional to get into their profession here it's very difficult. The father has lost status, who is the son supposed to look up to?

As Suarez-Orozco and Suarez Orozco (2001) also state "parental loss of status in the new society has profound effects on the morale of the parent and hence the child" (p. 76). In fact, Okot identified his father's inability to come to terms with his lowered "status" in Canada as a key factor in creating problems in the home, as well as being a catalyst for him acting out at school, developing bad behavioral patterns, and ultimately getting kicked out of the family home:

It [settlement in Winnipeg] took a toll more on my Dad than on my Mom because my Mom has never drank or used any substance or anything like that to cope. She was so used to chaos happening all the time, and I started seeing more of that happening at home and then at school I started getting into a lot of fights and things like that cause things were not working at home. Now I can look at it from a different point of view, but back then I didn't know things at home can affect kids. My Dad was having culture shock because he's a lawyer by profession and when he came here he expected to be a lawyer and here they were like "no, you have to go back to school." So he had to go back and get his mature diploma and that took a long time and in that process he developed alcoholism and it basically brought a lot of problems at home. It was taking a toll on me and my brothers, there was a lot of fights. In 2003 that's when it got really bad at home and I started getting into a lot of trouble at school.

Garbarino et al. (1991b) note that the capacity of parents to absorb stress is essential in maintaining "reservoirs of resilience" in their youth (p. 380). The authors continue by stating "once that point is exceeded, however, the development of young children deteriorates rapidly and markedly. Reservoirs of resilience become depleted" (p. 380). Indeed, it seems like this was the case in Okot's family.

Community worker, Heather stated that she has proposed programming aimed at fathers trying to cope with the change of a new life in a new country, and that it has been unsuccessful as fathers are reluctant to share their issues with others.

Okot believes that the families and in particular the parents are the key in social intervention aimed at young people:

The big part of prevention is the families have to work, the communities have to work, and the youth have to work together. Obviously you're gonna need social intervention. The way I see it in Canada, social intervention only happens when there's community intervention and community intervention only happens when there's family intervention. So basically, it's outreach. If you have an outreach program that does reach people then there's going to be a ripple effect. So if families reach out to their kids and say, ya know, 'we need help'—African families don't reach out, ya know? It's more like we keep what's happening at home, at home. Educate the parents cause the parents are the gateways to their kids.

Community worker, Heather agreed that there is a culture of silence among families with regards to their own issues at home. However, she also noted that overcoming this silence may be easier said than done:

Gossip is a very poisonous force among the immigrant communities. The mothers are terrified that someone is going to gossip about them if they know what's happening. The gossip isn't just about the boy, it's about how she's a bad mother.

The stigma of being a bad mother is so great in some communities that Heather shared with me that she has seen cases where a single mother has began courting a new potential partner in her life, and when the new partner hears from the community that her children are bad because she is a bad mother, he will back out of the courtship.

Overall, Police Officer Smith stated that parents need to be more involved and aware of what their kids are doing:

Many people would be surprised that their children are involved in African Mafia and this sort of thing. I don't know if they choose to ignore it, if there's so much post traumatic stress that they don't even see it happening, or if it's just that their lifestyle is different. I would never let my 10 year old go out with 17 year old kids. In certain communities everyone all goes together and they all watch each other's children and that's wonderful, that's how it worked there, but here if you're letting your 10 year old go out with a bunch of 17 year olds that kid is going to be involved with drugs.

Perhaps it is true that parents need to be more aware of what their kids are up to, yet in many cases again, this may be easier said than done. This fact is evidenced by the many challenges mentioned above such as: single parenthood, raising several children, children taking advantage of their rights, and parents working several jobs etc. Clearly, there exists a gap where parents and their children are concerned. As some of the participants mentioned, more effort needs to be put into educating the parents. However, the challenge to this as Ermias stated is that “Moms don’t have a lot of time for programs.” In particular, in cases where there are single mothers they are often much too busy trying to take care of their kids, working one or more jobs, and adapting to a new environment. Consequently, any programming needs to be tailored to their specific needs and challenges.

**4.6 - Perceptions in the ethnic community – “They’re discarded, they’re shunned and discarded.” – Community worker, Saalim**

Another theme which emerged throughout the interviews was the issue of the gap which exists between youth who have displayed anti-social behavior and members of their ethnic community in particular community elders and leaders. Okot noted how his community turned their backs on him after he was released from prison and had a deportation order against him:

I asked people from my community, “I need your help” and they were like “no”. No one showed up [to court] – only my Mom and my little brother. The African way is different than the Canadian way right? Canadians will look after their kids, help them get into a clinic where they can get therapy or whatever, ya know treatment. But the African way is like you’re thrown to the lions, ya know like you gotta survive, it’s do or die, throw you in the water you gotta swim or not.

And they were like ðyou survived, there's other kids that got killed, do you see that you're lucky?ö To them it's survival of the fittest.

Community workers, Hassan and Sadiiq recognized this gap and stated that community leaders need to do a better job of working with these youth. In particular, community worker, Sadiiq noted that:

The community itself needs to be educated so that when a kid makes a mistake and joins a gang, he should not be abandoned by the whole community. Like if you're a Somali today and you've been in jail the whole community will be saying ðlook at this criminal kidö ya know? So kids will never feel comfortable you know what I mean? Once you're bad, you're bad.

Moreover, community worker, Heather stated that when her organization went to the leaders of one of the African communities (coincidentally the same community that Okot, and community elder, Abraham hail from) for help in knowing how to address some of the issues with these young people, they only responded by saying that the organization is doing the best that it can and it should keep doing what it is doing.

Community worker, Sadiiq also noted that there is very little in the way of community run or church / mosque run initiatives to reach out to these youth. Where there are ethnically based community centres or programs Okot stated that in his community these organizations are not reaching the youth:

The community has a lot of resources, ya know? They get a lot of grants from the government, they don't invest in that cause they don't see the youth in there, ya know? They talk about the youth, they go to the government and say ðwe need to help our youthö, but when they come to the community centre I've never seen a youth going in there and hanging out with the older people, it's always older people in there. The only time you'd ever see a kid in there is when it's a community event, and even then they stigmatize, they're stuck all the way in the back and all the older people are in the front. When they're talking to the crowd, it's talking to the older people not the young people.

They don't have any programs to help these young people get out of gangs, or even address the issues of gangs and the lack of education they have. The amount of time I've spent talking to you right now, I cannot do that with any of the



leaders in my community. They don't have that much time to spend with me, ya know? So if you don't have enough time to spend with me right now and you say the youth are the future? If I have a chance to expose this community I will, we need to address this!

He continued by stating that the community centre should be open more than just 2-3 times a week, and should include youth programs, and at the very least should be a place where youth can go and grab a sandwich or tea instead of hanging out on the street. The perception of the lack of community support from one's own ethnic group was not just that of Okot, it was also the opinion of Emmanuel who is from a different ethnic group and completely different part of Africa:

In the African community the leaders are 'I dunno I don't think they're very 'I don't want to use the word 'educated' towards this kind of issue, but at the same time they're kind of afraid, ya know? They don't have the boldness to go after youth. They will sit in their offices and only when the kids come in then they will be able to approach them, but when they see the kids out there, ya know, they don't wanna go talk to them. They don't care, ya know, they're just like 'let them be'. And some people look at them kids and they don't even know what they're going through or even though they know a kid is dealing drugs, ya know, you know what he's doing, they don't know why he's doing it. You don't know why he's hanging around these people, ya know? Maybe sometimes he just needs a place to stay away from these people, ya know? He don't feel welcome. Most youth just look at these help centers as just a joke, ya know? They don't get down to the root problem, ya know? Like the cause of why these kids do these things.

When asked about the role of ethnic communities and cultural activities in reaching out to young people, the words of community worker, Hassan reflect some of the challenges and difficulties these communities face:

People that worry about culture are people who already have their basic needs met. When people come here they don't have their basic needs. It's hard man seriously. You're trying to go to school, you're trying to adjust to a new environment, you're trying to work a couple of jobs, you're trying to do so many things. You don't have time to adjust and celebrate. We do not have enough culture, it would be great but we don't.

Abraham, an elder from the same ethnic community as Okot acknowledged some of the struggles young people in his community face such as: stress, trauma, financial struggles, and not fitting in at school. However, he also asserted that the community is trying to reach out to young people, but reiterated some of the same challenges they have in doing so as community worker, Hassan:

People in the community are very busy trying to put together their own lives ó money, family, struggling to find a job. There are no retirees who could do this [run youth programs] because the community who is here is still quite young. All of us are students with families and don't have a lot of time.

Further, community elder, Abraham noted that his community would like to solve its own problems, yet it does not receive the funding despite its efforts to submit many funding applications to local government. He noted the need for more support on the family level as well as for community based initiatives.

The findings from the discussions regarding the ethnic community presented a wide gap in perceptions by the refugee young people when compared to those of community elder, Abraham and community worker, Hassan. There is a clear lack of communication between young people and the leaders of their ethnic communities. In particular, Okot perceived his community as having a lot of resources, which simply did not trickle down to the young people, and who also did not care enough to make time for their young people. In contrast, Abraham an elder from the same ethnic group as Okot had a completely opposite perception stating that the community centre actually does not receive very much funding and that it simply does not have the resources to assist the youth. In addition, he stated that people in the community are themselves busy trying to put their lives together and as a result many do not have the time to run youth programs. In order for newcomers to build cross-generational understanding these two different

perceptions of truth need to be reconciled and this can only happen if the young people engage with their elders or if the elders engage with their young people. Either way, someone needs to make the first move.

Strengthening and building support for ethnic community organizations helps to build social capital for newcomer families and is considered to be a key factor in the immigrant adaptation process (Chekki, 2006, p. 4). Ethnic and cultural organizations not only provide new-comer families with ethno-cultural support already in place, they also provide newcomers with a sense of social and spiritual fulfillment, and a sense of identity, belonging, and pride (Chekki, 2006). In the case of my participants this key support system is clearly not reaching the young people in the community.

**4.7 – Perceptions of Law Enforcement** *“One of the biggest challenges they face now more than ever is discrimination. Like the police discrimination ya know?” – Community worker, Sadiq*

Critical perceptions of the Winnipeg Police Service were expressed by both the young adult participants, as well as the community worker participants. The interviews unveiled a gap in communication and trust between police officers and refugee young people. Ermias pointed to the police as an obstacle for him changing his life into something positive:

The police, when they pull you over you get a fake charge. Because we were associated or related to [name of gang] before, so they think we’re still doing that, but what they don’t know is we’re trying to change man. So who’s trying to do the same thing over and over and over? That’s just dumb. If they would see me right now, if they’d pull me over they would just give me a fake charge they would just make it up! And the judge will believe them because I’ve been associated with [name of gang]. Even if you beat the case, it will still be under your name on your record. The police fucked up my life man, that’s why I hate

this country. I don't want to blame my problems, but they just add it more instead of helping me.

With the youth that he works with, community worker, Hassan has also noticed a similar experience to that shared by Ermias:

When the kids are in the system the police will harass them more and more, and the cops are looking for a reaction from them, to get a charge against them for assault or something. For sure there is racism, for sure there is ignorance, they want them to stay in the system.

Community worker, Saalim also noted the frustration some young people feel from their interactions with police:

There's a lot of racism by the Winnipeg Police Service towards newcomers. The frontline officers are not quite educated on cross-cultural understanding. The police see these kids in groups wearing hoods etc. they think they are doing deals, there is constant harassment. They push them against the wall five times, and the kid is going to be like "what the heck man I'm going to do it, they hate me so what? I'm going to prove it to them that I can do it."

The frustration noted by community worker, Saalim reflects the notion of *Negative Social Mirroring*. Community worker, Sadiiq noted that the way many African young people in Winnipeg dress (wearing hoods and baggy pants) is a reflection of what they see in society and does not mean that they are involved in gangs:

We are dealing with an identity crisis with these kids. They are no longer in Africa, and they cannot relate to white people. The only people they can relate to are other blacks, and the other blacks happen to dress in a certain way, so for them it's a statement. They're saying ya know "I belong to some people, I can relate too."

Okot and Emmanuel claimed that they have been taunted by the police. Okot stated that a police officer once told him "by the time I'm done with you, you'll be lucky if you get to stay in Canada." In addition, Emmanuel's experience with the police also reflected a macho and arrogant tone as he was once told by a police officer that "we are the gang, we own these streets." In other instances community worker, Sadiiq noted that

“police do not talk nice to them, they use the ‘N’ word, sometimes this could be a black police officer, it doesn’t matter, it’s just police in general ya know?” Negative and confrontational attitudes as perceived by these participants reinforces the gap that exists between police officers and refugee young people.

Police Officer Smith also shared a perspective on the gap that exists between the newcomer community and the police:

We know there’s social issues, but we almost go ‘we need to get tougher’ People don’t want to fail, our newcomers aren’t moving here wanting to fail, they’re not coming and saying ‘I want to join a gang, that’s what I want to do.’ So we know there’s social issues and we think there’s huge mistrust with the police and we need to be in my opinion training our communities to take ownership of their community again. I’ve seen many newcomer leaders do this, they say ‘we’re really supportive of the police and we really want to make a difference and build that relationship and we’ll do that when you guys stop pulling over our kids.’ And it’s like, we pull over a lot of kids, it’s our job to watch for things. Many of the parents whether you’re a newcomer or Canadian born and raised, parents just don’t believe the police anymore, they don’t want to believe their kid is a gang member. They don’t want to believe that ya, sometimes we’ve seen your kid do a couple of things and we’ve picked them up a couple of times and you still don’t believe me.

Further, Officer Smith stated that:

I think what we’re lacking is that the community needs to know how to police itself. I don’t mean like making a citizen’s arrest, but just being aware of what your kids are doing. And trusting us that if I say your kid is in African Mafia or if I say your kid is running drugs, trust me. There’s a gap in our justice system, yeah it’s great that you have programs in the youth centre, or in Stony, or in Headingly, but are you getting to the issue of what’s going on? They’re making headway right now in our Aboriginal population by doing just that, by talking about experiences with residential schools and the trickle-down effect from parents. And we need to be doing that with our newcomers, but we don’t know enough about it so now the elders of the community need to step forward. The community needs to back the police and the police need to back the community, otherwise it’s never going to work.

Community worker, Saalim agrees that the whole approach to dealing with some of these young people needs to be changed:

The thing that I find which is very difficult for younger kids is ya know, the justice system. You arrest a kid who is 13 years old, 14 years old who was found selling a joint one day. Maybe that's his first day, maybe that's her first day and you take them to the youth centre where they spend two weeks and they come out graduates. When you come out you are hardcore, you know the deals, you know the language, you know how to do it. And you become full-fledged, nobody has any control over you. Instead of like ok this kid was found selling drugs for the first time, does he have a record? Ok he doesn't have a record, how do we deal with this kid instead of taking him to the justice system ya know? What's the best way to approach?

Community elder, Abraham noted that in his view the police were doing a solid job, but the gap that exists is between youth based organizations and the ethnic communities. He stated the following in his story:

There are programs I don't like, like [name of organization]. Kids that have enrolled with them I haven't seen a child come back rehabilitated. What you are doing is not working, so stop it!! There needs to be more communication between organizations and the community. Kids often fall in and out, there is a need for sustainable growth. You can treat malaria, but if you're sleeping without a mosquito net then the problem will return.

In order to address the gaps which exist between the police and newcomer communities and refugee youth service organizations, an initiative termed *Umoja* meaning 'unity' in Kiswahili has been formed by leaders in the refugee community along with the Winnipeg Police Service to start a dialogue between these three groups. According to the Winnipeg Police Service officer participant at times it has been a struggle to get people from the community to come. However, despite these growing pains *Umoja* has taken some positive steps. For example, community worker, Sadiiq stated that he now does presentations to cadets and new recruits in order to help them gain a better understanding of the various challenges and perspectives of refugee youth in Winnipeg. Further, Officer Smith stated that cadets are now participating in after-school homework and sports programs for refugee youth in order to build trust and

understanding on all sides. For community worker, Saalim this type of relationship building is something he would like to see more of in the local community:

Isn't it better for a police to play with the kids, to play basketball with kids so the kids trust him instead of trusting a gang member? So the role model, the person who the kids trust and look up to is the policeman rather than someone who is on the street. So why can't we do this? The Mayor doesn't get this.

Saalim also noted the Police Citizens Youth Club (PCYC) program model used in Australia where police are heavily involved in running youth programs as something which should be tried out here in Winnipeg. Officer Smith agreed that this type of approach would be a great idea, but there simply just are not enough resources available to create such a program.

Lack of resources is another gap that exists in the area of service provision. Community worker, Jennifer stressed the importance of resources in providing refugee young people with the essential support needed to avoid falling into gangs. However, community-based organizations as well as agencies such as the Winnipeg Police Service can only do so much as their funding allots for them to do. Quite often the bulk of such funding comes from at least one of the various levels of government. However, as community worker, Heather noted:

The government wants to portray itself as a welcoming place for refugees without giving much forethought on what it's like to come from a refugee camp.

Therefore, if agencies, communities, and cities are serious about addressing these issues they must petition the various levels of government to provide more funding to these areas or search for alternative funders. With such a holistic, multi-modal and multi-level approach also comes the responsibility to ensure effective, efficient, and appropriate programming.

#### **4.8 - Key Findings of the Research**

There were several significant findings, which emerged throughout the course of the research. These findings were identified within the various themes of Chapter Four.

Based on the interviews with the participants it was clear that they all had a difficult time adapting to the school system in Winnipeg. The reasons for this difficulty stemmed from grade placement based on age rather than competency, and an inability to communicate with others due to language barriers. These challenges left my participants feeling isolated and made them vulnerable to bullying and gang recruitment. Further, it is clear that the schools were not equipped to meet the unique needs and challenges my study participants faced. These negative experiences at school led these young people to associate with other likewise disenfranchised young people with whom they could relate.

The fact that all these young people were expelled from school for their behavior points to a gap in the school system whereby teachers, schools, and the school divisions are simply not equipped to identify and address the root causes of their negative behavior. The fact that only one of my study participants eventually completed high school many years after being expelled highlights the significant affect expulsion from school can have on a young person's life chances. As well, this fact also suggests that if schools are to truly be a democratic and inclusive place of learning, growth and nurturing for all students, we need to consider other ways of holding them accountable for their actions, while also identifying and addressing the root causes of their negative behavior.

It may be short sighted however, to suggest that expulsion from school alone is the determining factor in a young person continuing down a path of anti-social behavior. All of my participants also lacked essential supports in several other areas. As noted both



in the literature and in the interviews with my participants, refugee young people adapt to their new environment much more rapidly than their parents, which has created conflict and power struggles within the family home.

Through schools refugee young people are made aware of their rights as youth living here in Canada, rights that they may not have been able to exercise in their home countries. Their awareness of the laws has become a particular issue with regards to how parents discipline their children and the authority they hold over them. As evidenced in the literature and interviews, young people are using the threat of calling the police and Child and Family Services (CFS) when threatened with discipline from their parents. The fear of losing their children to the authorities has left parents feeling helpless so that they allow their children to do what they want. The abuse of knowledge on the part of young people coupled with the fear and loss of control the parents are now experiencing identifies a gap in which both refugee parents and young people need to have access to resources, which can inform them of alternative ways to solve conflict within the family.

Further, as noted in the research many of these families are single parent households often headed by the Mom. In many cases mothers do not have a sufficient grasp of the English language. They are also raising several children while working, often more than one job. In short, many mothers are not equipped to nor do they have the time to assist their kids with school homework. This lack of support at home is yet another factor in refugee youth not adapting well to the school system here in Winnipeg and may contribute therefore, to their negative behavior.

The importance of a strong father figure in the lives of refugee young people is another key finding of this research. Both Ermias and community worker Saalim noted

that young male refugees may have difficulty accepting the authority of their mother as the head of the household in the absence of their father. In refugee families who do have fathers present, the fathers often experience a drop in social status as their professional credentials in their country of origin are often not recognized in Canada. Community worker, Heather noted that this loss of status makes it very difficult for young males to look up to their fathers as key mentors in their lives. Further, Okot's experience shows the demoralizing and devastating affect the loss of status can have on a family as his father developed alcoholism as a result of his culture shock. The affect of Okot's father's alcoholism resulted in violence in the family home, which ultimately led to Okot's increased anti-social behavior and gang involvement.

Conflicts within the home whether it is a from a son refusing to accept the authority of his single mother, or the family dysfunction caused by an alcoholic father trying to cope with the loss of social status, are further compounded by the culture of silence and fear of being the victim of gossip noted by both community worker, Heather and Okot. This finding underscores the importance of creating support programs aimed at single mothers, as well as fathers coping with the loss of social status that encourage them to share their experiences and struggles so that they do not suffer through these family conflicts in isolation. However, arranging such programs may be difficult as my participants stated that single mothers do not have the spare time to attend these programs. As well, getting fathers already struggling with their identity and loss of social status to open up to one another about their issues and struggles may also prove to be difficult as noted by community worker, Heather.

The ethnic communities of my participants fell short of providing the necessary support mechanisms needed to ensure the resiliency of these young people. The lack of support from the ethnic community stemmed from three areas. First, as noted in the interviews many potential adult role models in the community including the leaders and the elders are themselves busy with their own families, struggling to make ends meet to secure a future for themselves and their families. Thus, they do not have the time or energy to support these young people when they themselves are also looking for support.

Second, there appears to be a lack of understanding of how to approach and address the negative behavior of these young people. Possibly, this lack of understanding exists because anti-social behavior such as criminal activity, drug use and gang involvement may be new problems and not previously experienced by the community. Moreover, current methods of dealing with these issues are simply not working in this new context, and it is very clear that shunning and/or discarding these young people is not working as a method to correct their behavior. Communities and in particular their leaders and elders need to work with the families and the young people in order to address the root causes of their negative behavior and to prevent gang involvement.

Third, there is a clear lack of communication between refugee young people and the elders in their communities. Community workers, Sadiiq, Saalim, and Hassan all stated that in terms of the discipline and mentoring of young refugee males, the community leaders and the families need to communicate better with their youth and not discard them once they have made a mistake.

Okotø's perception of the elders and leaders in his ethnic community and the work that they do, or do not do for the young people in their community was at odds with what

community elder, Abraham articulated, and also points to a lack of communication between community leaders and the young people. Okot perceived the leaders in his community to be receiving a lot of funding, which was not trickling down to the young people. Abraham on the other hand, stated that the leaders in the community would like to run more programs for the youth, and in fact do not receive adequate funding to do so.

Unable to find the supports they needed at school, in their families, or from their ethnic communities, the participants for this study had no problem finding alternative systems of support in their neighborhoods through street level criminal activity and gang involvement. The importance of geographical location when newcomers are settled in Winnipeg was not lost on my participants. All of the participants recognized that their inner city neighborhood in central Winnipeg is overrun by crime, violence and gangs. This reality made these vulnerable young people easy prey for gang recruitment. My study participants noted that the friends they made from their neighborhood were negative influences on their lives and led them into gang involvement.

Many of the participants thought their lives would have turned out much better if they were settled in more middle class and affluent neighborhoods, where they perceived that the negative influences of crime, drugs, and gangs do not exist. Moreover, the issue of negative friends and the fact that they are preyed upon by gangs underscores the vulnerability of refugee young people when they first arrive in Winnipeg. This vulnerability also highlights the importance of creating early prevention and awareness programs as some of my participants have suggested so that when young refugees arrive in Winnipeg they are aware of the various dangers within their new neighborhoods.

Newly arrived young refugees are particularly vulnerable in cases where they have cousins who have been in Winnipeg longer and who are already gang entrenched.

Another key finding of this study is the negative perception of law enforcement by my participants. Experiences with racism and police harassment have led to a deep mistrust between refugee young people and law enforcement officers. On the other side of this issue it appears that the police would like to see more engagement from community leaders and parents in copolicing their own communities. This gap is being addressed by the *Umoja* initiative, but again, this is a slow process which requires commitment from all sides. The police need to be committed, and parents and community leaders need to take time out of their busy days to attend these meetings. Including educators in these gatherings would also be a positive step towards building a stronger and more understanding community. However, as noted in my interviews this has sometimes been easier said than done. In order to move forward and close the gap, which exists between law enforcement and newcomer communities a solution that meets the needs and fits within the schedules of all concerned parties needs to be discussed.

The reoccurring theme of physical violence experienced by my young male participants in each of the six theme areas presented in this chapter is another key finding. My young male participants discussed witnessing violence in their countries of origin, in their neighborhoods and in their homes in Winnipeg. They also discussed being victims of violence in their homes, in their neighborhoods and at school in Winnipeg. Finally, they spoke about their experiences with participating in violence in their homes, at school and in their neighborhoods in Winnipeg.

The culture of violence these young men grew up in has taught them that violence is normal, and in fact an appropriate way to address problems in their lives. The different areas where these young men experienced violence are interrelated as the experience of Okot provides a good example of this. When Okot experienced violence at home, it led him to respond with violence against other students at school. His violent acts at school ultimately got him expelled. He then found himself in the streets with his gang where he was both a victim and a perpetrator of violence in his neighborhood. Identifying the interconnectedness between these areas where violence occurs is essential to addressing structural violence and getting at the root causes of why a person such as Okot would participate in anti-social behavior. As well, the interconnected areas where violence occurred with my participants mirrors the multiple areas of risk noted by my respondents such as: school, family, neighborhood, and peer group.

#### **4.9 – Conclusion**

Chapter four has presented information gathered during semi-structured interviews with the study participants. In so doing, six key themes emerged in which my respondents noted how the negative experiences and perceptions have contributed to their gang involvement. In particular, areas where support was lacking were identified as school, family, ethnic community, law enforcement. Where positive support systems were lacking, negative support systems based on criminal activity and gang involvement accessed within the neighborhood and through peers attracted these young men. The interviews with these young men, the community workers, the elder, and the police

officer make it clear that more needs to be done in terms of providing necessary supports within schools, families, neighborhoods and ethnic communities.

## Chapter 5 – Walking Away from Gang Life

### 5.1 – Introduction

Chapter five focuses on key themes that emerged during the interview process, which highlight my participants' positive experiences and discusses the pathway out of gang life. This chapter discusses four interviewee themes including: Influences and Role Models; Turning Points; Coping Strategies; and Addressing the Issues. My participants shared their positive experiences and perceptions as well as discussed their difficulty in leaving the gang. Further, my participants shared their points of view about how to address some of the challenges they have dealt with so that young people similar to them do not have to go through the same struggles.

### 5.2 – Influences and Role Models – *“You’re a blind person when you don’t know about life.” – Ermiyas*

Despite the many negative experiences and influences as noted in my study participants' various interactions with school, family, friends, ethnic community and neighborhood, the young people in this study also noted sources of positive influence.

The following statements shared by both Bashir and Okot highlight the positive affect a caring and thoughtful teacher/mentor can have in empowering and influencing young people. With regards to how his shop's class teacher helped him, Bashir shared the following with me:

I thought that I can't do it, like I failed already. Then I made a belt buckle, candle holder, welding, I did all that. Then I think, 'I can do it, it's easy!'

This positive experience sparked an interest in Bashir as he stated that one day he would like to have a profession in mechanics or welding. It is doubtful he would have this same



interest today had his teacher not given him the time and attention that he needed in order to succeed. Similarly, Okot shared with me the impact a soccer coach had on his life as follows:

My teacher did actually try and reach out to me, and they put me in this after-school soccer program. And that worked for a bit cause I ended up winning two championships back-to-back. That was in 2001 ó 2002, but in 2003 things started getting really bad at home and I started getting into a lot of trouble.

Although his success in soccer was not enough to quell the storm of his family problems, knowing that his involvement in the soccer program provided at least some positive experience is important to note. The role of positive mentors and role models is something teachers and community workers can use to build on in providing these young people with more constructive experiences in their lives.

Community worker, Saalim identified school sports as a key area to empower youth who are struggling in school:

These kids are very good at soccer when they come here. So instead of using soccer to empower them, you introduce them to basketball, and hockey, and football which they don't know and they suck at it, and they find ya know -I can't do anything- and they become so helpless. So instead of doing that, why can't the schools use soccer to empower these kids? When they are able to do soccer and they do very well, they feel empowered and can easily be introduced to other things.

The importance of having an engaged teacher who is interested in supporting a young person's interests and in encouraging his/her talents in order to build success was also noted by community worker, Sadiiq who shared his experience as follows:

There were days when I would say 'fuck school, I'm going to find a job', but finding a job was hard and it made it easier for the gangs. They would say 'nobody is employing you, you don't speak the language, street language is easier to learn you don't need grammar, no school needed, you'll be good at it, you're a tough guy, you're a clever guy just do this little bit for us every day.' Then I would say 'fine I'll do it', but then the next day I would say 'no, I cannot do it', and then I would say 'yes, I can do it, no I cannot.'

Then I became friends with one of the teachers at school and he kind of helped me. I don't think he understands what he was doing, the impact of what he has done. He connected my childhood and where I am now. He emphasized that I should be proud of who I am and look forward, and move forward, ya know? So that made me realize that I can't go this road [gang life], this road does not reflect my challenges. Then after that I started thinking what I can do, ya know, rather than just looking after myself. Then I started doing documentaries about the challenges of people. Just out of that conversation came finding out what you're good at, ya know? And then I knew that I am good at writing stuff, so I started writing and once I wrote this stuff then I talked to the teacher about it and he thought that was an amazing project. And I said I can make a film, and he said yes and then that helped me to stay out of gangs literally, ya know? I was able to kind of manipulate what was happening in the gang life into the film, ya know?

The experiences stated above highlight the great influence and positive affect a teacher can have on a young vulnerable person's life. As noted earlier, schools have our young people for five days a week and six hours a day. Within the time spent at school rests an enormous responsibility and an equally great opportunity to engage these young people constructively in a, caring, and interested way.

Community organizations that run youth programs also have a great opportunity to reach out to vulnerable refugee young people. For example, Bashir explained how one organization's program helped to wean him away from the gang culture:

[That program] helped me. Volunteering with the kids in the hip-hop program doing music, playing soccer and basketball. Hip-hop makes me feel fun, doing performances for the kids, in rapping you don't have to talk about gangs or anything, that's what I like about it. It's fun, you write your stuff and perform it, it just makes me feel happy. Sometimes I write about my friends, I talk about Africa, the war in Africa.

However, Bashir noted that since returning from a stint in Alberta he has not been motivated to rejoin the program.

Ermias also shared his experience of being in a program specifically aimed at refugee youth at-risk of joining street gangs:

I would go that program, they chose me cause they knew I was going in a bad way. That program told us a lot. They would show us videos of how gang members get killed or deported, and everything that was happening in that video is happening to me right now. As I speak tomorrow is my court date and I might get deported. What are you gonna do once a week? The programs should be everyday, cause on the outside [in the street] I'm learning a lot. When you don't have a lot of people in your life to help you it's sad man. My life got corrupted for me not knowing.

The infrequency of available programming that Ermias refers to for vulnerable young refugees such as himself is very significant in that, when the pull of the street is so strong, it seems unlikely that a "once a week" program will have a lasting effect.

Although the positive experiences shared above did not ultimately prevent the participants from joining a gang, they nonetheless provided a glimmer of hope of what could be achieved with more case appropriate and targeted resources that bring together family, school and community. However, according to community worker, Jennifer, there simply are not enough resources in place to address all the issues these young people face. Again, this is most likely related to a lack of funding and positive role model volunteers for such programs.

Okot spoke about just how major an influence life in the street can be in the absence of effective and available programming:

They're just so used to like having nothing, It's not a surprise that they want to hang on to the only thing that they have. That's what the government doesn't understand. "Oh these kids are always bad, these kids are this etc." But in order for you to get these kids off the street, which is the only thing they have to survive, the only thing they're good, at ya know? They've solidified themselves, I have a future in this, they see that. I'm a boss now, I got money, I got a life, I got a house, I got my kids taken care of, ya know? Like they don't think like of how you guys would think of them. They're thinking of securing their future, ya know? I'm gonna get \$250,000 out of this and start a business, keep this thing going on the side, start a music label, whatever. Like they want a way out, ya know? But there's no way out to them, there's nobody reaching out. So the only thing is going to be like well nobody reached out to me what am I going to do? I'm going to keep doing the same thing. I'm making money this way for sure, I

wake up every day my phone is ringing, I got people bringing me money, why would I stop that? What do you got for me to change? All you want me to do is do you, do what you say, but you don't have a substitute for me. That's what I found really hard for me when I was changing. I didn't have a way out, all I heard was people telling me 'you're a bad kid, you need to get out of this, you're messed up,' but they didn't tell me how.

Similarly, Bashir also spoke about the difficulties in leaving the street life behind and the need to find an alternative way of living:

When I sit by myself I'm like 'oh I need to go to school, find a job, make myself leave from here,' ya know, try and move on. But every time you try to do that there's something that blocks you, ya know? Something stops you. I don't know what to say about this, cause I have a lot of struggles. Sometimes I think 'what am I doing?' I never used to be like this so I try and move on. But you know, you don't know where to start from right? But you need to find something to move on with, if you don't find something to move on, you're not going to move on.

Reflecting on what can be done to motivate youth to leave gangs community worker, Sadiiq noted the following:

I think employment is number one. If we have more employment for these kids they would be more than happy to come clean and work. But when a kid makes a mistake and he gets a criminal record—forget it! How can he find a job with a criminal record? So once he makes that mistake they're like 'forget it, I'm not coming back!'

Echoing the sentiment that employment opportunities are needed, and effective programming is essential in saving a young person's life, Ermias spoke about a job placement program he was once involved in. This is what he had to say:

Those people told me they would get me a job and help me. And they got me a job and I worked a full two years, I was working straight. I forgot about everything, ya know? I was doing good, going to school, going to work. That program helped me cause they got me a job. Then the program got cut, everything got cut, my life went down. I started putting myself down. I was doing good for 2 years, I was trying to go to work, I was trying to go to school and in the end I ended up losing everything, ya know? After that I stayed at home for a year and a half doing nothing and my Mom was always telling me 'go get a job, go get a job' ya know what I mean? And then the same people I met on my first day came to me and said 'let's go do this' and I did, I made the wrong

choice. I went back to selling drugs for another 2 years and I got caught and now I'm facing the consequences. Now it's like they want to deport me. They're trying to give me 22 months and then I'd have to do immigration time. I can't keep saying "I made a mistake" but I don't know what else to say to them. If my Mom found out I was getting deported she would have a heart attack, ya know what I mean? If that program would've continued until today I would have been myself, ya know what I mean? But for some reason they cut the program and I don't know why. When they cut the program, they cut my life too, they cut a lot of people's lives, a lot of people got locked up after that.

However, even in spite of available programming and a desire to leave the gang life behind, Okot explained that it can often be easier said than done:

Some get recruited when they are really young, like those who I told you about who got into the game when they were 9 and now they're like 18, 19. Some bring their younger cousins and those kids have a harder time getting out cause the game works like if I brought you in then you're loyal to me, ya know? 'til the end. These kids will always be loyal cause like when I had nothing you were there for me, ya know? I had nothing, I didn't have a home, I didn't have food, you gave me like all these nice clothes all these nice shoes, you gave me a place to sleep, you gave me money in my pocket, ya know? You showed me how to get money. I was staying with you, ya know? So you gave me all these things when I didn't have anything, and then when I got to a point where I could sustain myself all you wanted me to do was continue to push for you, ya know? To stay connected to you, stay loyal. So how you gonna break that, ya know?

What he is raising here is a desire to belong, to have someone look after him, and to have his basic needs met. If nine year old children feel more looked after in a gang than they do with their own family or community then we as a society have failed them.

Okot shared his own story with me highlighting the difficulties of leaving his gang:

I had a weapon I would keep around. They literally tried to kill me a couple of times. They came to my house like five or six guys and they tried to like they did try like two or three times at least to try and really get rid of me. They were like paranoid right? Like this guy is up there, he knows stuff, he might try and snitch on us. But that's not the point, I'm trying to do this for me, I'm trying to clean myself up right? But to them, they're like "no we don't need to lose another member, we need you to stay" they'd try and force me to stay. But there's no way around it, I can't hide. I realized that if I want to get things accomplished I have to go out, and whatever happens, happens. I went from carrying a weapon to

like I put it away, I buried it. I was like forget this, I'm not going to walk around scared. I'm going to show myself that I'm not afraid and I'm going to show them that I'm not afraid. For these guys they go by respect right? They jumped me a couple of times, but after a while that all stopped.

Emmanuel also noted the strong expectations of remaining loyal as even after he moved away from Winnipeg to a rural town to get away from gang life, the gang threatened him with violence if he did not continue to purchase drugs from them to sell. As a result of this threat Emmanuel was lured back into the gang where he continued to sell drugs for them in his new town until he was eventually arrested and sent to prison. Emmanuel reflected on this experience in the following way:

At that point though I had been through so much, like being out here [in the rural town] and seeing how things were going. I was kind of pulling myself away from it slowly, but it wasn't working. I didn't know anything to do man.

These experiences signal the need for effective supports that empower young people to leave gangs in a manner which protects their personal safety. In some cases this may mean confidential relocation to a safe house with the necessary resources to ensure a successful transition for that young person.

There is a battle for the lives of these young people between the lure of gang life and the positive influences of mentors and appropriate programming and services. Targeted programming, which is relevant to the lives of these young people can work if it is persistent and sustained. It is quite clear that the pull of life on the streets is powerful, and thus the frequency of available mentors and accessible programming needs to increase and be sustained in order for these young people to make positive and healthy lifestyle choices. In particular, schools and community organizations have an important role to play in nurturing a culture of belonging, positivity, and healthy relationships.

**5.3 – Turning Points** – *“Going to jail was a real eye opening moment for me.”* – Emmanuel

All of the young adult participants shared with me their ah-ha moments in turning their lives around. Not surprisingly, all of them noted a significant life event, or a series of significant events that ultimately led to their decision to leave gang life and gang association behind. For example, Bashir was reluctant to go into detail with regards to the impetus that influenced him wanting to change his life, but he did make reference to a violent incident in his neighborhood, which affected him deeply. For Ermias it was the threat of being deported unless he cleaned up his act that became his wake up call. Further, Okot also noted that it was a series of life events that influenced his decision to turn his life around:

The sheer reason for me to change was like I came to terms with myself. I understood that when I got out of prison things were way different, it was a larger group, there were weapons, there were guns, bigger number of people and you can get killed over something and I realized I didn't want to be a part of that. For me to stay on top I would have to be more ruthless, and I would have to basically erase some people and I didn't want to be involved with that. I knew these guys were serious cause some people lost friends, like people got killed. I realized that in order to stay on top it's not that I can't, it's just that I chose not to like I had people that followed me and said that "I can do this for you, ya know?" I still knew people who could connect me with a large amount of coke, extacy, ya know, heroine whatever I need, ya know, weapons, it was not hard. I remember I used to buy like weapons for like \$75 for protection like kids would just have hand guns like it was no problem. I realized that if I wanted to stay like that, I would have to become more like that, and I knew I wasn't going to be like that.

Although he maintained a connection to his peers in the gang and still struggled with addiction, Okot slowly began to turn his life around by gaining legitimate employment, returning to high school, and seeking addictions treatment and therapy where he credits a really good counselor for helping him move through some of his issues. However, in 2009 a friend of his was murdered as a result of gang violence, and it was at this friend's

funeral where he finally realized he needed to end his relationship with the other guys in the gang:

In the eulogy one of my elders he was saying "you guys need to stop fighting. At home we came from a war country and we don't need to be killing each other here." To me that really got to me, like the message. I tried to advocate that, but the guys weren't hearing it, and they were like "fuck that." And I realized that I needed to completely cut my relationship with these guys, so I started slowly moving away.

The turning point for Emmanuel came while he was incarcerated and he had an epiphany:

Going to jail was a real eye opening moment for me. Cause with everything I did I never went to jail when I was a juvenile. That really got to me, it wasn't anything like people said, ya know? You got homies that will go out from behind bars and they'll come out feeling like "yo man I'm fresh out the box", ya know man, feeling like they have some power, ya know right? But when I went in there man, it was messing with my mind man, I was like man this is not for you. The whole time in jail, ya know you can't be yourself. I mean you may have homies in there, but you can't be free, you miss outside, ya know? I had time to think while I was in there and I had a few people that I would call to talk to them to give me advice about what to do after I got out, cause at the time I realized most of the friends I had weren't really friends at all, ya know? And I was like man, what the heck, ya know? These guys don't really care about me. Yeah man, I was in jail when I decided to change my life bro. I was there and I wanted to change, but I didn't know how. So my uncle he's actually a pastor right, so he was at a meeting and he heard about this faith-based discipleship program called [name of program] and he thought it would be good for me to change or to change my life. So he told me if I promise to go to this program then and only then he would help bail me out.

The fact that Emmanuel was in prison and wanted to change his life yet did not know how to, highlights a gap in services and supports also noted by Okot:

They don't have that [programs], they still don't have it. There's some people doing it independently trying to reach out to these kids, but no one really visits them or no one goes to jail and holds a group seminar for them and tells them of the options that they can do.

Emmanuel's experience immediately following his release from prison underscores the need for appropriate and effective programming for offenders while they



are incarcerated and highlights the pull of gang life. Emmanuel shared the following story with me regarding his release from prison:

When I came back out, two days later man I had a pocket full of crack and I had a phone. I hadn't been out of jail for like a week, ya know and we been chased like three times by the police, ya know? Once we got chased, there were three of us and we all split and I found myself just hiding behind this van, ya know and I had a clip [from a gun] in my pocket, I had money in my pocket, and I had a crack stash beside me, ya know? And I was thinking to myself 'man, you remember when you were in jail and you said you were going to do anything not to come back? And now you're going to go back guaranteed! Ya know, you're going back!!' And I had all these conditions that I was breaching so I was freaked out, ya know, that I was going to back to jail. So, I just went home that night and I told my auntie who I was staying with 'let's do this [name of program] thing.'

Cassell and Weinrath's (2011) research reflects the experience of Emmanuel. In their study of justice involved gang members seeking to exit their perspective gangs, the authors found that the in-and-out process of gang-exit can take from six months to five years. Their study also found that half of their participants returned to their gangs after originally exiting them.

The push and pull of being involved in street life or gang life is evident in the stories shared by these participants. Moreover, the lure and trap of gang life also underscores the importance of sustained and targeted programming, which as the participants shared with me, was a positive influence on their lives when it was available to them. Further, Okot and Emmanuel both identified a lack of programming and available resources for young adults coming out of incarceration. Where such programming and resources do not exist at all they are obviously essential in providing incarcerated young people with options and opportunities to turn their lives around. Where such programming and resources do exist, perhaps the incarcerated young people

need to be made more aware of potential programs and opportunities that they can access and which can provide them with a constructive way out.

**5.4 - Coping Strategies** – *“If you’re ever going to get clean you have to have some way of coping.” - Okot*

Deciding to turn one’s life around is one thing, but actually being able to sustain a healthy transition requires an ability to cope with that change. For many people the idea of physically moving away to another province or town to escape the negative influences in their lives seems like a popular idea. However, simply removing oneself geographically does not necessarily address the host of other issues, which may be negatively affecting one’s behavior in the first place. As Emmanuel noted earlier, escaping negative influences is not as easy as simply moving away. As well, community worker, Saalim pointed out that parents often overreact by sending their children to live with relatives in another location only to find that the problem intensifies. For example, Okot who himself moved to Alberta for a while to escape the negative influences he was experiencing in Winnipeg shared with me the following in his story:

There’s like four or five groups [gangs] in Alberta, that have all left from here, ya know? They went from here to there to break away from the violence, to break away from the conflicts that were occurring. So they grew a lot more, like they have a major problem out in Alberta right now with these guys. They’re probably a bigger number out there now then there is here.

Bashir also moved to Alberta in search of finding a good job and cleaning up his life only to find that it wasn’t what he expected:

When I moved from here I thought that I would be better too. After I got kicked out of school I wasn’t doing anything here. But the job there is not even doing nothing so I need to go back to school. I’m still struggling about it, I just want to

finish my high school and get a better job. That's how you move on. Yeah, I want to finish my school first.

Moving away to escape one's problems is not the only strategy for coping. Both Ermias and Okot stressed the importance of keeping themselves busy with different activities. For example, Ermias shared the following with me:

I'm working hard man, I don't even care about my health anymore. I'm working everyday and I'm trying to go back to school.

Similarly when Okot realized that it was time for him to turn his life around this is what he had to say:

I made myself really busy, ya know, full-time classes, working, seeing my son, playing basketball doing healthy activities. I just filled my time cause I knew if I didn't fill my time I was going to be there [in the street]. I went to a lot of AA meetings, I remember I used to go to like 5 AA meetings a week! (said with laughter) Trust me, some of these guys may want to be a kingpin, but they know what comes with it, and they don't want to be in this game a long, if they get a chance to get out a lot of them are like "man I just want to get out, but I don't know how, I'm going to make this money and that's it cause that's what I know from now until something else comes up." But I try and tell them, nothing is going to come up, you have to make it for yourself.

It all works hand-in-hand, ya know? If you're ever going to get clean you have to have some way of coping. Like a lot of them cannot deal with their problems, the only way is they get high all day. Even to take one course or two courses that's ok. If they have some kind of structure that little success that they have when they go home, they can build on that, ya know?

Like Ermias and Okot, community worker, Hassan also stated that after he dropped out of high school, he too kept himself very busy with work and activities at his local mosque in order to avoid getting himself into trouble, "I got involved in activities at the mosque, that was one of the things that saved me."

All of the young adult male study participants are members of ethnic communities where religion, culture, and tradition are all deeply intertwined. It is interesting therefore, that only one of these young men noted a renewed connection with his faith as the

cornerstone to helping him cope with life after leaving the gang. Emmanuel shared the journey and importance of his faith in turning his life around:

I went to [name of faith based program] with the intention of not going to jail. So I went down there with the wrong intention, but uhóthings changed. One of my mentors he told me òya know youøve been doing things by yourself the whole time and you see where it led to, ya know, and it didnø end up good. And now, ya know if the road youøre on isnø working in life why donø you try something different, ya know? Why donø you give God a chance, ya know?ö And I came to the point where I thought òyeah Iøll give God a tryö, ya know? And during that time I had a real eye opening moment, ya know, I had a different desire in me.

Further, he shared with me the importance of having positive people in his life:

The number one thing for me is accountability, ya know, having people that will hold you accountable. Real people to speak into your life to tell you like, òya know what youøre doing is wrong.ö Wise people. And staying away from things that are bad for me. Like for me the club is not my style anymore cause I used to struggle with drinking and getting high. I try to keep around me people that lift me up, that encourage me, ya know, that want the best for me, staying with the church, volunteering here and there. So for me Iøve decided that if somethingø not working for me, if itø not beneficial for me then Iøm not going to be there, cause that is my time.

The act of turning to faith and religion as a coping strategy in ethnopolitical conflict is an area of research which Cairns (1996) states deserves more research attention and could also be researched further within the context of gangs.

The notion of escaping a problem by moving away as three of the participants have tried, clearly does not work in and of itself, and as Okot noted has in fact spread the problem of gangs in Winnipeg into parts of Alberta. Filling the void of gang life is essential for a successful transition. The examples of Emmanuel and Okot show how filling oneø life with positive influences can be an effective way of staying away from gangs. Young people need access to programs, employment opportunities, positive mentors and activities to live a safe and productive life.

**5.5 – Addressing The Issues** – *“We need to educate them with this knowledge of what’s ahead of them.” – Emmanuel*

Throughout the course of their interviews the participants often shared their own thoughts about how to best address issues facing refugee young people. For example, Ermias stated that Winnipeg needs more cops on the street, more programs for immigrants. He continued by stressing that:

The main thing is programs to keep them out of trouble so they don’t get to the bad people and do bad things, ya know what I mean? Once you’re busy in the program you’re not going to care about those other things you’ll forget about those other people, ya know what I mean, more programs on how to get a job.

For Emmanuel the focus was on early prevention:

First, we already know what’s going on and we got to recognize that and get that over with and come up with something where we can catch them early when they first come. We need to educate them with this knowledge of what’s ahead of them. What’s there, ya know? Not just wait when they’re already thinking about it and seeing it and wondering, ya know? If they’re trying to make that decision by themselves before you come sometimes it’s too late. So educate them before that and then have a plan to help them keep moving forward or to remind them just in case they’re falling back or considering of going into that lifestyle, ya know, straight forward showing them the consequences. Have people like me come up and talk to them, ya know? And share stories, and show them the opportunities that they have, ya know? Sometimes we need to remind people of where they come from and if they want a better life they have to work for it. I had nothing like that.

Okot noted that it was critical to show youth the potential consequences of gang life:

You got to educate these kids about the stats, they see their friends dying, ya know, they see people going to jail, but they don’t know why that happens, ya know? If you show them the real stats like “ya know, you guys by the time you’re 17 or 18 you’re either in jail or you’re dead, and if you stay in school by that time you’ll be in university.” All of them all they want to do is sustain their lives ya know?

Okot also stressed the importance of addressing mental health issues among refugee young people:

I think right now the main thing is like people here, like the society don't understand the amount of trauma these kids have. Like they have a lot of trauma first of all from back home. I remember one of these kids [who said] 'I used to walk around with grenades packed in my bag and he said he was 9 years old. Some people were child soldiers so that trauma plus the trauma in the street, ya know? Like you don't understand the amount of trauma of seeing your friend get killed in the street and people who used to be your friend are your enemy now and you coming out having no safety from nobody cause everybody knows you and they know where you are, so you're living a real messed up life, ya know? So you're always in fear—not in fear basically, but in a 'I got to protect myself' kind of mentality and I still have to survive. On top of that the police are looking for me, I could get locked up at any time, my community hates me, my parents don't accept me, and I can't even go see my kids cause I'm paranoid I'm being followed, that's how it was for me.

So the first thing is to have a rehabilitation program for them, like therapy, they need to have group therapy, not just like therapy, group therapy because this first of all works in numbers because these kids hang out with each other, and you know they do activities together. They might be all five of them hanging out on the corner, but all five of them is experiencing different things, ya know? So you need to look into that, ya know, their states of trauma. Cause if they feel good about themselves, they feel good about what they're doing, and they feel good about having a good future, or they're hopeful, then they got a good chance at rehabilitation. The second thing is they need to have substitute options for them to have a lifestyle, that's what I had to do, find work, and had to find a life.

The need to address trauma related to violence among young refugees highlights a gap in service delivery. All of the four young male adult participants in this study have experienced physical violence in some way or another. Two of the participants shared with me they had experienced violence during war. Two had experienced violence within their homes. All four had witnessed violence in their neighborhoods in Winnipeg. All four had close friends in Winnipeg murdered as a result of gang violence. All four were victims of violence; two were admitted to hospital to treat their injuries, while three of them shared that they have also been perpetrators of violence and have spent time behind bars. Yet, none of the participants shared that they have ever been approached for or participated in any kind of therapy, which might have assisted them in coping with

whatever trauma related issues they may have. Okot noted that he has gone to counseling for his addiction issues.

Okot also noted deep structural issues that need to be addressed within the family:

This is the problem, families don't read. They have a lot harder time cause their kids are outside they're exposed to all these elements, but you the mother's illiterate, that father is illiterate, they don't have an uncle here, they don't have a Dad here, and guess what? What is happening is, ya know 'I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do, my kids are getting in trouble.' If you were to teach them, if you were to teach the parents, then when the kids come home 'ok listen, I don't know who your friends are, I'm not telling you not to hang out with them, but instead of hanging out with your friends all the time I want you to bring them here let them speak to me, I want to know your friends so I can bring you guys cake here, I can bring you food and I want to show you that I want to see your friends.'

So educate the parents to prevent the kids from getting in trouble. Parents can also bring up issues with the kids, start using 'I' statements, like 'I have a problem with you guys being mad at me', 'I have trouble reading', 'I have trouble in school.' Kids can say that, and the family can say 'ok I need you to start being at home on time', 'I need you to put up your grades.' Then people would understand each other. When the family knows what's going on at home, they can take that out front and go to the community, we can recognize problems sooner, elders can make programs to address problems in the community. But they don't do that, they just complain and say 'our kids are in trouble', but they're not countering that. In my opinion they're failing us big time!

What Okot is raising here directly correlates with much of what was shared by the participants with regards to the various frustrations and struggles the participants recognized within their families and with community elders. Further, identifying these struggles speaks to some of the gaps which exist between the child, parents, ethnic community and police as discussed earlier in this thesis.

The reality of the involvement of young refugees in gangs in Winnipeg is a multilayered issue, which requires a multi-track conflict intervention. The calls for early prevention programs for newly arrived refugees by my participants could go a long way in preparing and educating these young people about the dangers of gangs and the

potential consequences of gang involvement, as well as providing information about education and employment opportunities. As well, access to counseling and trauma healing for these young people and their families could go a long way toward healing and addressing the root causes of anti-social behavior. Further, Okot's idea of encouraging parents and their children to communicate better with one another will also serve to strengthen the bonds within families. More open communication between family members would also equip families to be better able to identify and express their concerns and worries. Confronting family issues and ensuring a stable, understanding family environment may be the foundation upon which refugee young people will also be able to thrive at school, in their neighborhoods and in their ethnic communities.

## **5.6 – Key Findings of the Research**

All of the participants identified positive life experiences that affected their lives. Although these experiences were not enough in and of themselves to pull my participants away from gangs, they nonetheless tell us something very important. That is, when and where programs were available, and when these young people had a positive mentor taking an interest in their lives, the young people in this study responded positively to this interaction and engagement. As many of the participants pointed to a lack of sustained programming, this positive reaction to available programming highlights the need for more available and sustained programming along-side committed mentors to walk beside such young people.

The pressure to remain loyal to the gang as noted by Okot and Emmanuel is another key finding of this research. After both of these participants had made decisions



to leave their gang they faced the threat of violence if they did not remain loyal to the gang's colors. As a result of this pressure, leaving the gang and severing ties with their friends was a process which took time. Both Okot and Emmanuel remained connected to their gang even after they had decided to leave the gang. Emmanuel's back and forth experience of trying to leave the gang speaks to the push and pull process of leaving a gang forever.

The significant life events that were ultimately the final motivating factors for my participants to turn their lives around are also key findings of this research. For Bashir and Okot seemed to have reached their capacity for the culture of violence inherent in gangs. Bashir noted for example, a violent incident in his neighborhood, which was the catalyst for him to change. Okot stated that once he was released from prison he knew he would have to kill some people in order to stay on top and he was not prepared to do that. The final push for Okot to leave his gang was the gang-related murder of one of his friends.

Where Bashir and Okot's turning points reflected their lack of capacity to continue violent activities, Ermais and Emmanuel's major life changing events reflected their experience with the justice system. For Ermias, the potential to be deported was enough for him to decide to turn his life around. Similarly, Emmanuel's time spent behind bars was an awakening moment for him and it was during this time that he realized he no longer wanted to participate in gang activity.

Another key finding as noted by my participants was the perceived lack of resources and services available to them while they were incarcerated that could empower them to make positive life choices. Having various positive options and

support mechanisms available to them could assist these young men in having a successful transition back into society.

Similar to my participants who attributed much of the negative influences in their lives to the geographical neighborhood in which they were settled upon arriving in Winnipeg, so too have the parents of some of these young people also articulated this negative experience. Both the former gang member participants and the community worker participants noted how families often relocate their misbehaving youth to live with relatives in Alberta. As acknowledged in the interviews, this so called punitive act has resulted in the spread of Winnipeg based gangs such as the African Mafia into parts of Alberta. The idea of relocation seems to be short sighted and clearly does not address the root causes of why these young people are acting out in the manner in which they are behaving. Although relocation can be a good and sometimes necessary step to safely assist in transitioning someone out of a gang, without the required support mechanisms in place relocation at least as far as this study shows, does not necessarily lead to a positive turn around for young people involved in antisocial behavior and gangs.

I recently attended a conference in Toronto at York University's Centre for Refugee Studies where a Somali community worker from Kitchner, Ontario shared with me that he is now seeing families move their youth from parts of Alberta to Kitchner due to the increase of violence associated with their children. Sadly, he stated that moving youth from Alberta to Kitchner has also resulted in an increase of violence in Kitchner. Thus, we are now seeing families move their youth from Winnipeg to Alberta to Kitchner all in the name of escaping gang violence. This reality should be setting off alarm bells for those concerned with the plight of refugee youth in this country as the spread of

violence from one city to the next continues. Clearly moving from one city to the next does not address the root causes of youth violence and if we as a community do not move to address issues of trauma, isolation, addiction, unemployment and poverty for example, refugee youth violence in this country will only continue to rise.

Due to the multiple stress factors contributing to their antisocial behavior, a multi-track approach is also needed where programming is concerned. Having a community sports program is good, yet if issues of family violence, trauma, unemployment, and addictions are also not addressed, it is unlikely that the sports program in and of itself will be enough to pull a young person away from antisocial behavior and gang involvement. In fact, as noted in my interviews, identifying the multiple levels of trauma associated with being a war-affected refugee, and a resident of a low-income, high crime, high violence and gang ridden neighborhood is necessary in addressing the root causes of this violent and negative behavior.

## **5.7 - Conclusion**

When these young men received programming, it proved to be a positive experience. Therefore, more resources need to be put into creating and sustaining long-term programs which not only provide these young people with recreational and employment opportunities, they should also address the root causes of their behavior. This means programs also need to include a focus on healing familial wounds, and bridging generational gaps, addressing trauma and addictions, and also training and equipping schools with the necessary resources and tools needed to meet the unique needs of refugee young people living in Winnipeg

## **Chapter 6 – Finding a Way Forward**

### **6.1 - Introduction**

It is clear from the findings of this study that refugee young people face numerous challenges on a daily basis in areas such as: school, neighborhood, peer group, family, ethnic community and law enforcement. Each of these areas comes with its own set of unique issues, which need to be addressed in an appropriate fashion.

### **6.2 – Reflecting on Key Findings**

With regards to challenges in school such as inappropriate grade placement and language barriers, it is clear that at the time my participants were attending school, the schools were not equipped to address their unique needs and challenges. As noted in the literature review, teachers should be equipped with the appropriate training and resources needed to more effectively meet the needs of refugee youth, and to better understand potential anti-social behavioral patterns (Kanu, 2008, 2009; Rossiter & Rossiter, 2009; Sersli et al., 2010; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). However, it is important to note that efforts are currently being made to address these gaps. The work of Jan Stewart (2011) is important in this regard, as listening to the voices of refugee young people who are in the Winnipeg school system is essential for developing the appropriate actions needed to address their unique issues, challenges and concerns within their Winnipeg school experience.

The notion of discipline within schools with regards to the expulsion of all four young adult male participants is a cause for concern. In all four cases it was after they were expelled from school that they really started into a downward spiral heading toward

entrenched gang life. It is obvious that schools have rules and regulations and there needs to be consequences for one's actions, however expelling a student does not address the root causes of why that student was acting out in the first place. Rossiter and Rossiter (2009) and Sersli, Salazar and Lozano (2010) state that youth may act out in violence as a way to cope with stress. Moreover, Noguera (2000) argues that youth may act out in violence if they are "socially ostracized, bullied, teased, or mistreated by school officials or other students" (p. 135). Indeed, as evidenced in my findings, my participants largely felt ostracized, bullied, and not cared for within their schools. MacLeod (2009) argues that more attention needs to be brought to bear upon the school and how it places value on "lower-class" children. He states "[t]he problem is not that lower-class children are inferior in some way; the problem is that by the definitions and standards of the school, they consistently are evaluated as deficient" (p. 101).

The policy of expulsion sends an already troubled youth into the waiting arms of gangs. Once a youth is expelled from a school it becomes very difficult for them to be accepted into another school. As my results indicate, many never go back to school. These findings corroborate the findings of Polakow-Suransky (2000) who also found that most young people do not return to school after being expelled, and in fact often continue down a negative path. Of course school administrators and educators need to ensure the wellbeing of the school population on a whole, but if we truly value our young people we must try to address the root causes of these actions and provide the necessary support systems to keep these young people on a positive path.

As noted by Okot, problems at school can often be a result of problems at home. My young male participants all struggled with internal family conflict. According to

Kanu (2008, 2009), Rossiter and Rossiter (2009), Sersli et al. (2010), Stewart (2011), and Byrne and Senehi (2012) this is not a surprise as refugee single mothers struggle to make ends meet and are often not able to assist their children with school related work due to their busy schedule and often inadequate education. Further, Rossiter and Rossiter (2009), Sersli et al. (2010), and Shakya et al. (2010) note that trauma experienced by parents (for example, Okot's father) prevents them from being a stabilizing force in the family.

In order to combat the lack of parental and community support for their children Okot called for parents, children, and the broader ethnic community to communicate with one another and to listen to each other's needs. Indeed, such family support mechanisms have proven to be effective in steering young people away from violence and other anti-social behavior (Byrne, McLeod & Polkinghorn, 2004; Wortley & Tanner, 2007; Molix & Bettencourt, 2010; Sersli et al., 2010).

The negative influences within one's neighborhood and within one's peer group can also lead to conflicts at home and stigmatization within one's ethnic community as evidenced by several of the study's participants. Chekki (2006), Rossiter and Rossiter (2009), and Sersli et al. (2010) note that ethnic communities can play a key role in ensuring the resiliency of refugee youth by providing them with spiritual guidance, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging. However, according to the perceptions and experiences of the young male refugees and community worker participants in this study, the ethnic communities of these young men failed to meet their needs. Rather than providing a system of support for these young men, the leaders in their ethnic communities were perceived as being judgmental and dismissive. Okot and the other

participants called for more action on the part of community leaders as well as more targeted programming that informs these young people of the potential dangers in their communities and the consequences of engaging in gang activity. The views of my participants correlate with those of Chekki (2006), Sersli et al. (2010), and Byrne and Senehi (2012) who all stress the importance and effectiveness of community leaders, mentors and elders in guiding young people down a positive constructive path.

The negative experiences of my participants in terms of school, family, ethnic community, neighborhood, peer group, as well as with law enforcement, should not be addressed in isolation from each other. The cyclical and interwoven nature of these issues requires a holistic and multilayered conflict intervention approach. If a young person does not have a solid home environment with engaged parents, it is unlikely that they will be constructively engaged in school, which means it is more likely they will be engaged with negative peers and anti-social behavior in their neighborhoods. As evidenced through the experiences of my young male participants, anti-social behavior and gang activity leads to negative experiences with law enforcement, which leads to stigmatization from their ethnic community and further conflict in the home, and the cycle continues to repeat itself. Nanette J. Davis (1999) asserts that "a widely recognized gang characteristic includes alienation from the traditional foundations of community – home, school, work, as well as adult and elderly role models and associates – which serves to isolate the gang, rendering it apart from the fabric of society" (p. 231).

Calls for parents and community members to become more engaged in the lives of their young people are too simplistic if they do not consider the unique challenges that refugee parents and community elders themselves have. As evidenced through my

interviews, refugee single mothers are often busy working trying to make ends meet and do not have time for extracurricular meetings. Fathers too face challenges of lowered social status. Further, community leaders and families in general are busy simply trying to build a new life for themselves. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) note that "migration tends to have a destabilizing effect on the family" (p. 75) due to the business of building a new life, which renders parents less available for their children often leaving them "to their own devices long before they are developmentally ready" (p. 75).

Based on my study's evidence it is true that refugee parents and community elders need to become more involved in the lives of their youth. The literature also stresses the importance of community noting that:

Community is a place where adolescents feel a sense of belonging and connections with others in a special way. It's a place where they learn about who they are. It's where they begin to develop a sense of identity and a vision of how they fit in the world around them. Community is a place where adolescents can find answers to life's many difficult and complicated questions (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2005, p. 63).

Appropriate programming and education for ethnic communities and parents about how to understand the issues their youth are facing were mentioned by the study's participants as intervention processes that are needed. This study has shown that current disciplinary measures such as relocating a troubled youth to live with relatives in Alberta simply are not working. Rather, such measures have in fact made the issue worse by geographically expanding the "trouble" into other parts of Canada. However, a significant challenge to organizing such a strategy as evidenced in the findings is the difficulty parents and their children have finding the time to attend such programs. There is no easy answer to this issue, and the solution requires further discussion with the parents and community elders



themselves in order to identify their particular needs that would empower them to be able to attend such programs.

Collaborative efforts such as *Umoja* which aims to bring together parents, elders, community agencies, and members of the Winnipeg Police Service in order to build mutual understanding and trust are definitely a step in the right direction. However, at times it has been difficult getting members of the community to attend events, which again requires further discussion with parents and community elders in order to find a solution that will encourage them to attend these events. Collaborative efforts such as *Umoja* must include the voices of young people as well as educators in order to provide a well-rounded and informed discussion on issues affecting refugee communities.

The participants of this study faced many negative experiences and challenges in school, family, neighborhood, ethnic community, peer group, and with law enforcement. The lack of support systems in these six areas resulted in the unfulfilled basic needs of my study participants. These universal needs cannot be negotiated (Burton, 1993; Jeong, 2000; Byrne & Senehi, 2012) and as evidenced in my research findings, and as noted by Sersli et al. (2010), where traditional support systems have failed to meet the basic needs of young people, gangs are more than willing to fill the void.

Although they did not name it explicitly, the young men in this study recognized that they faced various levels of structural violence or social injustice in their lives. The inequalities in power relations, opportunities and distribution and access to resources that define structural violence (Galtung, 1969; Byrne & Senehi, 2012) were experienced by my participants in a variety of ways. First, the young men in this study were acutely aware that their families were settled in a particular neighborhood that was infested with

crime, drugs and gangs and they had no power to say otherwise. All of the young men in this study thought that if they would have had a choice to be settled in another neighborhood such as St. Vital or Tuxedo they would not have fallen into gang life.

Second, the young men in this study were placed in school classes based on their age rather than on their level of English comprehension. The policy of placing a young refugee in a class based on her or his age when in fact s/he may have had little or no prior education sets them up to fail especially where schools are not equipped with the necessary resources to help these young people succeed.

Third, both the young men and community workers felt that refugee young people were unfairly targeted and treated by law enforcement officers in Winnipeg. The racism and harassment experienced by my study participants from members of the Winnipeg Police Service in some ways echoes the experiences of many refugees with systems of authority in their countries of origin where many have faced racism and other forms of exclusion and harassment (Stewart, 2011; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Wolf, 2006). Further, these negative experiences with law enforcement officers serve to reinforce negative perceptions of authority some refugee youth already have due to past experiences in their country of origin.

The literature on structural violence and basic human needs asserts that physical violence can arise as people respond to the injustice of being prevented from achieving their full potential and in fulfilling their basic needs (Galtung, 1969; Staub, 1989; Burton, 1993; Gilligan, 1996; Jeong, 2000; Byrne & Senehi, 2012). Indeed, the young male participants in this study experienced physical violence as witnesses, victims, and

perpetrators in their homes, at school, and in their neighborhoods as a result of unfulfilled basic needs and structural violence.

The use of physical violence by my participants as a way to cope with challenges at home and at school reflect the assertions of Rossiter and Rossiter (2009), and Sersli et al. (2010) who contend that youth may use physical violence to cope with stressors in their lives. Ermias for example, saw physical violence as a natural response to the violence already occurring in his neighborhood. This matter of fact approach to physical violence reflects the notion of Kanu (2008) and Byrne and Senehi (2012) who contend that young people become desensitized to physical violence if they are continually exposed to it in their daily lives.

The positive experiences noted by my study's participants, highlight the powerful impact engaged and passionate educators can have on young people. Further, when the participants had access to programming whether it was, music, sports, employment, spiritual mentoring or counseling, all of them stated that these programs affected their life in a positive way. Vorrasi and Garbarino (2000) highlight the importance of programming by asserting that "risk factors may be neutralized or at least partially offset by the introduction of opportunity factors into other realms of the child's life, even when patterns of risk are thought to be impervious to intervention" (p. 63). Not surprisingly, all of the participants expressed the need for more programming geared towards refugee youth in the areas of trauma counseling, sports, music, skills training, and employment opportunities.

Much of the funding and resources needed for such programs is often provided by the various levels of government. Thus, where governments do not have the will, desire,

or resources to fund such programming, service providers must look elsewhere. Alternatively, there must be a collaborative effort on the part of young people, parents, community elders, community organizations, businesses, educators and law enforcement to inform government of these gaps in service provision and how ensuring these services will benefit society as a whole.

The results of this study have shown that the challenges faced by refugee young people in Winnipeg are complex and multilayered. The causes of my young male participants' anti-social behavior and gang involvement were also multilayered. This finding corroborates with the work of Howard and Jensson (1999), Vorrasi and Garbarino (2000), and Garbarino (2001) who argue that youth violence is the result of young people living with multiple risk factors. Thus, Byrne and Senehi (2012) contend that conflict resolution intervention approaches to addressing these issues need to be multilayered as well. By looking at the "web of interconnected parts" which function together, Diamond and McDonald (1996) contend that we are better able to "see who we are, what we're doing, how we're doing it, where we're headed, and why" (p. 1). Law enforcement, early prevention programs, educational programs, employment programs, sports and music programs, community engagement, and family and individualized therapy programs all need to be part of the solution. Where such services exist young people need to be made aware of them.

The importance of being made aware of existing social services is especially important for those young people wanting to leave their gang. As evidenced in my research findings, many gang-involved young people do in fact want to exit their gangs, yet they simply do not know where to turn for help. The in-and-out process of leaving

the gang and no longer associating with people one considered family as shared by both Emmanuel and Okot underscores, the difficulty of gang-exit and highlights the importance of local community resources to empower young people to make the right choices during such vulnerable and critical times. The findings of Cassell and Weinrath (2011) who note the lengthy in-and-out process of gang-exit as well as the high rate of return of ex-gang members to their gangs, further stresses the importance of targeted programming during the critical in-and-out gang-exit process. Their findings also reflect the sentiments of Emmanuel and Okot who noted the need for support services for young people who are coming out of correctional institutions while they are transitioning back into society.

In order to achieve the goal of increasing services, there needs to be a concerted effort on the part of community leaders, educators, religious leaders, law enforcement, families, community agencies, corrections, probation services, government agencies, and the business community to collaborate and work together towards these goals. As Diamond and McDonald (1996) suggest, a multi-track peacebuilding effort requires us to acknowledge our interrelatedness and work together towards a shared goal rather than in isolation of each other. We must seek out and listen to the voices of these young people who have lived these experiences, who have been in gangs, who have been locked up, and who feel abandoned by their community. It is the voices of young people in particular that must inform policy and programming as we move forward.

### **6.3 - Future Research**

Future research with regards to gang-affected young refugees living in Winnipeg should consider examining the programs and resources, which already exist that aim to assist gang involved young people transition into a more positive lifestyle. More research also needs to be carried out on which refugee communities are most affected by gangs, and which refugee communities, if any, are unaffected. Understanding these differences about why African youth are joining gangs, compared to refugee youth from Myanmar or Iraq, for example, will help us identify possible gaps in the available support systems. As well, understanding whether French speaking African communities are as affected by gangs as non-French speaking African communities may help to inform gang prevention/intervention programming and guide the distribution of resources appropriately. These differences will assist in identifying points of resilience and support structures that may exist in some communities but not in others which can be used as models to be adapted by communities who are facing gang involvement issues amongst their youth.

The original proposal for this study included the participation of female formerly gang involved or gang associated participants. Unfortunately, as noted earlier I did not get to interview any female former gang members. Although most of the academic literature centered on gangs focuses on males, females also play a key part in gang life. It is clear from speaking with my participants that female refugee youth are also involved in gangs in Winnipeg. However, it appears that there is no programming geared specifically for female gang involved refugee youth, and that they are hard to identify because they do not have as much involvement with law enforcement as their male counterparts.

More work also needs to be done in connecting with parents to determine their unique needs and challenges. It is clear that a gap exists between refugee young people and their parents. Future research needs to explore what resources are available to parents, which may assist them in addressing the unique and unfamiliar challenges in parenting which this new context of living in Winnipeg has brought them. In particular, what are the resources available to parents informing them of what to look for regarding the potential gang involvement of their child, or what are the specific signs of drug addiction? What are the resources available to them to assist in parenting a child who is going down the path to gang involvement? Even if these specific resources do exist, many parents may not know how to access them.

Certainly more research needs to be carried out on the relationship between refugee young people and their specific ethnic communities. Although the relationship between refugee young people and their ethnic communities has been identified as a big gap, some positive steps are being taken within the South Sudanese Dinka community to bridge the generational gap. As recently as May 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013 the community hosted a fundraising event led by its youth which raised money to support Dinka cultural programs for the young people, as well as supporting programs geared toward fostering parent-youth dialogue. This initiative could go a long way in bridging the gap between generations. It will be interesting to see how this initiative measures success and how this new intervention process will affect the behavior and identity of Dinka youth and the relationships they have with their parents and their elders in the community.

Finally, as refugee based gangs from Winnipeg spread into Alberta and across the country, research needs to be carried out on a Canada wide basis. Examining how other

cities are addressing refugee youth gang issues can be the beginning of building cross-Canada collaborative efforts to provide the necessary support mechanisms and programming for these young people no matter which province they might happen to be in.

#### **6.4 – Final Conclusion**

This qualitative research study examined the perceptions, challenges and experiences of young adult male refugees living in Winnipeg. I sought to gain a better understanding of how and why these young people developed negative behavior patterns and consequently became involved in street gangs. Further, I have sought to understand what has motivated them to turn their lives around for the better. It is hoped that the data collected during this study will be useful in informing various service providers, policy makers, and peace workers about ongoing challenges and possible gaps in service provision for refugee young people living in the city of Winnipeg.

It is clear that where schools, families, and ethnic communities have failed to meet the needs of these young people, negative support systems such as gangs found within their neighborhoods are ready to fill the void. In a time of war youth may join an armed struggle to fulfill their needs for protection, belonging, family, justice, food, clothing and shelter (Wessells, 2006; Wessells & Jonah, 2006). Similarly, in this study young people have joined a gang to fulfill those same needs. Wessells (2006) states that where support systems such as family, teachers, and community leaders exist, youth living in war zones show a higher rate of resiliency. As refugee youth are now living in the urban war zones of our cities where drugs, crime, gangs and violence permeate



through the neighborhoods in which they live, we need to ensure that these same supports systems exist to provide for their needs.

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## **Appendix A Interview Guide**

### **Question #1:**

How did you come to Winnipeg?

### **Question #2**

What are some of the challenges you have faced as a refugee?

### **Question #3**

What are some of the coping strategies you use to get you through hard times?

### **Question #4**

What is one experience that sticks out in your mind as a newcomer to Winnipeg?

### **Question #5**

What were some of the key turning points in your life?

### **Question #6**

What are your worst fears and worries for your life in the future?

### **Question #7**

What are your best hopes and dreams for your life in the future?

