

Focusing on Prison Gangs

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It is hard to understand why the prison gang phenomenon does not attract more attention from the media, scholars, and policy analysts. One would think it would be big news that powerful race and ethnically based gangs are an entrenched feature of many American (and foreign) prisons and that this phenomenon has only gotten bigger and more entrenched since my study of the "supergangs" at Stateville Penitentiary almost a quarter century ago (Jacobs, 1977). Do politicians and the public realize that when a male defendant is sentenced to prison, there is a good chance that he will join a gang (voluntarily or involuntarily), regard it as his family, submit to its discipline, and work toward its antisocial goals; and that if the inmate is not gang material, he may be preyed upon, terrorized, exploited, and dominated by the gang? Is it widely known that our prisons are the spawning grounds for neo-Nazi racist groups? And that the prisons provide opportunity for street gangs to mature into full-blown organized crime groups? Gangs in prison pose a serious challenge to prison officials and law enforcement agencies, and they should be a concern to all of us. The publication of this symposium is therefore very good news.

The worst-case scenario is that prison gangs serve to strengthen gangs on the street. There is fluid communication between the gang members outside and inside prison. Criminal schemes are hatched in prison and carried out on the streets and vice versa. Within the prison, gang members are never out of the sight of their peers and leaders. Thus, the gang becomes a larger force in a low-level

member's life. The chance that, upon release from prison, the gang inmate will make a clean break with his gang banging past is sharply diminished.

The presence of powerful prison gangs sporting their colors, tattoos, and insignias sends a signal to inmates that the staff do not control the prison and that antisocial norms and values prevail there as in the inner city. For inmate gang members, the prison is not a "time out" from the gang life of the streets. It provides an opportunity to perform in front of some of the gang's legendary leaders; rank and status are won and lost, criminal careers are shaped.

It is no surprise that prison gangs pose security problems. For one thing, there is always the danger of inter-gang conflict at the individual and group level. For another, there is the constant threat to unaffiliated inmates and the intimidation of staff. In exchange for recognition and noninterference, the gang leaders have sometimes been willing to offer a kind of peace. But this is a peace that comes at a heavy cost. The gang leaders' good will, reasonableness, and ability to manage inter-gang relations cannot be counted on in the long run. In addition, officials cannot ethically or lawfully turn a blind eye toward serious criminality within the prison.

What are the implications of a prison gang culture for programs and treatment? Is it likely that prisoners will be rehabilitated or rehabilitate themselves in a gang-dominated environment? For rank and file members, the most significant reality is the gang, its leaders' praise or criticism, peers' approval, and endless intrigues, conflicts, and rackets. The gang

leaders are not likely to be pleased by subordinates shifting their allegiance to professional staff and pro-social goals. Classes and programs may become sites for conducting gang business. Teachers and other professionals may be intimidated or demoralized by their presence. Staff may become cynical about the capacity of inmates to turn their lives around and may become suspicious about tacit collaboration between program personnel and the gangs. Even if one is skeptical about prison's rehabilitative potential, one can feel strongly that the prison experience should not encourage inmates to become more deeply committed to antisocial values and lifestyles. The presence of prison gangs undermines even this modest goal.

This is a *major challenge* for correctional leadership. The general goals of policy should be clear. We want to reduce the prison gang phenomenon as much as possible, which means reducing the size, power, and influence of gangs. But how is this to be done consistent with due process and with the safety and security of the prison and prison system? What kind of intelligence gathering is necessary? What kinds of cooperation and coordination with urban police departments are optimal? Is it desirable or possible to separate gangs by tiers, cell houses, work assignments, recreation, and even by prison? Should active gang membership be made an administrative violation? Can anti-gang strategies that have worked in the community be adapted successfully to the prison? I certainly do not know the answer to these questions, but I am certain that there is a need for sustained profes-

sional and scholarly attention. To begin, the collective experience coping with and combating gangs must be memorialized and analyzed, successes must be identified and disseminated, failures must be scrutinized and digested, and the problem must be brainstormed from every possible perspective. This sympo-

sium should become, I hope, the first of many.

REFERENCE

Jacobs, J.B. (1977). *Stateville: The penitentiary in mass society*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

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