Crip or Die? Gang Disengagement in the Netherlands

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Abstract
Building on the growing body of research on gang desistance and disengagement, this article focuses on the departure of 20 members of the Dutch Rollin 200 Crips during three years of ethnographic fieldwork (2011–2013) in a small neighborhood in the Dutch city of The Hague. In this article, I retrace the process of gang disengagement from the onset of conflicts within the gang, the growing discontent with Dutch gang life, up until the actual departure of several members. Specific attention will be drawn to the methods, motives, and consequences of leaving this Dutch “gang” and the role of disillusionment in the process of disengagement. Younger members encountered a lack of financial compensation for the work they put in for the gang, which on the long run outweighed the benefits associated with being in the gang. Contrary to popular gang myths, most Dutch members cut ties with the gang abruptly and left without any repercussions. The importance of contextualized accounts of gang desistance and disengagement is highlighted, with specific attention to alternatives for gang life and the difficulties related to identity in the process of disengagement.

Keywords
gangs, gang disengagement, gang desistance, gang embeddedness, gang economy, ethnography, identity

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Introduction

Disengaging from gangs and gang desistance are understudied areas relative to the rich tradition of gang research, but the topic has gained some momentum in recent years (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Moloney et al. 2009; Melde and Esbensen 2011; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Bolden 2013; Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013; Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule 2014; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014; Carson and Esbensen 2016; O’Neal et al. 2016).

Most of the available research on gang desistance and disengagement draws on “indirect ethnographic observations, secondhand accounts, or reviews of the broader literature” (Pyrooz and Decker 2011, 417). Quantitative studies of gang desistance struggle with methodological and conceptual contentions related to the operationalization of “ex-members,” since there is a gray area occupied by former members after leaving the gang (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Carson et al. 2013). Gang desistance should be understood and treated as a process, recognizing “the blurry line” between its start and ending (Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014, 496). However, Melde and Esbensen (2011, 515) note that “unfortunately only a handful of studies have information regarding their subjects either before or after gang involvement.” Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb (2014, 509), therefore, opt for a longitudinal design with multiple points of measurement for “gang status, ties and important life-course concepts (e.g., transitions, trajectories, and turning points),” stating that it will prove invaluable in the study of gang desistance and disengagement.

The goal of this article is to contribute to the discussion on gang desistance and disengagement by providing an ethnographic account. As a research strategy, ethnography has the potential to tackle most of the above-mentioned conceptual and methodological issues, in particular because it has the benefit of the researcher “being there” for a sustained period of time (Geertz 1983; Ferrell and Hamm 1998), resulting in a contextualized account of gang desistance and disengagement from an emic perspective. The current study is based on three years of fieldwork in a local neighborhood in the Dutch city of The Hague, home of the Rollin 200 Crips (Roks 2016). During this period, the number of active gang members decreased rapidly, with twenty members leaving over the course of eighteen months. In this article, I will retrace the process of gang disengagement from the onset of conflicts within the gang, the growing discontent with Dutch gang life, up until the actual departure of several members. Specific attention will be drawn to the methods, motives, and consequences of leaving this Dutch “gang” and the role of disillusionment in the process of disengagement.
Leaving Gangs: The Role of Disillusionment

The growing body of research on gang desistance and disengagement has contributed to debunking some of the more powerful myths rooted in gang lore and the stereotypical depictions of gangs in both popular and police culture (Bolden 2013; Carson et al. 2013). One area of research examines the motives, methods, and consequences associated with gang desistance and disengagement (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Bolden 2013; Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014; Carson and Esbensen 2016). Contrary to popular belief, gang membership is an ephemeral state, with most members leaving the gang after one or two years and transitioning into other social arenas (Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013; Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013). Motivations for leaving the gang have been classified as—often intertwining—push and pull factors (Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013). Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen (2013, 526) conclude that “the most common motivation for gang leaving was associated with disillusionment (I just left, it wasn’t what I thought it was going to be).”

Carson and Esbensen (2016, 141) elaborate on the nature of the discontent occurring when gang members “lose faith in the inner workings of the gang, perceive the gang as unsupportive, or when they believe they are being taken advantage of by their gang peers” (Carson and Esbensen 2016, 141). Studies on the process of leaving ideological social groups—such as radical groups (Demant et al. 2008) and militant extremist groups (Bjørgo and Horgan 2009; Bjørgo 2011)—also point to disillusionment as the main source of disengagement. In an overview of the literature on gangs, violent extremist and religious groups, Harris (2015) discerns several individual factors leading to disengagement. Firstly, disillusionment is fed by normative factors like losing faith in the group’s ideology, frustrations about the lack of success, or being confronted with violence. Secondly, Harris (2015) describes affective components causing disillusionment due to failing group organization or inadequate leadership. Continuance factors, lastly, are practical life circumstances such as maturation, competing social relationships, external pressures, and stigmatization that may lead to disillusionment (Harris 2015). Disengagement, therefore, is “an inherently complex, multi-layered process...influenced by multiple issues and an amalgamation of personal as well as social factors that influence the member’s response to the source of disillusionment” (Harris 2015, 36).

The dominant quantitative methods used in studying gang disengagement and desistance have identified several causes for disillusionment. However, an in-depth understanding of the experienced disillusionment over time is
missing from these accounts. In an ethnographic study of a Puerto Rican gang, Padilla sheds light on the role of the gang economy and problems associated with power differentials within the gang:

After spending years working as street-level dealers, some youngsters come to recognize that their labor has been consistently taken advantage of and exploited. They come to understand that their work has only been benefiting the gang’s mainheads, or top-level distributors and suppliers. As street-level dealers, they have become aware of their permanent position as minimum wage earners. Against these conditions of gang domination and inequality, several members decide to cut their ties with the gang and return to the very same world they had earlier opposed. (1992, 6)

Similarly, Levitt and Venkatesh (2000), in a unique study based on an analysis of detailed financial information from a gang, conclude that drug dealing is not a particularly lucrative enterprise, with average wages only just above those in the legitimate sectors. Consequently, the hourly wages for the lower-level gang members are no better than minimum wage. Since high-level gang members are making far more than the legitimate market alternative, the primary economic motivation for low-level gang members lies in the possibilities of “rising up through the hierarchy” (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000, 757–58).

However, reducing being part of a gang solely to monetary benefits would provide a rather one-dimensional understanding of what gang membership entails. Even more so since gang membership is a heterogeneous experience (Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). For instance, “mainheads” (Padilla 1992, 6) or high-level gang members might have a different definition of the inner workings of the gang, determined by their age, their hierarchical position in the gang, but also their social and emotional ties to the gang (Pyrooz, Decker, and Webb 2014). Most studies on gang desistance and disengagement, however, lack a similar contextualization of the process of leaving the gang in terms of the “processes associated with role transitions” (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule 2014, 270) and the difficulties “due to being undereducated, undertrained, and socially isolated” (Pyrooz, Sweeten, and Piquero 2013, 19).

**The Rollin 200 Crips: A Dutch Gang**

Since the early 1990s, groups of youngsters calling themselves Crips and Bloods were reported in the Netherlands, following the global commercialization and commodification of American gang styles (Van Gemert 1998;
Van Gemert 2001; Roks 2016; Van Gemert, Roks, and Drogt 2016). Especially The Hague, the third largest city in the Netherlands, has been the home of several Crip gangs (HOF 1994). In 1994, local police in The Hague estimated that approximately 250 youngsters were active members in fifteen different gangs (Abels and Dwarkasing 1994). Information on one of these Dutch Crip gangs is rather well documented, because they featured in various articles in popular magazines (Viering 1994; Van Stapele 1998) and were the focus of a book written by a journalist (Van Stapele 2003). The media attention surrounding these Crips culminated in *Strapped 'N Strong* (Van der Valk 2009), a ninety-minute documentary on the criminal lifestyle of the gang. Over the years crime became a more central part of their gang identity, a development that can be partially reconstructed from the media coverage. For instance, the book *Crips.nl* (Van Stapele 2003) shows a transition from street crime to more organized forms of crime, most notably violent drug transactions.

The rise of European youngsters resembling the stereotypical imagery surrounding (black) American gangs has been the focus of the Eurogang research network for many years (Klein et al. 2001; Decker and Weerman 2005; Van Gemert, Peterson, and Lien 2008; Esbensen and Maxson 2012; Maxson and Esbensen 2016). Research on gangs in Europe is, aside from the apparent sociostructural differences between Europe and the United States, complicated by the so-called “Eurogang paradox”: “the denial that there are street gangs in Europe, because the gang patterns do not fit the American pattern of highly structured, cohesive, violent gangs” (Klein 2001, 7). Most American gangs, however, do not fit these patterns either. American gang culture has been incorporated into a larger youth culture, resulting in the global spreading of gang symbols (Klein 2001). Decker, Van Gemert, and Pyrooz (2009) also point to culture, and especially the role of popular culture, as the “chief explanation” as to why Crips can be found in Europe. Despite the notable similarities in terms of style, Decker, Van Gemert, and Pyrooz (2009, 401) describe some important distinctions between Crips in the USA and the Netherlands. For instance, the Dutch Crips “are far less organized, are not organized around drug sales, are not territorial, and engage in much lower levels of violence.” Also, the response of Dutch law enforcement and other social control agencies in the Netherlands is substantially less repressive and severe than the way gangs in the United States are approached and combated. In sum, because of the differing nature of the root causes of gangs in both countries, any comparison between these Crips rest primarily on style and identity (Decker, Van Gemert, and Pyrooz 2009).

There is some discussion whether these Dutch Crips, who fit the stereotypical imagery of American street gangs, should be called a gang. In official accounts and scientific publications in the Netherlands, the word *gang* is
largely avoided or used “only with reluctance” (Van Gemert, Peterson, and Lien 2008, 8; Van Gemert 2012). In this article, however, these Dutch Crips will be referred to as a gang. First and foremost, because of the emic perspective central in the current study. These Crips call themselves a gang and gang members and, as Garot (2010, 178) justly states, “however much we may want to avoid or sidestep this loaded four-letter word, if we hope to take members’ meanings seriously, we are left with many young people who call their group a gang, a group with which others . . . most come to terms.” Secondly, from a more positivistic stance, these Dutch Crips adhere to most of the prevailing international definitions of what constitutes a gang, and in particular fit the Eurogang definition of a (street) gang as “any durable, street-oriented group, whose involvement in illegal activities is part of their group identity” (Van Gemert, Peterson, and Lien 2008, 5).

The current article is based on an ethnographic study on the embeddedness of crime and identity in the small neighborhood in the city of The Hague. Three years of fieldwork (2011–2013) resulted in a network of 150 informants, consisting of (former) members of the Crips, residents, youngsters hanging around the neighborhood and a Youth Center, social workers, and local police officials. The usage of interviews, informal conversations, and observations resulted in in-depth information about the lives and/or criminal careers of 60 of these informants (Roks 2016).

Historically, the Dutch Crips were a group of brothers, relatives, and friends from a local neighborhood in The Hague. Over the years the composition of the gang changed: friends of friends joined the set, and prison became a place where new members were recruited. This has resulted in a gang that no longer consists of just local gang members, but sees members stemming from different parts of The Hague, and in some cases even from different cities. The majority of the gangs reported in The Hague during the 1990s have disappeared, leaving the Rollin 200 Crips as one of the few remaining gangs in the locality. During the start of the fieldwork in 2011, the Rollin 200 Crips consisted of approximately fifty active members with a predominant Surinamese background, ranging in age from fifteen to forty years old. Several members were incarcerated over the course of the research because of their involvement in stabbings, an assault on two police officers, possession of illegal narcotics, and weapon charges. Some Crips, however, combined these criminal activities with (often low-paying) jobs, school, or they collected unemployment benefits to make ends meet. Toward the end of the fieldwork in 2013, the number of active gang members in the set had decreased rapidly, leaving only a core of members who had been part of the Crips since the early 1990s. The remainder of this article will zoom in on the process of disengagement by the members that left the Rollin 200 Crips.
“Where Is the Money?”²: Growing Disillusionment

On a Sunday in August 2012, various younger members were awaiting the weekly training session led by Rick, one of the “OGs.” Daniel, a twenty-six-year-old member, was late because he had to sleep on a friend’s couch because of a carbon monoxide leak in the house he normally stayed at. Rick was clearly upset with Daniel being late. When Daniel eventually showed up half an hour late, Rick yelled: “Cuzzo, you’re late again! Again! Don’t make me have to tell you again, alright? Just be on time cuzzo!” Rick’s sudden outburst seemed to bother Daniel, pulling his hoody over his head and isolating himself from the group until we left for training. As I walked next to him to the car driving us to the spot we usually trained, he looked at me from under his hoody and said:

I’m tired of the bitching, man. If you ain’t giving me respect, how do you want me to respect you? Respect has to be mutual, right? That nigga ain’t my daddy!
What the fuck is he thinking? That nigga don’t know what I did. He don’t know what I’m capable of! I ain’t getting paid for this shit, so leave me alone man.
(September 23, 2012, conversation with Daniel)

After the training session Daniel came up to me again and started airing out his frustration about the current situation within the gang, repeatedly stating that “it’s all bullshit” and that he was not “making any money.” Gino, a close friend of Daniel and usually rather reluctant to talk to me, seemed to agree with Daniel: “Yeah man, that’s true. We ain’t making no money. And that’s why we joined, you know? But where is the money?” As we walked back towards the car, Daniel, who seemed even more frustrated than earlier that day, proclaimed: “If nothing changes? Fuck it, I’ll say goodbye to y’all niggas. Imma leave the set. We make no money, it makes no sense, you know?”

For a long time during my fieldwork, unity, loyalty, and financial success were the main topics that dominated informal conversations about the gang. These themes also constitutes a pivotal part of the carefully constructed imagery about the Rollin 200 Crips in the media. For instance, Keylow, the leader and founder of the gang, shows large amounts of cash money on various occasions throughout the documentary Strapped ’N Strong (2009). Furthermore, members constantly spoke about “putting in work for the h200d” and that the gang was “Rich Rollin,” or financially successful. Because I spend the first period of my fieldwork in close proximity of older members of the gang, I was influenced by the dominant narrative explaining why these members had left, claiming that they were kicked out due to a lack of loyalty or because they were “fake gangstas” and “bitches” who “couldn’t handle gang life.”
After Daniel first confided in me, we spoke more frequently about his experiences as a member of the gang. In these conservations, he would address his changing perspective on the inner workings of the gang. Daniel was in jail for the better part of the first year of my fieldwork—as was leader Keylow and several other members—and things started to change when they both came out of prison. Instead of coming to the h200d whenever he wanted or had the time, nowadays he was forced to be there every day. In addition, as he stated some weeks earlier, he experiences a lack of money:

So that’s why we slang yayo, you know? I get the whole big dream you know? And I believe in the big dream of cig cuzzo, but come on man, I also need something to get from here to the dream you know? Something in between. I know you could be taping me right now for your book, but I don’t care man. Undisclosed gang member, haha. (October 18, 2012, conversation with Daniel)

At this point Daniel, sharing his “first doubts” (Ebaugh 1988) about his role as a member of the Rollin 200 Crips, still seemed to adhere to part of the gang culture of the Rollin 200 Crips, even though his growing disillusionment with the day-to-day realities is apparent.

“I’m Getting the Feeling Morale Is Low Lately”: Crystallization of Discontent

In the weeks that followed, I learned that other, predominately younger members had similar feelings of discontent. They were bounded by several rules, like reporting to the neighborhood on a daily basis, limiting their contacts with people outside of the gang, and having to give constant notice about their whereabouts and activities. At first, most of these younger members were careful not to discuss their experiences and doubts with me. Winston, for instance, explicitly told Daniel to “shut up” as he overheard us talking about this topic.

Gradually, however, the growing disillusionment among members became more noticeable and seemed to develop into a collective “crystallization of discontent” (Baumeister 1991, 306). Most of the younger members started questioning their commitment to the gang and reflected on whether the positive aspects of gang membership outweighed the disadvantages. This led some of the members to stand up against some of the daily routines and rules. For instance, Daniel started missing his daily appointments in the h200d on purpose, Winston faked a fitness injury to get out of the constant surveillance by older gang members, and Gino found a job that restricted him to come to the neighborhood during the day. Other members complained about their
current living situations and the lack of (financial) progress, while some openly questioned the reputation of older members. In general, these younger members seemed to no longer hide their dissatisfaction with Dutch gang life.

One day Steven, an older member, overheard Daniel and Dré complaining about being broke. He walked over to leader Keylow and seemed to relay what he heard from Daniel and Dré. Keylow then called Daniel and Dré over and said, while raising his voice to catch the attention of everyone present:

Keylow: Look at Jimmy and Fernando (two former members, RaR), they wanted to grow, they wanted to move, they wanted to do more shit, and they were bitching about money. Just like you guys. Nigga, you can’t be like me! I’m Key, I’m double OG, triple OG, don’t just think you can be me. I don’t need the set, remember that! I hear a lot of complaining lately. But if you wanna do something, make some money, come talk to me! Come up with a plan, bring me a good torie (plan/ scheme, RaR). Daniel, I know you, you are a hustler, but nigga come up with a plan to make some money. Come and ask me!

Daniel: But I don’t wanna have to ask cig cuzz. I’m a man, I don’t wanna. . . .

Keylow: I get the feeling that morale is low lately. It’s like you’re saying: Key, you’re a dick. You’re just letting us stand here, in the freezing cold. But cuzzo, come up with a plan! You a smart nigga, but look at the way you are standing in the h200d, all down and shit. Fuck money nigga! Money ain’t all that. Respect, loyalty, that means more to me than money cuzzo. What could be more important than respect?

(November 22, 2012, observation)

Keylow’s response captures the essence of the underlying problem within the set of the Rollin 200 Crips. From his perspective, respect and loyalty constitute the key factors of gang membership. Even though the Crips at times make use of the stereotypical hierarchical terms embedded in the global gang culture, with “OG” being the most notable example, the gang lacks a formal structure. However, there are power differentials between members, based on age, criminal experiences, reputation, and the years they have been part of the gang. This asymmetry is usually not questioned or problematized by younger gang members. They believe that, as time passes, their position in the gang’s hierarchy will change and anticipate the balancing out of money and respect in the long run. However, as Sahlins (1972) points out, there lies a potential danger in this delayed generalized reciprocity: the absence of counter gifts might result in negative reciprocity and can, in some situations, be experienced as exploitation.
For a long time, these younger Crips seemed to accept the situation within the gang, in particular because of the benefits associated with being a member of the Rollin 200 Crips: it provided them with a sense of belonging, a certain amount of status and reputation on the streets of The Hague and, on an individual level, an identity. In addition, the prospect of things changing in the (near) future—something older members would frequently reiterate by claiming that they were “on the verge of making it big”—kept younger members loyal to the gang.

“Crip or Die?”: Methods of Leaving

Embedded in the subcultural repertoire of the Rollin 200 Crips is the notion that gang membership is “for life.” Drawing on the “blood in, blood out” mantra surrounding leaving gangs in the United States, most members of the Rollin 200 Crips have tattoos that reflect the “till death” gang loyalty in the form of phrases like “Crip for Life,” “Tru Blu To The Casket,” “200 Gang or Die,” and “Crip or Die.” Moreover, this “Crip or Die” narrative is fed by Dutch gang members drawing on comparisons with stereotypical depicting of gang life in parts of Northern or Latin America featured in popular films, series, or videos on YouTube, but also by telling stories about former members getting “kicked out” of the gang. For some members, this “Crip or Die” narrative limited actual disengagement.

Research in the United States has shown that gang membership is transitory and that most members can and do leave gangs (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Bolden 2013; Sweeten, Pyrooz, and Piquero 2013). The Netherlands, however, lack an actual gang environment or gang culture to debunk the powerful myth surrounding leaving the gang captured by the “Crip or Die” narrative. Nonetheless, most members that left these Dutch Crips since the formation of the gang in the late 1980s have done so without suffering the consequences the “Crip or Die” narrative might call forth.

The members that left the gang during my fieldwork did so rather abruptly. For most of them, Keylow’s above-mentioned outburst seemed to function as a turning point. A few weeks after the confrontation between Keylow and Daniel, the latter, and several others, rigorously cut ties with the Rollin 200 Crips: they packed their bags, moved out of the house that was provided by the gang, changed phone numbers, and left the gang indefinitely. Facilitating their departure was the fact that these leaving members did not actually stem from or lived in the neighborhood the Crips claimed as their territory.

Even though these members left without any problems, the threat of violence surrounding leaving the gang prevailed and showed powerful. As
I contacted Tyrell, one of the Crips that left, a few months after his departure, he seemed somewhat reluctant to talk to me via “Whatsapp Messenger.” He only stated that I knew what went down a couple of months earlier and ended our brief conversation with: “I can no longer come to the h200d, so you won’t see me there. But Roks, if someone asks, you never spoke to me, ya feel me?” When I met up with Tyrell five months later, he told me that he was summoned to talk to the leader—something several other former members experienced when running into active Crip members on the streets of The Hague. Most, however, refused to do so and never went back to the h200d. Since Tyrell had developed an emotional connection to the gang, believing and banging for the set for several years and seeing some of the older members as father figures, he felt compelled to give his side of the story:

When I came to the block it was like: Tyrell, go stand over there, you know? I’m like: what the fuck, you know? Always this bullshit. At least I came, you know? And then he treats me like this? And you know what Keylow did? You know what he did? He grabbed me by the throat and hit me. He started hitting me, you know? He beat the shit out of me. He said: you better start explaining what the fuck you guys are up to! I started crying right there, I’m being real with you. I couldn’t understand what was happening, you know? I always did everything they said. If they said A, I did A, you know what I mean? I always did what the fucking big homies told me. And still it was like: no, you did that wrong and you didn’t do this right. Whatever man. With all the homies, all of the homies, we put in so much work for the h200d and now we’re bitches? Now we’re bitchass niggas? (May 10, 2013, interview with Tyrell)

Over the years, I heard several stories about former members being beating, followed, and threatened. However, from the 20 members that left, Tyrell was the only one being “jumped out.”

“Volunteer Work”: Reasons for Leaving

The departure of some of the Crips I hung out with on a daily basis constituted a defining moment in my study, especially since the conflicts between my informants made me feel pressured to choose a side. Because I had known leader Keylow for almost ten years, I decided to talk to him about this thoughts on keeping in touch with some of the Crips that had left. Somewhat to my surprise, he had no objections and even seemed to recognize the importance of their perspectives for my research. But he also stated that “they won’t talk to you about that, that’s one of the silent codes of the set. But you can try.”
During 2013, I met up and interviewed most of the members that left the gang. Three main problems, all related to disillusionment with the gang experience, stood out in these conversations. First, the nature of the gang banging activities in general did not match their expectations. Most former members were drawn to the imagery surrounding the Rollin 200 Crips, either because of the media coverage or their reputation on the street of The Hague. They had certain ideas about Dutch gang life, in part inspired by the imagery of the Rollin 200 Crips in the media, but also heavenly influenced by the more stereotypical representation of American gang life in popular culture. However, as Klein (1995) observes for American street gangs, the most common gang activity is inactivity. A similar thing seemed to hold true for these Dutch Crips: the anticipation of gang banging was trumped by a day-to-day reality that meant spending time hanging around the neighborhood, waiting, and doing nothing.

Secondly, after their departure former members talked rather openly about the nature of the criminal activities they were involvement in, but also the circumstances surrounding these criminal endeavors. Younger members were forced to stay at houses where the Crips cultivated marijuana, supervising the growth, but also protecting the yields from being stolen. Others had to help during the harvesting of the cannabis or sold the product on the streets. Some, however, saw this as “child’s play” and wanted to do “grown man shit,” as former member Fernando explained to me. Next to their communal criminal activities, individual members sold narcotics on the streets. Oftentimes, members had to buy their product from the gang. One day I spoke to former members Daniel, Tyrell, and Pedro about their experiences with selling drugs. They started laughing and dishing up stories about the bad quality of the narcotics they had to sell. Their regular customers complained about the poor quality and they were not able to sell all of their product. When they addressed this problem, older members said, “If you are a good hustler, you can sell anything.”

Most of the problems relating to the disillusionment with Dutch gang life, however, stemmed from having to “put in work for the gang” but not being financially compensated for it. Looking back, Fernando states,

If you’re protecting this guy all day, watching his back, opening doors and shit, then you’re a goon, right? And goons have to get paid, right? Real talk: I’d do that, if I would get paid for it. If there’s some money in my pocket every day, it’s a different story right there. But I’m not playing a goon without getting paid. (March 23, 2013, conversation with Fernando)

A central theme in the stories told by former members was the notion of unbalanced reciprocity, not just in terms of the distribution of money but also
in terms of respect. According to the members that left the Rollin 200 Crips, these circumstances were at the heart of their disillusionment about Dutch gang life.

Next to talking to the former members, I also kept in touch with the active members of the Rollin 200 Crips. The rapid decline in members frequently came up during conversations. Rick, one of the older members who was well aware of the nature of the ongoing tensions within the set, framed the departure in a certain way:

Suddenly they’re playing hide and seek, all of a sudden they’re missing in action. Daniel was being so weird the last time we spoke. Winston also man, I heard he is hiding somewhere in another city or something. Cuzz (Keylow, RaR) even told me he dropped the thing on his foot himself, on purpose. But you know, this is how it always goes. After . . . After Sin, after Sin was killed, the shit became too real for them. Then they couldn’t bang anymore, because they suddenly had a job or something. But you know, the police also knows this. That’s why they see us as the core members. But many have left, man. (December 20, 2012, conversation with Rick)

Most older members made sense of the sudden departure by claiming that gang life became “too real” when Sin, one of the members of the Rollin 200 Crips, was shot and killed in Amsterdam in August of 2012. This violent episode—although none of the former members referred to it as effecting their decision to disengage from the gang—might have triggered the first doubts about their role as a member of the Rollin 200 Crips.

When most of his close friends had left the gang a few weeks earlier, Dré stayed. As we spoke about the “homies” leaving, he said,

Look, I don’t regret joining the gang, no way, but something has to change cuzz. Things can’t stay this way. I’m getting lazy from doing nothing all day cuzz! Cuzzo, things can’t stay this way cuzz, they just can’t. Money ain’t the most important thing for me cuzz. Look, I’ve always been a banger, but certain things need to be taken care of cuzz. My bills are piling up. Something has to change, I need some money cuzz. Roks, you don’t work for free right? Hell no, right? So, what the fuck are we talking out? I’m better of doing volunteer work or some shit. (November 5, 2012, conversation with Dré)

Eventually, Dré also left the gang in 2014 because “nothing had changed.” For Dré, as for most of the younger members, their living situations played a central role in their eventual disengagement from the gang. Their gang embeddedness (Pyrooz et al. 2013) had resulted in a marginalized position because they had runs in with the police resulting in arrests and prison sentences, with some
losing their house, job, or having to quit school in the aftermath. Moreover, they cut ties with relatives and friends outside of the gang. In this process, as Daniel illustrates, they grew more dependent on the gang for support:

I even tried to tell them like: listen, I have to make money. I can’t stand here like this you know? Like, my life is basically standing still you know? Not paying no bills, not paying nothing. No fucking mail coming in, you know what I’m saying. You know what I mean? No money coming in at all. Living hand to mouth. Little bit of money that I get, I spend on food, weed and cigarettes. Half the fucking h200d is there smoking my cigarettes and my weed. . . . You’re living day to day shit. It was me trying to help everybody else a little bit also you know? Even when I was struggling you know, I would help out Gino, I said to Gino: okay you can also slang some yayo, have some of the yayo and shit, you know? But he had no money to put into this shit, you know? So I gave him half of my yayo basically to sell, you know? Because he has a child, you know? Shit, how can I fucking not do that, you know? (March 15, 2013, interview with Daniel)

Winston told a very similar story, but with a noteworthy difference. Because he noticed the inner workings of the gang some time earlier, he started looking for a regular job to provide for himself and his girlfriend. Not to be solely dependent on the support of the set, Tyrell started a trajectory to collect unemployment benefits during the first part of 2012. After leaving the gang by the end of 2012, Winston and Gino had found a regular job. Daniel also talked about finding some form of employment, next to his criminal endeavors on the streets, to get him back on his feet.

Gang membership was not a homogeneous experience for members of the Rollin 200 Crips: there were clear differences between members in terms of their respective gang embeddedness, which related closely to their methods and motives for leaving, but also shed some light on why some stayed active members. Steven, one of the older members, for instance repeatedly told me he “wasn’t in the gang for the money,” but because he felt at home. Moreover, being a gang member provided him with an identity and a sense of direction in life. For Steven these benefits outweighed any downsides associated with gang membership. Others, in particular older members, either had a (substantial) source of income from their own criminal activities or were able to live off the money the gang made on the streets. Subsequently, they were not financially dependent on the Rollin 200 Crips.

“I Will Always Wear Blue”: The Importance of Identity

Most of the former members I spoke to had no regret leaving the gang, because they left on rather bad terms. However, for members that were
part of the set for decades, like Jermaine, this process was much more complicated:

It took me a while before I was at peace with my decision to stop banging, even though I knew it was the right thing to do. But leaving my cuzzos, my homies like that, it felt like betrayal. That Crip shit was so deep and it’s still a huge part of me. When friends ask me if I still see them, I explain that I left and that I’m trying to find a job and a house. They’re glad to hear that I took a different turn in life, but they always ask me: you are no longer banging, but you still wear blue? You know what, I will always wear blue. I’m no longer active, but I will always be a Crip. I made that choice back in 1994 and it’s on my body: Tru Blu Till My Casket Drops. Crippin cost me too much. It took me my freedom, it fucked up my relationship with women and my kids. So yeah, I will always wear blue, because that shit just cost me too much. (November 27, 2013, personal document written by Jermaine)

Jermaine shows that as Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule (2014, 280) conclude, “letting go of a strongly held identity is a difficult task.” To this day, Jermaine still sees himself as a Crip, because it constitutes an integral part of his overarching “master status” (Hughes 1945; Becker 1963). Other leaving members also held on to parts of their former gang identity in carving out their new roles. A group of former members started their own gang and kept part of the Crip identity. When I asked Daniel why they still claimed Crip after leaving the Rollin 200 Crips, he uttered: “It just made sense.” For these former members, the Crip brand still constitutes an important part of their identity and is deeply embedded in their style. For instance, the influence of the Crip identity could be found in their street names, it was oftentimes immortalized as (large) tattoos on their bodies, but it was also central to the street slang they spoke. In this case, gang disengagement meant more just than cutting ties with the gang and gang members: it ran the risk of resulting in the “horrors of identity nakedness” (Lofland 1969, 288).

A transformation of the gang was set in motion by the departure of the large number of members. In a matter of months, the set was stripped down to a core of no more than a dozen members who had been claiming Crip since the late 1980s and early 1990s. Over the years the Dutch Crips had changed, rebranded, and updated their name. The rapid changes within the gang coincided with larger developments in Dutch street culture. For new generations of youngsters, gang identities based on the American stereotypes of the Crips or Bloods seem less appealing. Since 2016, the phenomenon of the Dutch Crips as a street gang is fading and has transformed. Some of the founding fathers of the Rollin 200 Crips played a central role in the formation of a new outlaw motorcycle gang (OMCG). However, the Crip identity is still visible from the three-piece patch worn by members of this OMCG.
Discussion

Echoing the broader literature on criminal careers from a life-course perspective, there is more knowledge about joining a gang than about gang disengagement and gang desistance. The recent attention to this understudied issue in gang research has resulted in important insights about motives, methods, and consequences of leaving gangs (Carson and Esbensen 2016). However, as O’Neal et al. (2016) note, the experiences during disengagement from gangs are still underdeveloped, especially since most studies are not able to incorporate a longitudinal perspective on gang desistance. The current ethnographic research provides some directions for future research to further the knowledge on disengagement from gangs, notwithstanding the apparent limited generalizability of the results and potential ethical dilemmas—some of which are outlined in this article—involving in doing the ethnography of gang desistance or disengagement.

Among the most common motive for leaving a gang is disillusionment (Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Carson, Peterson, and Esbensen 2013; Carson and Esbensen 2016), but there is still much to learn about what constitutes the nature of the discontent resulting in gang disengagement. The current study followed the building up of conflicts within a gang and highlighted the role of gang economy in the growing disillusionment. Younger members of the Rollin 200 Crips encountered a lack of financial compensation for the work they put in for the gang, which in the long run outweighed the benefits associated with being in the gang. This problem of unbalanced reciprocity is inherent in social networks with power differentials like gangs. Moreover, as Pyrooz et al. (2013, 5) state, gang embeddedness “inversely reduces exposure to and involvement in other networks, reducing information flow, opportunities to fill structural holes and the ability to accumulate prosocial capital.” Gangs, from this perspective, highlight the dark side of social capital (Portes 1998) and might serve as important push factors promoting gang desistance and disengagement by resulting in disillusionment about gang life.

The case of the Dutch Rollin 200 Crips shows the importance of alternatives for gang life in facilitating gang disengagement. All of the twenty members that left the Rollin 200 Crips over the course of eighteen months disengaged from the gang, but not all desisted from crime. Some of the former members are still involved in criminal activities, in part suffering the consequences of their gang embeddedness. They were immersed in the set for some years and grew more dependent on the gang because of problems with law enforcement, the lack of a job, having cut ties with family and friends, and having no other regular source of income. However, the Dutch context provides various alternatives to being in a gang. In the Netherlands, there is
no (acute) necessity for gang members regarding personal safety for joining or staying in a gang. Furthermore, as Van Gemert and Weerman (2015) illustrate, mainstream economy in the Netherlands actually provides young men with more certainty and security. Former members started school, found regular jobs, successfully collected unemployment benefits, or could rely on the temporary support of their social network. Lastly, in contrast to the situation in the United States, departing members did not suffer residual consequences of their gang disengagement in the form of still being treated like a gang member by the Dutch police or criminal justice system or being included in gang databases.3

These points speak, first and foremost, to the specific socio-structural circumstances surrounding the current Dutch study. However, a similar contextualization of the process of gang disengagement or gang desistance relating to alternatives for gang life is largely absent from American gang research. A notable exception is the work of Decker et al. (2014, 280) who show that “the doubts associated with gang identity and gang events . . . are simultaneously reinforced and combated by competing social groups and institutions.” Pyrooz et al. (2014, 509) point to similar difficulties relating to gang desistance and disengagement, stating that leaving a gang may result in a more isolated life, because it “means losing friends, protection, and identity.”

The role of identity in the process of disengagement is especially evident in this study. On an individual level, being a Crip provides a clear-cut identity, including a blue uniform, tattoos, and a gang name. Furthermore, it speaks to a sense of belonging. Being part of the set constitutes an important aspect of the way these Dutch gang members see themselves and how they want to be seen. Leaving the gang means jeopardizing these nonmonetary benefits associated with gang membership. However, following the broader literature on desistance of crime (Maruna 2001; Paternoster and Bushway 2009), the importance of identity seems to be an area of both empirical and theoretical paucity in understanding gang desistance and disengagement (Decker, Pyrooz, and Moule 2014).

Lastly, the current article shows the impact of the sensational and romanticized depicting of gangs in the media and popular culture. No other topic in criminology is so powerfully influenced and distorted by its stereotypical representation as gangs (Katz and Jackson-Jacobs 2004). According to Hayward (2004, 170) this has made it “very difficult to tell whether ‘gangster rap’ imagery and styling is shaping street gang culture in the US or vice versa.” The confusion resulting from this dynamic might play a part in the disillusionment about gang life. This applies in particular to the situation in the Netherlands since it lacks a larger gang environment or culture. However, these “media loops and spirals” (Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2008, 129–39)
also have an impact on American gang life. In that sense Klein’s (2001) observation about most American gangs not fitting their own stereotypes might apply both to the researcher studying gangs and to youth (dis)engaging with gangs.

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Notes

1. In the Netherlands, an inventory instrument for youth groups is used that makes a distinction between “troublesome,” “nuisance,” and “criminal” youth groups (Beke, Van Wijk and Ferwerda 2000). The latter category comes close to the Eurogang definition (Van Gemert 2012). An inventory of the police of The Hague in 2011 reported thirty-five troublesome, twenty-two nuisance, and nine criminal youth groups in The Hague (The Hague Police 2011). None of these groups, however, could be seen as a rival group or gang.

2. Since most informants spoke Dutch, I translated the empirical data in this article. Many of the conversations, however, contained words or complete sentences in English, especially in the form of slang influenced by American street and gang culture. Daniel (a pseudonym), who was born in Africa and attended an international school in the Netherlands, is a notable exception because he always spoke English.

3. More generally, as one of the reviewers justly noted, admitting gang membership is not an issue in the criminal justice system in Netherlands, nor a ground for an enhanced penalty in the case of future criminal activities.

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