UNRAVELLING IDENTITIES & BELONGING

Criminal Gang Involvement of Youth from Immigrant Families

Hieu Van Ngo
Dale Taylor

Project funded by the National Crime Prevention Centre

Overview

- Setting the Contexts
- Research Design
- Findings
- Suggested next steps

Setting the Context

- Youth from immigrant families represent about 20% of all young Canadians under the age of 18, and are expected to reach 25% by 2016 (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2006)
- Growing public concern about youth gangs
- Public discourse- the reporting of and opinions on criminal and violent incidents
- Scanty research on children of immigrants

Research Objectives

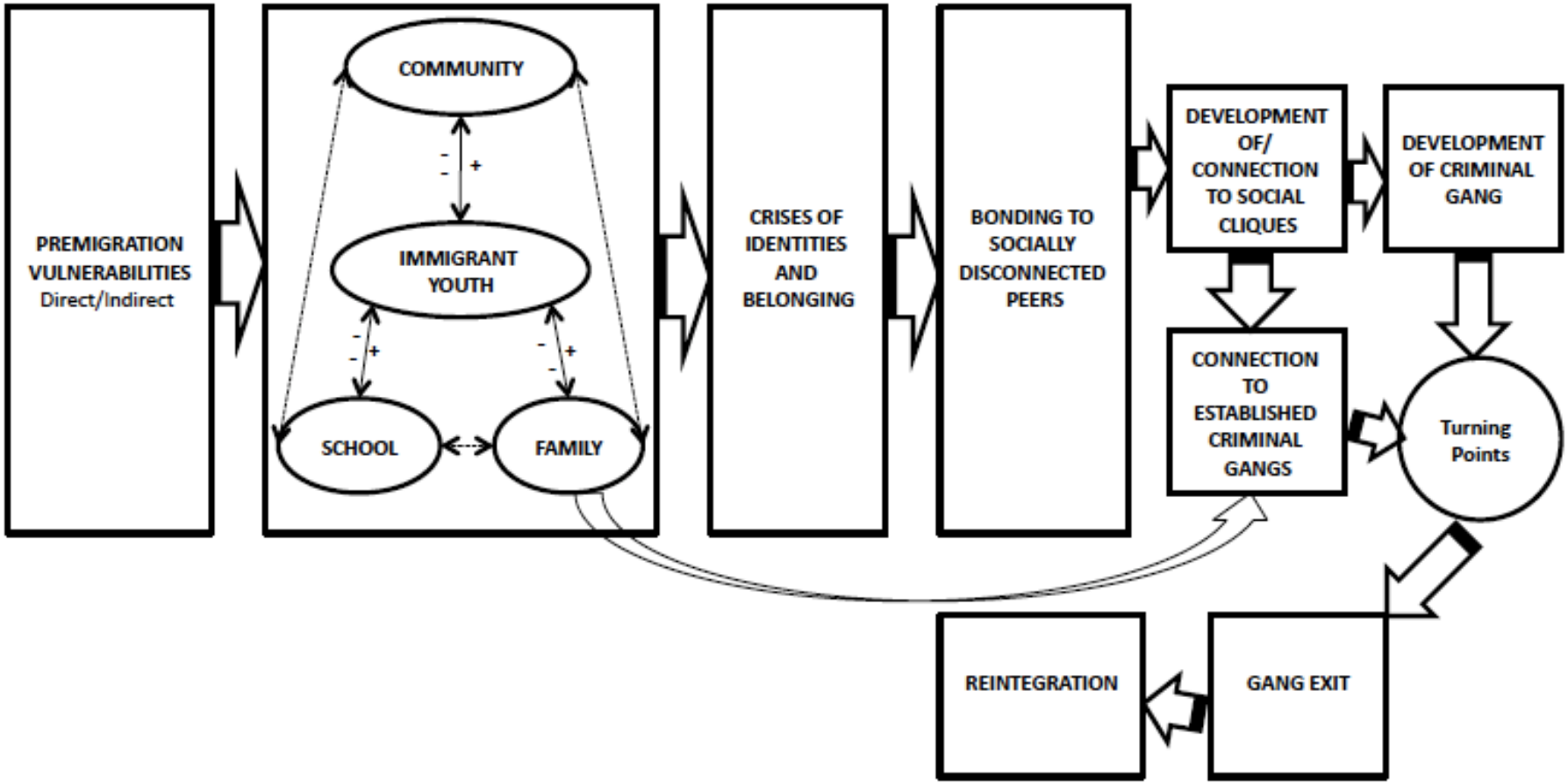
This research sought to answer:

- why and how some youth from immigrant families have become involved in criminal gang activity.
- what strategies can be used to effectively support high risk and gang involved youth from immigrant families.

Research Design

- Mixed methodologies- Participatory action research and grounded theory
- Interplay of two processes
  - The participatory group process of the collaborative inquiry network- 32 community and service representatives
  - One on one inquiry into the lived experiences of 30 gang involved youth and former gang members from immigrant families

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



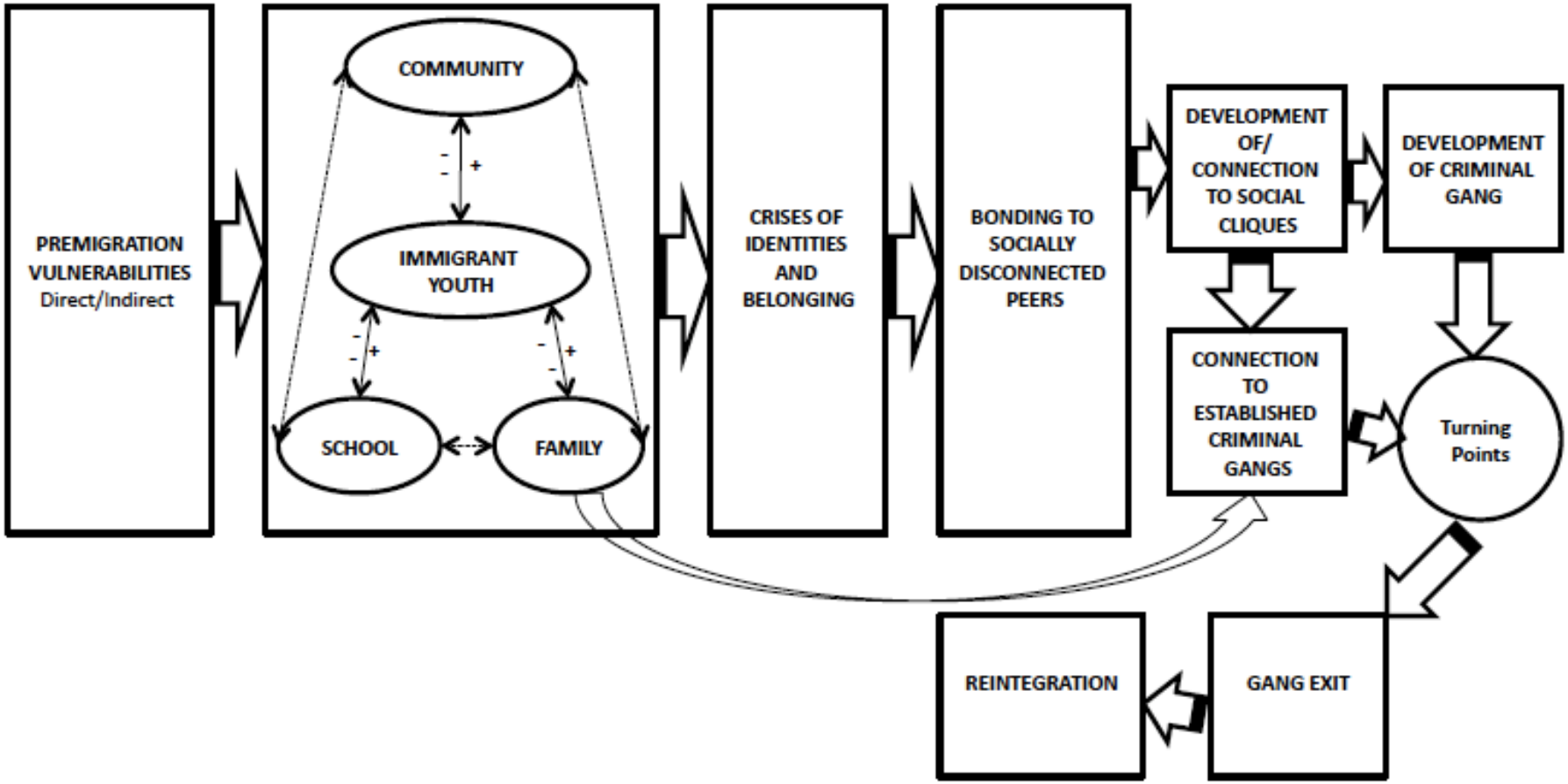
Pre-migration Vulnerabilities

- Foreign-born youth- Direct experiences
  - Extreme violence and brutality
  - Disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions
  - Sporadic education
- Canadian-born youth- Indirect experiences
  - Parents' traumatic behaviours
  - Strict upbringing of parents

In their Words…

I've seen lots of people dead in front of me. Too much to count… I've seen people run behind me, beside me, and get shot. Once, my sister was close to being shot, but the lady beside her got shot. It wasn't a good thing to see, because the lady was also carrying a baby on her back. The bullet went through the baby and out of the woman's chest. I'm still happy it didn't hit my sister, but I feel sorry for the lady too. I've seen lots of people die…After the war, hundred of soldiers, hundreds of mothers, hundreds of kids just lying around dead. And it would take about four to five days to clean it. So every time I would go to school, I'd be seeing pictures of ladies on the run, I would be seeing how about if that was my mom, my dad, or sister laying on the ground like that. Basically, those memories would piss me off. (Zuberi)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



Disintegration: Family Relationships

- Parenting- Neglectful, permissive, strict or hostile parenting as the prominent approaches to childrearing.
- Intergenerational/ acculturative gaps
- Differential treatment on the basis of gender, family position, mixed child status or stepchild status
- Negative sibling influences
- Negative parental influences
- Disadvantaged family socioeconomic conditions

In their Words…

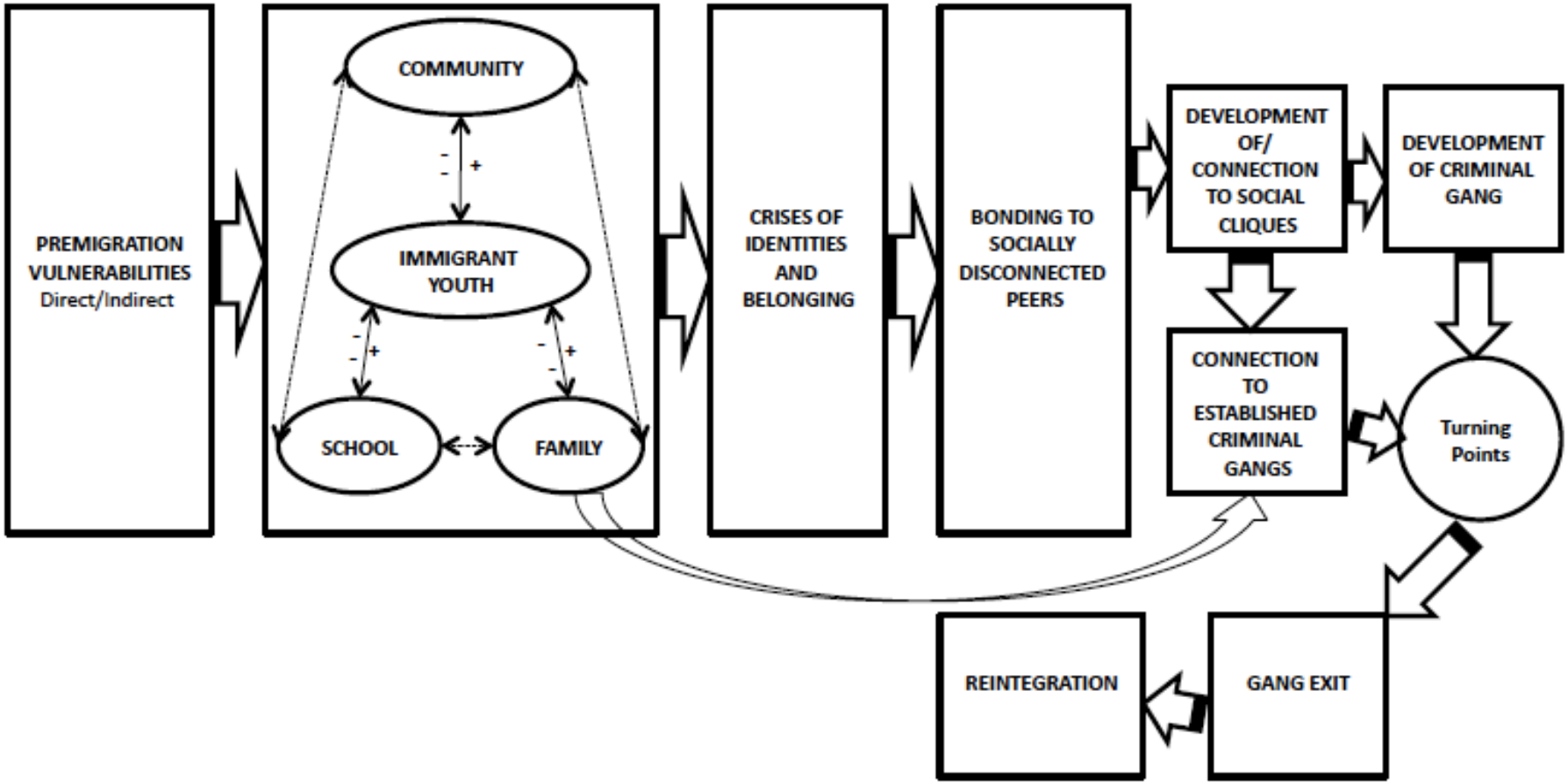
My older sister told my mom about my dad's plans that he wanted to remarry to another lady and have 2 wives. So my mom confronted my dad about it. That night, in this room right here is where we all slept…My dad came out and electrocuted my sister. He plugged in a plug like that. And he ripped it open and he electrocuted her right in the eye. We were all very very terrified. I was only 5 at the time, but I still remember it like it was yesterday. And then he beat up my mom very badly, he broke her nose and cheek bone and stuff like that. That was the first time I had seen such a brutal thing in my life. That was probably the first major hit in my life…I didn't like my dad at all. As I got older and I realised how cowardly acts that was too, and he started hitting her even more. So that's why I think I rebelled a lot about it…I remember after that happened, the next day I remember I had killed a cat, it was a kitten actually. Out of anger I picked up a big rock and started smashing it. That was like a big thing in my life from when I did that, to what happened a couple of years down the line…Because I didn't talk about it forever. It just sat with me for a while. (Bekele)

In their Words…

I never talked to my family about school. I would just go home, eat, and go to my room. Even other friends were like that with their family too. (Jagjeet)

About 16 [years old], I started to stay with your friends overnight…What my parents can do is trying to find me through my friend's parents, right well, have you seen my son? And you know, your friends' parents would say, "Well, I haven't seen him. Have you seen my son?" And some odd days, I went back home to take a shower to get clothing and I went back out again. I planned. I wanted to make sure that they not home…You know, I didn't want those awkward feelings and all that, right? I did anything possibly to avoid those feelings. (Vinh)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



Disintegration: School Interactions

- Learning barriers
- School transitions
- Bullying and racism
- Behaviour problems
- Negative peer influences
- Lack of parental involvement
- Inadequate and ineffective school support
- Disengagement from school

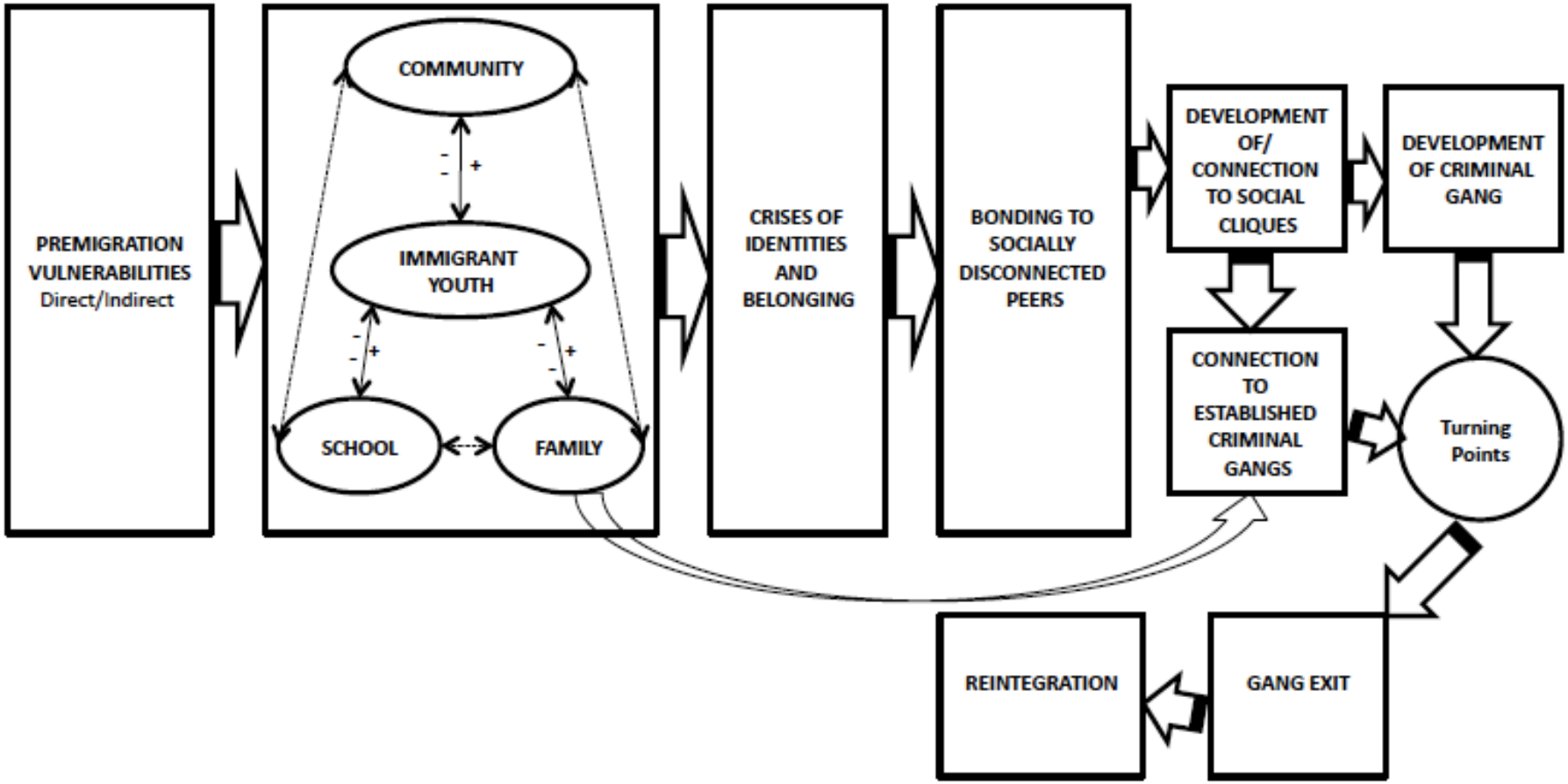
In their Words…

Reading and writing, and math and English- it was all so hard for me. I couldn't attend no more. It was too hard for me. My brain was just going crazy. It was too much for me. I don't understand everything, why I'm in school. (Osakwe)

In their Words…

I used to get called names all the time and pushed around and kicked and spit on and everything you can imagine in terms of bullying. So just getting called a Paki by itself made me upset, but it wasn't the main thing. That was part of it, but it would come hand in hand with punching me or spiting on me or kicking me or something. Up until 10, I was bullied probably once a week… I don't think it ever made sense. I think all it did was turn into anger…I wanted to take that out, but you know who am I gonna take that out on? You know what I mean? And then sometimes, I would snap at my family members, and they would be like "Well, what did we do?" And I would just storm off and go to my room and say "Leave me alone." I would just go hide in my room, you know. So anger from getting beaten up all the time, but how did I process that and how did I feel about it and what did I think? To be honest man, I don't know... I think all that came out of that is anger, that that, why are these kids treating me like this. (Amir)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



Disintegration: Community Interactions

- Impoverished neighbourhoods
- Negative community influences- Violence, drug use, drug dealing, prostitution
- Lack of interactions with positive adults
- Negative peer influence and behaviour
- Racism and discrimination
- Lack of access to community resources
- Disengagement from ethnic community and general community

In their Words…

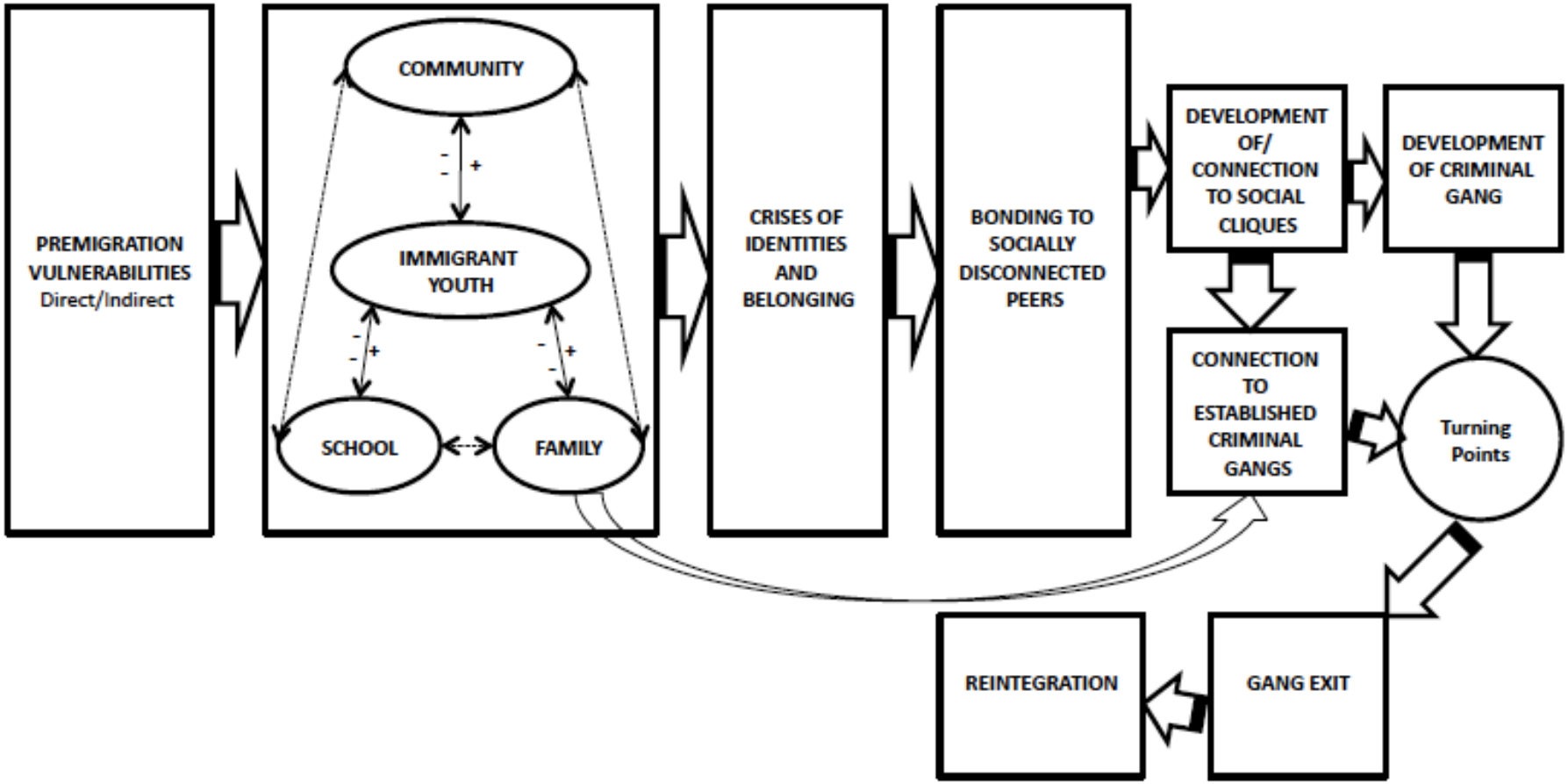
I don't like that whole area. People who are immigrants are sent to Dover or Forest Lawn. I can't stand that area of the city. I will never move back there. It's the northwest for me. That it's like the city just basically says, "Let Forest Lawn be Forest Lawn, let that area be the bad area of the city. Every city needs a bad area in it, let's just let it be there." You know what I mean? They come out to the media and say that they're trying to do this and that, but they're not trying to change anything. It's all the media thing. To me, that's how I see it. They're the forgotten ones. Not just Forest Lawn, but Ogden, Bowness - all of those areas in the city that are just forgotten…You go to Tuscany, you go to Crowfoot, they got the clubs and different things for kids. You go down there [southeast], you have not much…Why not put the same things that they put in rich communities? Why only privileged communities? Some place where kids can go. (Salim)

In their Words…

I did my thing and I left their thing to themselves. Whatever benefited me, I would do, but I would never get involved with them. I would go with my [Pakistani] friends, and mainstream could do whatever they want. It's not a part of us. (Rashid)

I didn't consider them [people at my mosque] a support system but I considered them a burden. So we're part of a religious group, and we go the mosque every once in a while, and I never really liked those people there. I felt like an outcast when I went there. So, was it a support system? I mean, it could have been. Was it a support system to me? No, not at all. I felt it was a chore going there, and I felt like an outcast, and I felt that these guys didn't like me. (Amir)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



Crises of Identities and Belonging

- Disempowering self-concept- The victim/oppressed, the deprived/underprivileged, the unwanted, the incapable, the follower, the frustrated/ disillusioned, and the delinquent
- Under-developed Canadian identity
- Lack of empowering ethnic identity
- Under-developed sense of belonging

In their Words…

I have nothing to go back to. I don't know my background. I don't even know my own language. I never even seen my dad. (Mamdouh)

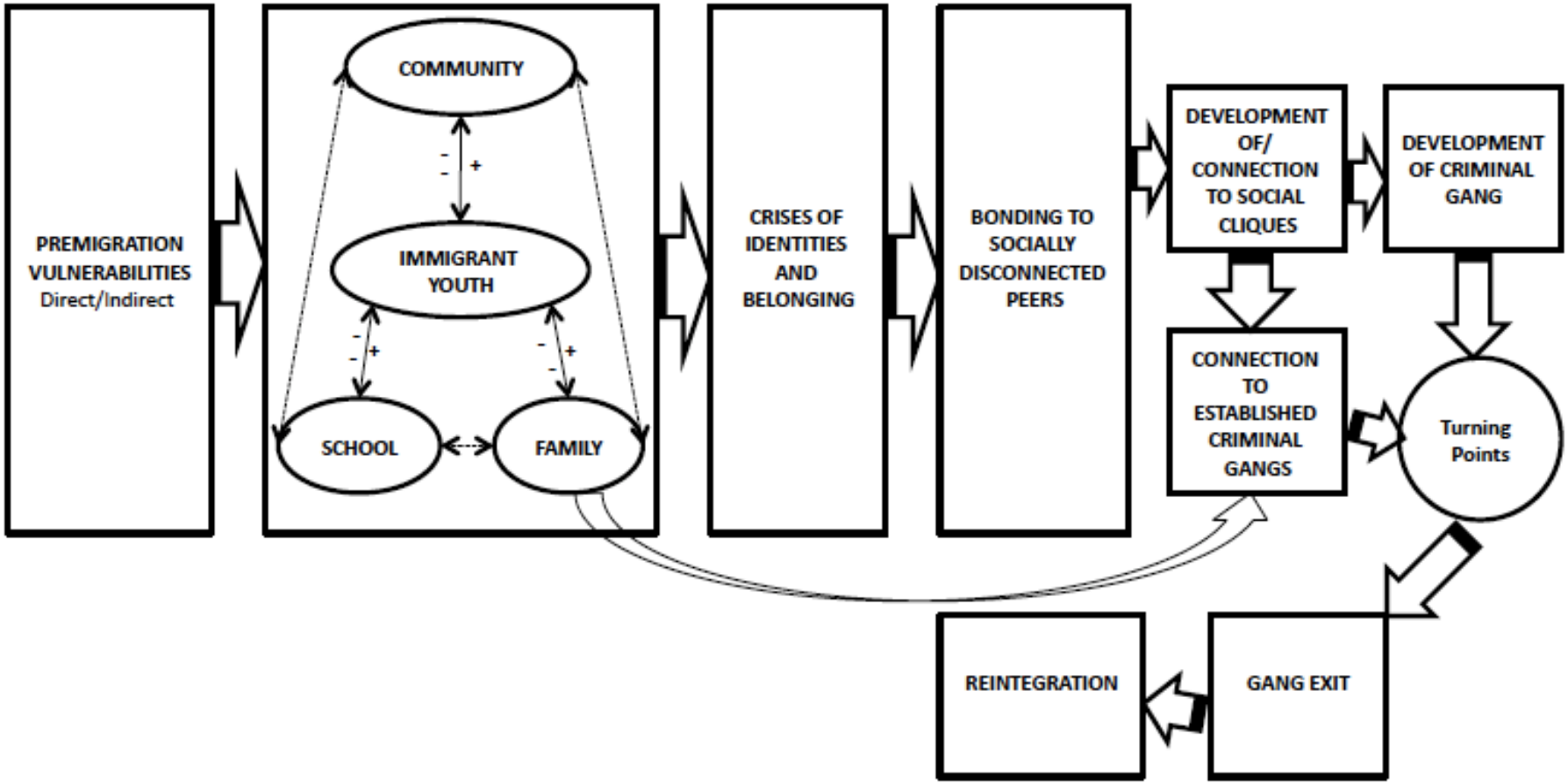
I was just like looking at the mirror, like thinking…I just wanted to, feel like, spitting at myself, you know, spit on my skin or something. I just hated it, you know, disliked it…I just felt like, people look at me and call me the N word, you know. That's why I hated myself, even if I was a little bit lighter than this. You see, (gesturing vertical hierarchy) there's Black, and then there is light, and then there is a little bit Black, and then there is mulatto, and then all the way down here is where tar is, you know. And I'm like there (pointing to the bottom), that's what I feel like, you know. These kind of light skin guys, they get away

In their Words…

I saw myself as an outcast, like I wasn't wanted. Somebody that wasn't wanted, somebody that was bullied…I didn't feel belonging at home. I didn't belong in school either, because people called me names so I felt bad about myself. (Mamdouh)

I don't feel at home here. There's no real home. What we're going through now, I don't think there's such thing as home. I don't know where I belong to tell you the truth - I still don't know. (Jagjeet)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



Substituted Integration: High Risk Social Cliques

- Development of social cliques
- Connection to established social cliques
- Group structure- informal, peer group
- Benefits- social support, protection, status, cultural pride
- Activities- thrill seeking behaviours, recreational activities, bullying others, fighting, vandalism, theft, drug use, selling drugs

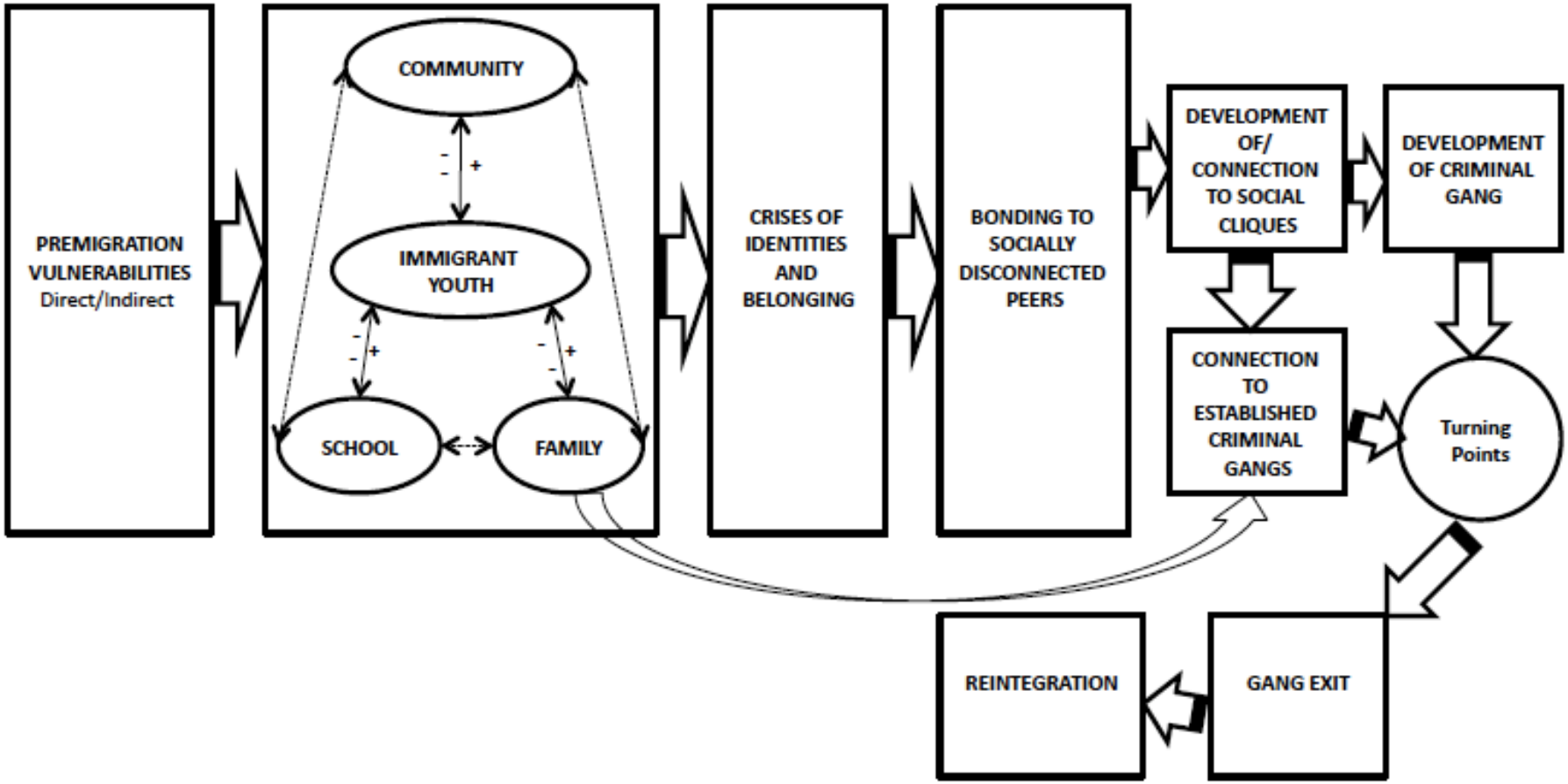
In their Words…

In grade 11, I started to go outside a lot. I would come home late and lock my room, because I had 10-15 guys in my room sleeping together without mom and dad knowing that. In the morning my mom would wake me up, and we somehow sneak out and sneak in, and we kept doing that over and over. She thought that I was going to school, but I never went to school. (Jagjeet)

In their Words…

First, I wanted a name. I wanted people to stop bugging me. Second of all, I wanted the power that they had. Third of all, I wanted revenge…I got exactly what I wanted. That's all I wanted at the time…All you wanted at the time was to feel tough, feel big, to have the attention, and to be untouchable where nobody can do anything to you…I was untouchable, and everybody knew that. And that made me become cocky. (Pierre)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



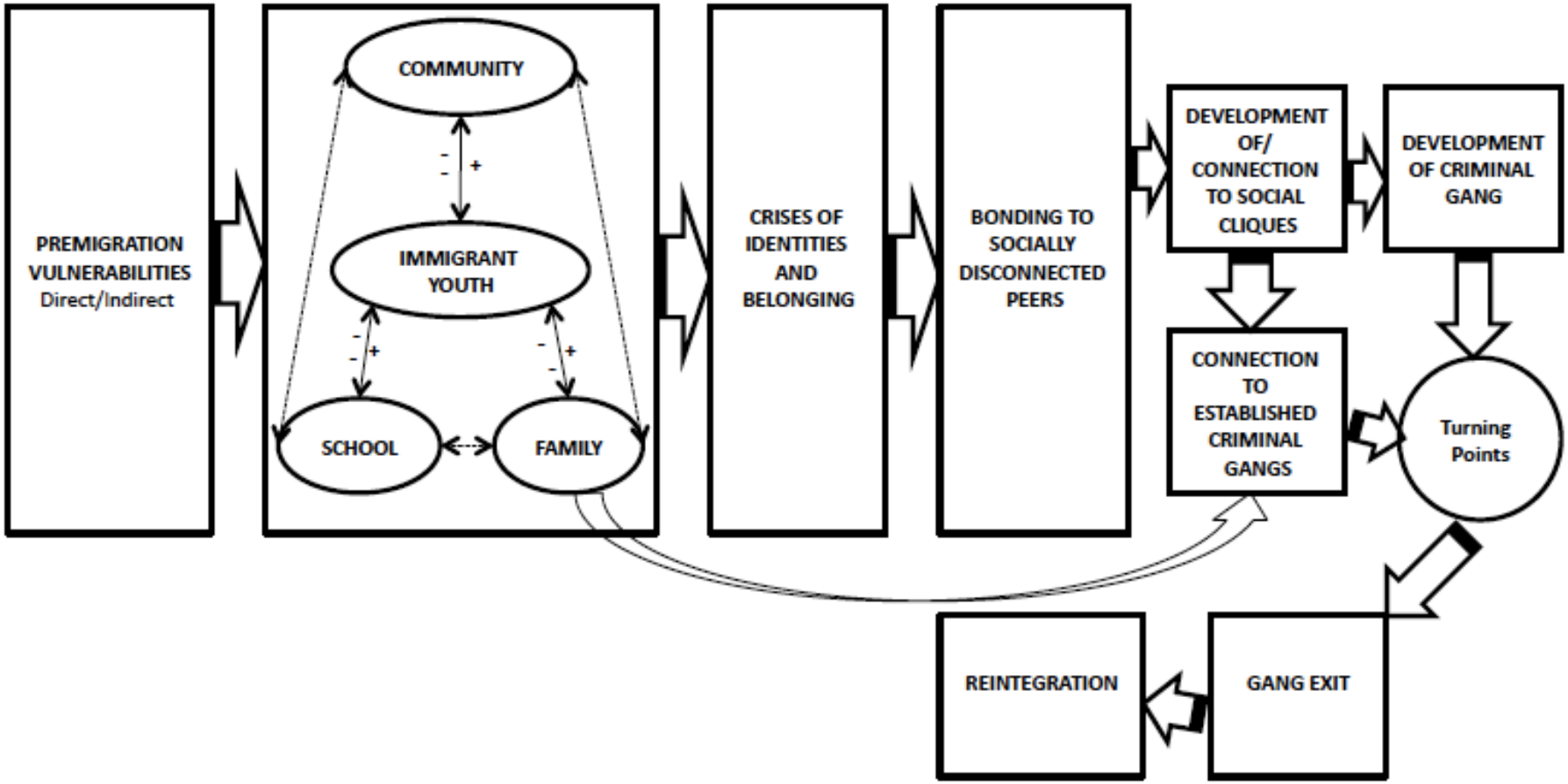
Substituted Integration: Criminal Gangs

- Development of criminal gangs
- Connection to established criminal gangs
- Gang structure- explicit intent of committing criminal activity; hierarchically structured; Selectively open to expanding membership;
- Dynamics- rituals, ethnically based/ multicultural gangs, group identity, insular relationship, level of sophistication
- Activities- drug trade; debt collection and extortion; property theft and robbery; selling guns, fighting
- Benefits- human bonding and solidarity, money, power and status, thrills, access to drugs

In their Words…

Every gang member, I'll tell you right now, they're insecure by themselves. I've been in it myself. They're nobodies. They're insecure. They're not their own person, but when they're in a gang, and there's a group of them, all of sudden superman comes out of them. They're very macho and all of a sudden, they got all this confidence in the world. They can take out this building with one punch, they can become superman. But when they're by themselves, that Clark Kent comes back in them, you know, with the glasses- they're just geeks. I'm just saying that from experience. (Salim)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



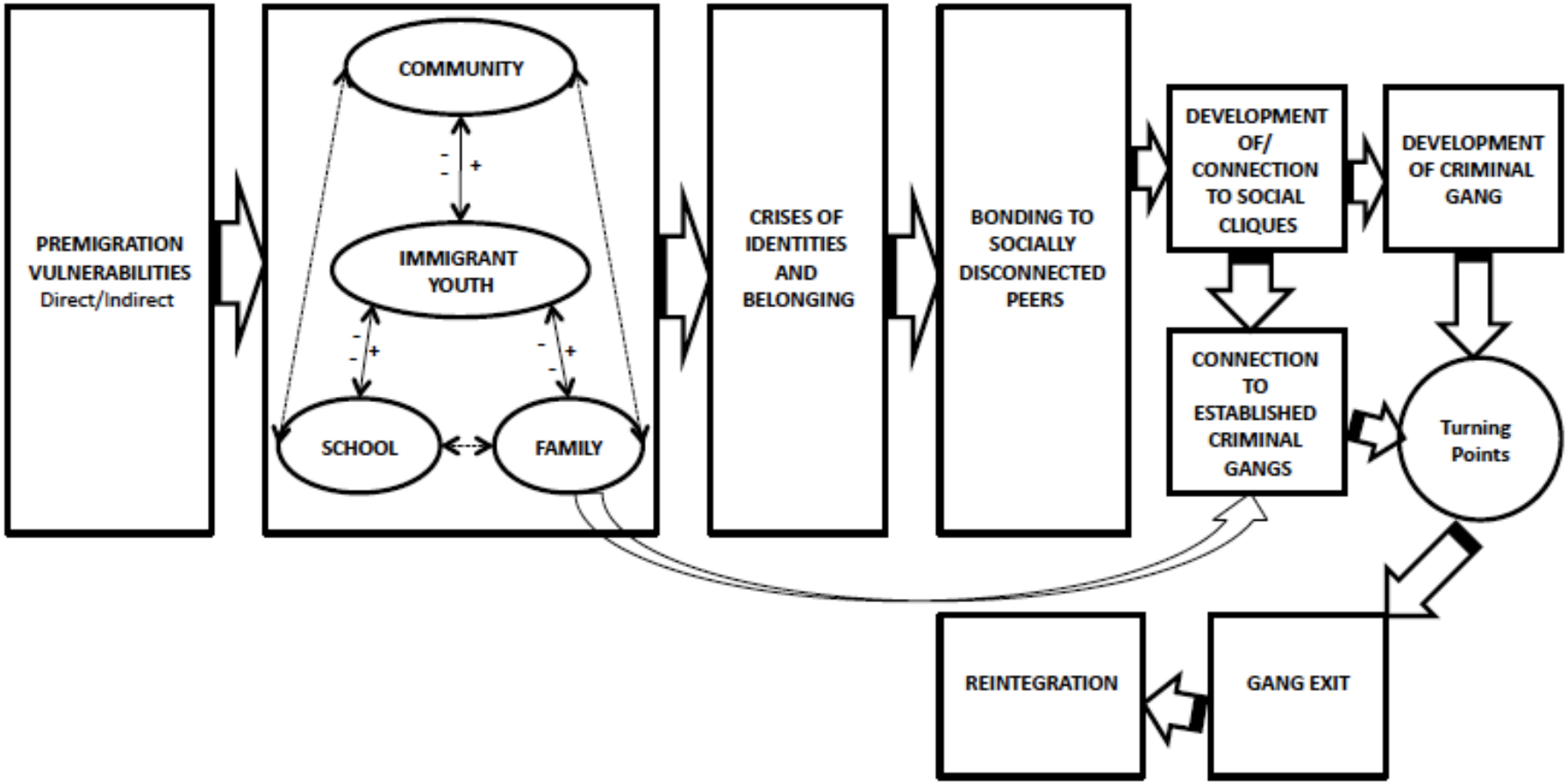
Gang Exit: Turning Points

- Deaths of innocent by-standers
- Deaths of friends
- Peer betrayal
- Cognitive maturity
- Fatherhood/ desire to be a good role model to siblings
- Religious awakening

In their Words…

I felt lost in life. There was something in my life that was just missing. I know everybody talks about it, but that's what happened to me too. There was something missing in your life, and you feel empty, and the reason why I got into fighting was trying to fill that stuff too. To become a man, I thought it would make me full, but it didn't. It just made me cocky, arrogant, and irrational. When I got into religion, I just needed something in my life to change me. I just started researching, because my mom talks about religion all the time, and why Islam was so beautiful, and I also thought about why people feel good when they go to the mosque. You research, and then you find out. I didn't know a lot of things about religion. Every time I hear stuff about religion, I feel like something comes up from my chest and expands me. It makes me feel better. It gives me something to do and to focus on. Something that I know is right to do. Something that makes life comfortable for everyone around me and myself. (Rashid)

Pathways towards Gang Involvement and Out of Gang Life



Gang Exit/ Reintegration Strategies

- Unlearn gang identities
- Seek support from family members
- Access social support and services
- Seek legitimate employment
- Seek mentorship in ethnic communities

In their Words…

I made less money than I used to. But I don't even know where the money went before. Easy come, easy go. I make about $1000 in two weeks. But the thing is, I'm putting it towards something very useful. I'm putting it towards a car. It's my car, not a jacked car. I have a license. It's not huge for you, but it's a huge accomplishment for me to get a license without cheating. That's one thing you have. If my family needs help, the only thing I can do for them to help is sell my car. (Jagjeet)

In their Words…

I started training kids [boxing] out of my house. All the neighbourhood kids loved coming to my house. I would turn my basement and my garage into a gym. So I started training them. The joy I seen in them, it brought me back to when I was young, and I wished that somebody would have done that for me when I was young, instead of letting me go into a different path and not care, and just think that I'll change one day. For me to see the joy in these kids eyes, and teach them discipline and respect their parents, and how important school was, and how important it was to be a leader, not a follower…If you teach them when they're young to be leaders, and to show respect and to have dignity, you get them young. That's what I wish somebody would have done for me…You fall in that hole, and it's hard to get out of that hole without a rope. I always wished that somebody would help me out and throw in that rope a little bit. Nobody did, and I managed to find my way out. But that's what I was trying to do with these young kids. Before they even find the hole and fall into it, I want to stop them and get to them before that. (Salim)

Summary of Findings

- Multiplicity of needs/ issues
- Severity of needs/ issues
- Prolonged exposure to negative experiences
- Disintegration in relationships at home, school and in the community
- Unravelling of identities and belonging

Practical Framework: Vision

- Stakeholders in diverse sectors and communities will work collaboratively to support youth from immigrant families who are at risk or have a history of criminal gang involvement to develop positive identities and achieve a healthy sense of belonging at home, school and in the community.

Practical Framework: Guiding Principles

- Promote positive identity development in all services and programs
- Ensure equitable resource allocation, opportunities and outcomes
- Promote multi-sectoral involvement, coordination and collaboration
- Adopt multiple approaches on the part of youth services
- Address multiple needs with multiple interventions
- Ensure timeliness and responsiveness of services

Practical Framework: Family-based Support

	Prevention	Gang Exit and Reintegration
Family-based Support	❖ Resettlement support ❖ In-home tutor / family literacy ❖ Support for healthy family interaction ❖ Support for struggling parents and siblings ❖ Family outreach and mentorship ❖ Socioeconomic support	❖ Family safety ❖ Involvement of family members ❖ Family strengthening support ❖ Other support identified in Prevention

Practical Framework: School-based Support

School-based Support	❖ Academic and literacy support ❖ Positive social opportunities and programs ❖ Character building/identity support ❖ Mentorship/access to positive role models ❖ School transition support ❖ Outreach and psychosocial support to vulnerable youth ❖ Preventive education and support ❖ Effective school practices	❖ School safety ❖ Psychosocial, academic and financial support ❖ Educational opportunities ❖ Other support identified in Prevention

Practical Framework: Community-based Support

Community-based Support	❖ Immigrant youth/culturally specific programming ❖ Support for youth to access general youth services ❖ Mentorship ❖ Community education and support ❖ Community/neighbourhood development ❖ Social action to address neighbourhood/community inequities ❖ Cultural competence among service organizations ❖ Organizational capacity to help psychosocially/behaviourally challenging youth	❖ Outreach support ❖ Gang dissociation support ❖ Post-gang psychosocial support ❖ Post-gang practical support ❖ Community connection and involvement ❖ Leadership opportunities ❖ Other support identified in Prevention

Recommended Next Steps

- Achieve shared understanding about issues
- Adopt the suggested framework as a starting point for collaborative action
- Establish a multi-stakeholder, multi-sectoral infrastructure to implement plan
- Ensure emphases on prevention and interventions; family-based, school-based and community-based support; and policy, practice and research
- Address specific programming and access to general services and resources
- Integrate an explicit focus on identities
- Support organizational change and cultural competence
- Involve youth and ethnic communities in all collaborative efforts

A Collaborative Initiative

- Effective Community Response to Immigrant Youth Gang Crime initiative in Calgary- Built on the Comprehensive Gang Model developed by Spergel (1997)
  - Strategy #1: Community Mobilization- Action research, collaborative inquiry network, collaborative action plan
  - Strategy #2: Provision of Social Intervention and Opportunities- Provide gang involved or high risk immigrant youth with educational, life skill and employment related services and personal support; Connect gang involved and high risk youth and families to services and resources in the community to enhance their social wellbeing and connections, and (3) support former gang involved youth to develop and enhance leadership skills to make positive contributions to the community

A Collaborative Effort

- Strategy #3: Gang Suppression and Social Control- Support for justice stakeholders to work effectively with ethnocultural communities
- Strategy#4: Organizational Development and Change This strategy supports participating organizations and institutions to examine their policies and practices, and to plan and implement strategies to provide culturally responsive services to gang involved and high risk youth from immigrant families