

Corrections

Gangs and Violence in Prisons

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Chapter 8: Gangs and Violence in Prisons

There are various definitions for prison gangs, but a generally accepted description is that a prison gang operates within the prison system as a criminally oriented entity that threatens, or is perceived to threaten, the orderly management of a prison.

Inmates belonging to a prison gang will often have similar norms, values, and language and have a distinct code of conduct among its members. Many prison officials use the term *security threat group* (STG) to identify a gang. Prison gangs are usually informally organized along racial or ethnic lines, mimicking and often overlapping the organization of street gangs. Inmates often join gangs as either a means to secure personal protection from other inmates or for economic gain, often relying on gang members as surrogate family members.

Among prisoners, violence is often a means by which to gain status from other inmates, and gangs provide both a means to perpetuate this violence and protection from either unaffiliated prisoners or from rival gang members. Some forms of prison violence include assault, sexual assault, riots, and homicide. Much of the violence that occurs in prison remains unreported, making it difficult to address on an individual victim level. Correctional [p. 106 ↓] facilities often use various types of segregation techniques to reduce or punish different forms of violence. They may also rely on education on both gangs and violence in an effort to reduce their prevalence.

Types of Prison Gangs

Most prison gangs are based on an inmate's race and ethnicity. Some white gangs include the Aryan Brotherhood, Hell'Angels, and Dirty White Boys. African American gangs include members belonging to the Crips, the Bloods, the Vice Lords, the D.C. Blacks, and the Black Guerrilla Family. Some Hispanic and Latino gangs include the Mexican Mafia, La Nuestra Familia, and the Latin Kings. Although a few multiracial prison gangs exist, members belonging to gangs that are not organized primarily by

race are often organized to engage almost exclusively in economic endeavors, such as drug cartels.

Many of the existing prison gangs began as street gangs that formed in the community. For example, the Hell'Angels, the Crips, and the Bloods have existed for decades in the free community. The United States began to use incarceration as its primary mechanism of punishment for gangs, and the gang population behind bars began to surge. As members of these street gangs became incarcerated, they began to form gangs using similar structures while they were incarcerated, importing many of their beliefs, values, and norms and assimilating them into their prison environments. As prisoners transfer between facilities, they may extend existing gang membership into new chapters. This not only increases membership, but also may create rivalries among the various chapters and gang affiliations. Depending on the security level of the facility, gang members may comprise as much as one-third of the total inmate population. Maximum-security facilities typically report the highest levels of gang membership, while minimum-security prisons have the lowest levels. The number of inmates involved in gangs also varies according to geographical location, with New Mexico, Texas, and California reporting the greatest number of gang members.

Gang Membership

Because prisons specifically prohibit gang membership, many members of prison gangs attempt to conceal their gang affiliation and activities. Many of the solutions to dealing with gang activities are punitive, such as placing known gang members in administrative segregation. As such, it is unclear [p. 107 ↓] as to the exact number of inmates who are affiliated with a gang. There are currently more than 100 known prison gangs throughout the United States.

Although many prison gangs engage in similar types of activities, each gang is unique and tries to differentiate itself from other rival gangs. They often have a unique motto, specific membership symbols, colors, and a constitution that dictates group behavior. Gangs often have a hierarchical structure, with a leader and a council of members who work directly under the appointed leader. The structure of a prison gang is often more stable and more organized than that of a typical street gang, in part because there

tends to be less turnover of gang members in a prison gang than a street gang. Both require absolute loyalty to one's gang, as well as complete secrecy of affiliation with the gang.

Gang members often identify each other by tattoos of their particular gang affiliations. These tattoos may be made by either cutting into the skin, or by burning the skin with an iron. Each gang typically has specific tattoos that are associated with its members, and nonmembers who falsely self-identify as a gang member may have their tattoo forcibly removed by members of the gang. Most prisons expressly prohibit tattooing, in part because of gang affiliations, but also to curb transmission of diseases. However, inmates continue to tattoo themselves and each other and often hide the tattoos under their clothing. They may also carry scraps of paper with tattoo-like emblems that are specific to their gang for identification purposes.

Prison gangs often adhere to the "blood in-blood out" adage, and are more difficult to move in and out of than the average street gang. Violence is often required for gang membership, with many gangs requiring a violent act such as murder or assault to be performed against another inmate to gain admission. The "blood out" idea indicates the difficulty of leaving a gang. Exiting gang members are often injured and potentially even killed for what is perceived by other gang members as disloyalty to the gang. Common reasons for members to leave a gang include a loss of interest in gang activities, a general level of disagreement with the leadership of the gang, or a refusal to commit violence on a former member.

Prison gangs are almost exclusively a male phenomenon. Female inmates, though somewhat involved in violence (to a lesser extent than male inmates), are not reliant on gang membership. The primary group mechanisms used by female inmates are called *pseudofamilies*, which are small, family-like units comprised of female prisoners. Family members include typical roles, such as mother, father, and daughter, and very seldom result in interpersonal violence.

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Participation in the Inmate Economy

Inmates may join a prison gang for economic purposes. Gangs often earn money by engaging in various illegal activities, such as selling drugs, extortion, theft, and prostitution. Gang members are often involved in theft of the property of their fellow inmates, sometimes invading another inmate's cell with other members of their gang to steal their valuables, only to sell them on the illegal black market within the prison. Members may also buy and sell their fellow inmates to other gang members for sexual purposes, or engage in other coercion or extortion tactics.

Anything not explicitly allowed by prison regulations is considered contraband, which has created a huge black market for gangs. The inmate economy thrives on illegal contraband, which may include drugs, alcohol, cell phones, cigarettes, condoms, and currency. Gang members residing outside the prison facilities are often instrumental in smuggling these items into the prison. Visitors may sneak items into the visiting area to give them to the inmate or toss them over the fence or wall and into the prison yard.

Furthermore, correctional officers may be coerced or blackmailed into bringing illegal items into the prison. If an inmate has knowledge of an officer breaking an institutional rule or engaging in illegal behavior, they may use this information as leverage against the correctional officer in an attempt to force them to help smuggle items into the facility. Other correctional officers may be willing to engage in illegal smuggling as a means to earn additional money.

Prison gangs are actively involved in all facets of the illegal inmate economy. However, their greatest level of participation is in the illegal drug market. In the 1980s, the amount of gang activity and gang membership began to increase. The War on Drugs increased the penalties for both drug use and drug trafficking. As such, the profit-making opportunities for drug sales both behind bars and in the community increased, coinciding with an increase in gang activity among inmates.

Participation in Violence

Although gangs often participate in the illegal prison economy, most inmates join gangs as a means of protection from potential violence at the hands of their fellow inmates, or as a way to gain status within the prison. Violence among prisoners, even those not involved in gangs, has become not only [p. 109 ↓] accepted, but also expected. Even drug and property offenders who did not commit violence pre-prison may be released as violent offenders as a result of their exposure to high levels of violence while incarcerated. Inmates must convey a tough and masculine appearance in order to thwart violent attacks at the hands of their fellow inmates.

Gang members may make up a relatively small number of the inmate population, but they are responsible for a disproportionately large number of violent activities occurring in prison. In addition to violent initiation ceremonies, violence may become part of everyday life for many gang members. Because they are often organized along racial lines, racial tensions among all prisoners, as well as between inmates and guards, may increase at a particular facility with the existence of gangs. Inmates rely on violence for purposes of intimidation and protection, thereby potentially increasing the level of violence at the institution. Gang members generally account for more assaults on other inmates and staff than inmates not affiliated with a gang. In addition to rival gang members, another common target of gang violence includes gang members who are suspected of disloyalty to the gang. This is especially prominent among members who are attempting to leave their current gang.

Just as with street gangs, turf wars may emerge over areas of the prison. Common areas, such as the cafeteria or recreation yard, are often the venue for these turf wars, in which rival gangs fight over specific, claimed territory they feel is being encroached upon by rival gang members. Unlike the turf wars among street gangs, there is no neutral or safe area for gang members to retreat to, often resulting in an eruption of violence among rival gang members.

Communication among gang members is essential to carry out organized violence within a facility. Some gangs use sophisticated code passed on slips of paper to communicate with other members, and others beat on cell walls or bars to convey

messages across prison corridors. By communicating in this manner, gang members may be able to organize massive gang-related activities with less chance of recognition by correctional authorities.

Inmates go through a process termed *prisonization*, in which they adopt the norms, values, and beliefs that are endemic to the inmate subculture. Part of this prisonization process may involve joining a gang, initially for protection purposes. Many of the ideals encompassed by the inmate subculture counter those found in the general community, such as having no respect for authority and accepting involvement in crime and violence as normal. It is also believed that the longer an inmate remains in prison, the [p. 110 ↓] more ingrained these values become in the individual's personality. Because the inmate subculture values violence as a resolution to differences, inmates often become accustomed to violence as a way of life.

The deprivation theory can be paralleled with the primary ideals of prisonization. Deprivation theory suggests that the pains of imprisonment, such as a loss of liberty, heterosexual relationships, material goods and services, autonomy, and personal security account for the creation of the inmate subculture and, consequently, violent activities and acceptance of those activities as normal. In contrast, the importation theory suggests that inmates bring their criminogenic and antisocial norms, values, and beliefs with them from the community. According to this theory, violence is already a normal way of life prior to incarceration, not something that is learned within the correctional facility. If the tenets of this theory hold true, many of the inmates who engage in gang activity may have participated in similar activities prior to their incarceration.

Types of Gang Violence in Prison

Although homicide is among the most feared types of violence, it is also the least-frequently perpetuated type of violence among the inmate population. Prison homicides are most likely to result from either a particular gang activity, such as an initiation ceremony, or as the end result of an assault against another inmate. The prevalence of homicide among inmates has drastically decreased since 1980. Many believe this decrease can be partially attributed to the practice of segregating known gang members

and other offenders who are frequent violators of violence-related rule infractions, preventing them from committing further acts of violence against other inmates.

Inmates may also use sexual violence in an attempt to control one another. All forms of sexual intercourse, including consensual sex, are prohibited by correctional policies. Although some sexual relations in prison are consensual, forced sexual contact is one way in which prisoners may exert their power and masculinity on other prisoners. Male prison society is almost completely devoid of females, many believe that males commit sexual violence against each other in an attempt to feminize their victims and act out power roles. Unlike sexual assault in the free community, the majority of sexual assaults that occur behind bars are interracial, and many are gang-related incidents occurring between rival gang members.

Male rival gang members may use both overt and covert sexual activities to exert dominance over one another. This phenomenon is less common [p. 111 ↓] among female inmates. Females are significantly less likely to become involved in gangs than their male counterparts. Additionally, female inmates are less likely to perpetrate sexual violence against their fellow inmates. Although sexual coercion may be relatively more common among female inmates than overt sexual violence, this coercion is seldom linked to gang involvement.

Many inmates adhere to the “convict code,” which is an informal set of norms and values that are loosely followed. Some of the tenets of the convict code include “be a man” and “be tough,” which may inadvertently encourage inmates to engage in violence against their fellow inmates to exert their masculinity and toughness. The code also endorses that inmates be loyal to other convicts and not attract attention to themselves, which may partially explain why many violent incidents ultimately go unreported to correctional authorities.

Levels of violence are at least partially correlated with overcrowding. As the number of inmates increases, the ability for correctional officers to continuously monitor inmates decreases. Double-celling inmates, or housing two inmates in a cell originally designed for one person, may also contribute to violence. This is especially illustrative when considering that a large number of violent physical and sexual acts occur among cellmates. Overcrowding also reduces the ability of authorities to segregate violent

inmates or those who have been violently victimized into their own housing units to prevent future acts of violence. A higher prison population also results in fewer work opportunities, leaving idle those who may be the most likely to commit acts of violence against other inmates.

Gangs as a Correlate of Violence

Not all inmates are equally likely to participate in prison violence. An informally organized prison social system, known as the prison hierarchy, loosely dictates the likelihood of an inmate's involvement in violence, either as a perpetrator or as a victim. An inmate's place on the prison hierarchy is often determined by their individual characteristics. One of the major characteristics that determine whether an inmate will occupy a place on the prison hierarchy where they are less likely to be victimized is their involvement in a prison gang. Those who become prominent gang members will find themselves in the uppermost echelons of the prison hierarchy, which not only shields them from having violence perpetrated against them, but also makes it more likely that they will perpetrate violence against other inmates.

[p. 112 ↓] Some inmates engage in activities that make them more susceptible to violence. Involvement in the buying or selling of illegal contraband, such as drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes may place an inmate at particular risk. Gambling and especially owing gambling debts also places an inmate at risk, as inmates who are owed gambling winnings may resort to physical violence in an attempt to collect unpaid debts. These types of behaviors are considered high risk, and despite being cautioned against them, many inmates who are involved in prison gangs engage in these risky behaviors.

Reporting Issues

Issues related to prison violence are further exacerbated by the fact that many incidents go unreported. Inmates are reluctant to report victimization by other inmates, in part because of the informal social structure of prison. Inmates are encouraged to not fraternize or associate with correctional officers and staff, and to not “snitch” on their fellow inmates. The consequences for officially reporting these incidents may be

revenge by their attackers or other inmates, as they may be viewed as weak. Although it would seem that inmates may be therefore more likely to report incidents perpetrated against them by correctional staff, they also may be reluctant to report these incidents. Some inmates believe that their reports of violence at the hands of correctional staff will not be taken seriously, and others fear the reprisal of reporting such incidents. This issue is particularly pertinent when the attacks are committed by gang members. Inmates who report victimization may be particularly fearful of not only their attacker, but of their attacker's fellow gang members seeking out revenge against them for reporting the incident to correctional officers.

Inmates are often hesitant to report sexual victimization to an even greater extent than other forms of physical victimization. Victims may fear that the perpetrator(s) may exact revenge for reporting the incident to correctional authorities, possibly leading to future acts of physical and sexual victimization. Victims may also feel embarrassed at their own perceived lack of masculinity. Because of the normative nature of violence among prisoners, inmates may not perceive that a crime has occurred. Especially among inmates who engage in risky behaviors, such as gambling and black-market involvement, sexual violence or sexual misconduct is often seen as a solution to indebtedness, and victims may believe they are deserving of this type of victimization.

Violence perpetrated by gangs poses particular problems with respect to reporting. Victims of gang violence may be especially likely to not report [p. 113 ↓] the violence to correctional authorities. Fear of reprisal by gang members is particularly feared by targets of violence. Furthermore, because a great deal of gang violence perpetrated behind bars is between rival gang members, it is likely that the target may not report it because they do not want their involvement in a gang to be revealed. The punishments and segregation methods in place at most facilities provide disincentives to reporting gang violence. Gang members are typically more likely to handle violence through vigilante justice, exacting revenge on their attackers either by themselves or with their fellow gang members.

Solutions to Gangs

Because correctional facilities prohibit gang membership among inmates, various official methods attempt to eliminate or reduce gang membership and gang violence within correctional facilities. These methods vary according to the state and the individual institution. Correctional policies try to account for the unique nature of prison gangs when determining appropriate solutions and responses to gang membership. The traditional method was to increase the length of a prison sentence for known gang members. However, because many gang members are already serving a life sentence, this solution provides little incentive for them to leave a gang. Prison policies also often consider the potential for punitive measures to increase the shroud of secrecy associated with gang membership.

Identification, Segregation, and Tracking

The first step to controlling gang activity is to successfully identify potential gang members. Upon intake, inmates are subject to a process of classification for housing purposes by classification specialists who are trained in identifying potential gang members. Some states require that inmates who are identified as gang members be placed in disciplinary segregation, which is meant as a form of separate housing from other inmates. In disciplinary segregation, inmates are given no privileges other than one hour of outdoor recreational time per day, which can be revoked at the discretion of correctional authorities. The rationale for disciplinary segregation is two-fold: it is meant as a punishment for gang membership, and prohibits interaction with other gang members in an attempt to reduce violence among inmates in the prison's general population.

Another scenario is that identified gang members may be sent to separate facilities. Again, the purpose of this segregation is to decrease interaction [p. 114 ↓] and violence among those housed in the general population. However, housing gang members together may allow for members to interact with other gang members, thereby increasing violence at the institutions exclusively housing gang members. Furthermore,

after interstate transfers of high-ranking gang members, these members may simply open a new chapter in a new state.

Certain minimum-security institutions can also be deemed gang-free facilities. In order for inmates to be sent to a gang-free facility, they must have no existing or previous history of gang membership or association. These institutions are considered to be significantly less violent and safer than other types of institutions, and may prevent inmates who may have otherwise joined a prison gang from doing so.

Databases are now used by correctional agencies in an effort to track and monitor prison gangs and their activities. Not only can correctional agencies share information with each other on inmates who have been identified as gang members, but there is also the possibility of inter-agency information sharing, allowing police agencies to also be involved in the process. A major benefit to these databases is that photographs of the individual, as well as any identifying tattoos or scars, are associated with the individual's file. Database searches can be conducted simply based on these identifying marks.

Treatment, Rehabilitation, and Education

Some states have implemented gang treatment and rehabilitation strategies. In these venues, once a gang member has been identified by the classification staff and segregated, they are placed into a peer-led program. These programs are led by former gang members who instruct the newly arrived inmates on how to deal with and avoid violence within the facility without resorting to gang membership. Some facets of these programs include increasing an individual's problem-solving skills, utilizing role-playing strategies, and providing substance abuse treatment. Other alternatives may include programs for existing gang members who are committed to ceasing their membership status. Inmates who have been segregated for association or membership with a gang may show an interest in this type of program in order to be returned to the general correctional population.

Many prisons have programs that are meant to educate inmates on issues related to both physical and sexual violence. These programs center on educating inmates on

what constitutes violence, providing them with alternatives to engaging in violence and the resources to deal with victimization.

[p. 115 ↓] They also encourage inmates to avoid high-risk behaviors that may place them at a greater risk of victimization, such as gambling and buying or selling goods on the illegal inmate market. These programs are often peer-led by other inmates who have firsthand experience as either the perpetrators or victims of prison violence.

Curbing Contraband

Prison administrators have long recognized the role that illegal contraband has in perpetuating violence among prisoners. Possession or trafficking of illegal drugs and alcohol are not allowed at any correctional institution, and cigarettes are banned at most institutions. Cigarettes are particularly problematic because they are both legal in the community and can be easily smuggled in by visitors or correctional officers. They are also often considered the primary currency among inmates, used in place of money for activities such as gambling and bartering for goods and services. Banning these various forms of contraband has become somewhat controversial. Although the prison administration fears possession of these items and the dangers associated with them, some believe that disallowing items in prison that would otherwise be considered legal, such as cigarettes, creates more violence by perpetuating the black market and allowing gang members and other entrepreneurial inmates the opportunity to extort and commit further acts of violence.

Connections with Loved Ones

In an effort to decrease the violence that occurs as an outcome of frustration or despair at the loss of contact with loved ones, many prisons allow for visits between prisoners and family members. By allowing inmates to visit with their families, especially their spouses and children, many believe they are better able to maintain a healthy, masculine self-image, reducing their need to commit violence against other inmates in an effort to exert male domination. Conjugal visits in particular may prevent sexual violence in that it allows inmates to maintain a healthy, nonviolent sexual relationship.

All forms of visitation are believed to be helpful in preventing violent rule violations, as inmates view them as part of a reward system for good behavior. As such, allowing for visitation may prevent inmates from joining gangs by allowing them to continue their social contacts with the outside world.

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Technology and Prison Structure

Some facilities are beginning to rely on various forms of technology to curb violence. Many facilities use some form of closed circuit television (CCTV) to monitor and record activities within the institution. Video cameras can be used to capture images and, if monitored, can prevent violence or prevent violent activities from escalating. There are also projects currently underway to use crime-mapping software to help determine whether a particular institution is at risk for particular violent incidents, such as attempted escapes, riots, sexual assaults, and assaults on staff members.

Others have recommended an overhaul in the structure of correctional administration on a large scale in order to address some of the issues related to gang violence. Because the inmate culture feeds on an “us versus them” mentality (the prisoners versus the correctional staff), breaking down the barriers between these two groups may be key to disentangling many of the issues associated with the convict code and inmate subculture. Some suggest that additional training of correctional officers to treat inmates more humanely may address some of the issues related to violence. Most notably, those associated with nonreporting of crimes and major violent incidents, such as riots, may be impacted by this upheaval of the existing correctional framework.

The negative aspects to having existing gangs within correctional facilities include potential increases in violence, gambling, and black market activity. However, some argue that the existence of gangs may actually be beneficial to correctional facilities and staff. Correctional staff may even look down upon inmates who cannot protect themselves against more aggressive, violent inmates.

Pro: Positive Aspects of Prison Gangs

Gang organizations may serve as a mechanism of informal social control. Prison is meant to be a total institution, one in which all aspects of inmates' lives are controlled. However, as the prison population continues to grow, it may become increasingly difficult for correctional officers to exercise the extent of formal social control necessary to consistently control the inmates. The number of incarcerated individuals continues to surge, often with few correctional officer hires, and there continues to be an increasing disparity between the ratio of inmates to officers. Gangs may therefore buttress the existing formal social order of the prison by providing norms and values to which inmates can adhere.

[p. 117 ↓] Moreover, gangs may actually help foster a sense of cohesion among group members. Although intergang violence is problematic, belonging to a gang may give inmates an informal social structure in which to survive the harsh realities of prison life. Gang affiliation may protect inmates against violence at the hands of other inmates, without physical violence to necessitate this protection. In other words, it may be the threat of potential retaliation by gang members, and not the actual retaliation, that isolates inmates within their gangs for protection.

Violence occurring among prisoners may also deflect some violence from correctional officers. If inmates view each other as being the enemy, they may be less likely to engage in violence against the correctional staff. Again, by providing a form of informal social control, the mechanisms of formal social control (in this case, the correctional staff), may become less of a threat to the existing social structure among the inmates.

Con: Drawbacks of Prison Gangs

There are many negative aspects to tolerating the existence of gangs within correctional settings. Gangs are likely responsible for a disproportionate amount of violence against other inmates, as well as against correctional officers and staff. They also smuggle drugs, cigarettes, and other contraband into the facility. Gangs are therefore responsible for creating a significant amount of criminogenic activities behind bars. Despite the

deflection of violence against correctional officers and staff, it may be seen as more beneficial by the correctional administration to curb or even eliminate the existence of gangs from the facilities, and therefore reduce criminogenic activities.

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Further Readings

See Also: Prison Overcrowding, Sex Offender Treatment

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