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Lauren Wagner Current Issues April 1, 2013 Gang Hierarchy Wiz Khalifa once said, " The things we crave the most are the things that destroy us the quickest. " After hearing this quote, I began to mull it over and twist it into different meanings; it could be about drugs or alcohol obviously, but it could also mean actual needs like social acceptance. In light of our juvenile justice class I was able to connect this idea with gangs and gang membership; juveniles that are entering prison for the first time, growing up in a rough neighborhood, have issues with bullying, etc. will typically latch on to a gang as soon as they can so that they can satiate that need for fitting in and/or staying protected. However, what those same juveniles don't understand is that once they are in, there aren't many ways out. Typically, once you are in there is only one way to move and that is up the membership ladder. The gang hierarchy is a complex system in which there are multiple stages and levels of commitment, ranging from the leadership members all the way down to the potential members. The leadership members are the ones that are in charge of the gang. They call all of the shots and run the gang's business, whether it is drug trafficking, weapons trafficking, violence etc. The leaders can also go by the name of " OG's", which is original gangsters, and they are typically " heavily involved in the gang, making it central to his or her life. The " OG" is often a violent criminal and he or she is very committed to gang activities. The original gangster has usually been part of the street gang for a long period of time" (Ruble). However, some of these leaders can also mentor the members lower down in the hierarchy. Many of the potential members and even less experienced members look up to them for guidance and support. The OG's, or leaders can keep the juveniles in school/programs

to graduate, take them under their wing to protect them, teach them the ways of the gang's operations, and much more. The many different types of gangs also vary in their leadership operations. Street gangs and prison gangs may have multiple leaders or no formal leader at all. There could also be a situational leader, in which an experienced member may be more knowledgeable about a specific crime and would take over for that amount of time. " Whatever the leadership structure may be, it is certain that proven leaders have specific, known qualities. One member of the " Latin Kings" stated, " Leaders must be daring, dangerous, and not afraid"" (Ruble). The hard-core members are a step down from the leaders, but not by very much. " The hard core gang members are usually the older gang members, the individuals who are culturally and criminally enmeshed in the gang and are at risk of being so for life. Most violent gang activity emanates from the hard-core gang members. Hard core gang members usually make up about 10% of gang membership" (Carlie). They usually reject any value system other than that of his/her gang and their life typically revolves around their gang. The hard-core member usually has been arrested and been through the justice system giving them more experience and ' street cred'. This member will commit any crime or act of violence to further the goals and objectives of the gang. This person is usually in his/her late teens or early 20's extending into their 30's in some cases. The next type of member is the regular members. The regular members make up the majority of the gang consisting of mostly 14 to 17 year olds. These are the juveniles you see on the streets starting and ending violent acts, committing petty and serious crimes, all in hopes of proving themselves loyal to the gang and worthy of their superior's

trust. These regular members also aspire to move up the chain of command to the hard-core level, but unfortunately their life expectancy is very low due to their dangerous lifestyle. " With Denver as an example, it was found that even though only 14 percent of teens are in gangs; these teens are responsible for 89 percent of violent crimes" (Teen) with " one fourth of all gang members being between the age of 15 and 17" (Teen). The next level of the hierarchy is the associate member. The associate member can be generalized as your typical street thug, buying and selling drugs as well as weapons, doing any dirty work that their superiors need to be carried out, and much more. These juveniles typically know and like gang members on a friendly level. They also regularly associate with as many gang members as they can to network. Most importantly, they consider gangs and gang related activity as normal, acceptable and even admirable (Levels). The associate member is usually young and in need of acceptance by their peers and protection. They are already initiated and will do anything that they can to continue proving their loyalty to their surrogate family including having the highest recidivism rate of any of the group members. Finally, the lowest form of membership is the potentials. These members are not yet initiated into the gang and are usually very young in age, ranging anywhere from eight to twelve years old. The potential members are usually recruited by previously established members. They also tend to join gangs for a lot of different reasons, for example " the opportunity to make money, thrill seeking, protection from bullies, desire for prestige, and a chance to belong" (Teen) are common reasons. Also, high-crime neighborhoods, poor education, poverty, difficult home-life, criminal mentality within the parents, and many

other causes will ignite the joining of a gang or gang related activity and their membership roots within these factors. Psychologically speaking, individuals need relationships with peers; they need acceptance and a tangible bond between friends. Unfortunately, many times this insatiable need is resolved, in part, by gang membership at a very early age. Moving up within this pseudo family then becomes the only thing they know and the only people they become close with and, unfortunately, the people they die for. The gangster lifestyle is a never-ending and vicious cycle with more and more juveniles signing up. As the infamous, and actual, original gangster once stated, " I believe that everything that you do bad comes back to you. So everything that I do that's bad, I'm going to suffer from it. But in my mind, I believe what I'm doing is right. So I feel like I'm going to heaven", Tupac Shakur (Tupac). Works Cited Carlie, Michael K. " Into the Abyss: The Structure of Gangs." Into the Abyss: The Structure of Gangs. N. p., 2002. Web. 06 Oct. 2012. . Fleisher, Mark S., PhD, and Scott H.