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Gangs in Corrections

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### Abstract

Images of gangs in correctional facilities as portrayed in popular culture seem to create an impression among the public that they know everything that there is to know about the culture and world of prison gangs. The prevailing stereotype of gangs in corrections focuses on a crude system of survival at all costs and a position of unredeemable corruption by prison officials who either benefit from the culture or turn a blind eye to it, and of prisoners who for all intents and purposes, are unable to be rehabilitated themselves. But the truth is that much of what we know about the entire prison system and not just about the phenomena of gang affiliations is based on inaccurate and insufficient data.

## Gangs in Corrections

Images of gangs in correctional facilities as portrayed in popular culture seem to create an impression among the public that they know everything that there is to know about the culture and world of prison gangs. The prevailing stereotype of gangs in corrections focuses on a crude system of survival at all costs and a position of unredeemable corruption by prison officials who either benefit from the culture or turn a blind eye to it, and of prisoners who for all intents and purposes, are unable to be rehabilitated themselves.

On one level there is some factual truth to this perception, but the rest of the facts make up a totally different picture and one that is nearer to reality. The fact is that most information about gangs in correctional facilities and of the violence or disruption they cause there is based on superficial and oftentimes sweeping generalizations. There is a need for a re-contextualization of evidences gathered from incidents involving prison gangs in order for more accurate analysis that would be helpful in formulating appropriate correctional strategies (Douglas, et.al, 2006). Another important point is that there is a need to properly identify or classify as to what gang an offender is affiliated to. There is disturbing evidence to suggest that some would rather go to prison and be gang-members inside because the material and economic benefits are far better than what is found outside of prison. Another important fact is that the social relationship that occurs between inmates and prison officials raises important questions on the dynamics of correctional management; should this be tolerated? Should this be exploited knowing that it has been proven to play a role in maintaining order inside a prison? If yes, what are the ethical issues involved?

Fifth fact is that law enforcement strategies can in themselves be instruments to contain the activities of prison gangs. The sharing of intelligence communication among the channels

within a prison and with law enforcement allows the ability of correction officials to curb and even avert both illegal and disruptive activities. With these facts in mind, there is an urgency to update what experts know about the state of prisons and correctional facilities and of how the gangs in these institutions currently operate; data should be properly contextualized within more relevant and appropriate parameters.

An indication that the criminal justice system has come to understand the importance of properly contextualizing prison gangs within proper geographical and institutional definitions is the change in terminology. The American Correctional Association now has three terms or categories for gang inmates; “Security Threat Groups,” “Security Risk Groups,” and/or “Disruptive Groups” and are defined thus as;

*“two or more inmates, acting together, who pose a threat to the security or safety of staff/inmates, and/or are disruptive to programs and/or to the orderly management of the facility/system” (Santana, 2007).*

These redefinitions are necessary simply because the composition of inmates within American correctional facilities has changed and grown considerably to even include ideological extremists and terrorists along with your garden variety criminals and street gang members. Still, the major prison gangs or organizations with memberships all across the nation’s prisons are the following; Neta, Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerrilla Family, Mexican Mafia, La Nuestra Familia and the Texas Syndicate. Other prominent gangs include Bloods, 5% Nation of Gods & Earth, Latin Kings, Crips and the Prison Brotherhood of Bikers. It has to be pointed out that these Security Threat Groups or STG organizations vary from state to state and with federal jurisdictions; there is also a difference in the kind of STG culture present in the East and West Coast regions (Santana, 2007).

In this context, the second important fact of proper identification and classification of criminal offenders comes in to play. But why is this important? This is important because much of the data which would have been useful in truly understanding the psychological processes and dynamics of gang memberships in a correctional setting is muddled as well as being inadequate. Experts keep emphasizing that membership in prison gangs contributes to violent behavior, but the empirical evidence through statistical data is simply not there (Douglas, et.al, 2006). The institutional procedures in the criminal justice system simply ascribe affiliation with the offense or the behavior but do not make any distinction as to motives. To be able to effectively say that there is a correlation between affiliations that is contributory to violence, there must be empirical comparison with a similar high-risk group.

If effective classification is to be achieved, the system has to be overhauled. Much of the information gathered from criminal offenders come from a variety of sources, across a multitude of authorities and in varying forms that a policy is clearly needed to gather, collate and share this information in a uniform manner. The inaccuracy of this system is obvious when classification by the criminal justice system of a criminal offender seems to be based less on the crime committed but on his supposed gang affiliation (Douglas, et.al, 2006).

In short, much of what we actually know about gangs in correctional settings is for the most part, distorted and misleading even to the extent that research findings themselves are based on generalizations and conclusions that are unsupportable by viable data. But this much we know to be true- that violence within our nation's prisons are not random rumblings by violent, discontented people.

Correctional responses to such violent acts would only have positive and successful outcomes if they are able to address specific institutional contexts that create or contribute to the

violence. In this regard, we have seen at least in the area of social control through correctional infrastructure, innovations in the way prison layouts are planned; residential units for inmates for example have been modified in such a way as to discourage attempts of inmates to launch violent episodes (Fleisher, 2005).

The irony of this seeming hardness and the way politicians and legislators carry on about putting more beef into crime legislation is that the real cause of crime is inevitably ignored. This irony is never more starkly illustrated by the rising tide of juvenile offenders coming from the nation's most economically depressed areas even as current legislation allows more dollars to go to the very prisons that will house them as well as going to support the medical care, schooling and employment training of those at risk.

In short, being in prison brings more privileges, safety and relative comfort than being outside and at the mercy of out of control social forces and a government that is not doing enough to both nurture and protect its citizens. But even inside, the same landscape of violence and abuse is also present but with a difference; they're displaced by numerous other options designed to allow an inmate to have control of his life. He could work; have some measure of schooling, drug therapy and rehabilitation and even medical care (Griffin, 2007).

In this setting, the positive outcomes of such choices are determined by how well inmates get along with their jailers. Sociologists point out that a balance has to be kept for the best cost-benefit ratio; relationship between inmates and correctional staff therefore has to consider the key element for the ratio to work which is being able to work well together for the longest time. Or until such time that the inmate is released (Krienert, Fleisher, 2001).

The logic behind this relationship or exchange is that nobody wants violence and disruption if they can't help it. Inmates would have to forge cooperation among all stakeholders

inside a correctional facility if relative peace is to be enjoyed. Part of this cooperation is acknowledging the fact that achieving this means accepting to be managed and to follow the regulations of the facility (Griffin, 2007).

In essence, what holds a prison together is the social exchange theory which suggests that violence is best controlled not by strict management, but by enforcement of correctional measures? In this regard, gang members are plied with work and research has shown that these high-risk prisoners who ultimately get to earn high incomes become less likely to engage in violent behavior. In short, STGs who are “potentially the most disruptive inmates in a prison, may be best controlled by implementing programs that strengthen inmates ties to prison programming.” (Fleisher, Rison, 1999).

What does this ultimately say about so-called criminal minds? This proves that inmates can also think in a rational manner; why be disruptive and violent when current tax dollars ensure that prison life is way much better than living in the ghettos? Prisoners, even gang members have a strong sense of self-preservation. The only reason why prison gangs have become as strong as they are in some correctional facilities is simply because the structure itself encouraged it; weak prison management, inadequate facilities, corrupt staff, etc. Violence and the gangs settled down when conditions ultimately improved (Bumgarner, 2006).

There is an urgent need to better understand the nature of gangs in correctional settings using research designs and methods which are appropriate to specific settings. Much of what we know about the entire prison system and not just about the phenomena of gang affiliations is based on inaccurate and insufficient data.

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