



# Managing prison gangs: Results from a survey of U.S. prison systems<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Responses from a survey of gang management strategies were collected from U.S. prison systems holding 1.19 million inmates. The results provided insight into the prevalence of gang members in prisons, gang structure, as well as the strategies used to manage the threat that these groups pose. Officials from most prison systems reported an increase in the proportion of security threat group (STG) members over the past five years and that these offenders were more disruptive and sophisticated than five years ago. Despite these challenges, there was no one clear strategy for the investigation or suppression of these groups, nor did most systems evaluate the effectiveness of their current gang management interventions. A lack of rehabilitative opportunities for gang members represents one shortcoming in the range of gang management strategies in most jurisdictions. The implications of these findings are addressed.

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## Introduction

There had been growing concern about the criminal activities of prison gang members, both within correctional facilities, and also their reach into the community. Researchers have reported that the boundaries between gangs in prison and community were becoming increasingly blurred as these organizations become more sophisticated: threatening not only institutional security, but public safety as well (Curry & Decker, 2003; Wilkinson & Delgado, 2006). This problem is exacerbated given that the presence of gangs and gang members in correctional facilities has been expanding (Decker, 2003; Hill, 2004, 2009; Ruddell, Decker, & Egle, 2006; Wells, Minor, Angel, Carter, & Cox, 2002).

According to a 1999 survey by the National Gang Crime Research Center, gang membership within adult state correctional facilities increased from 9.4 percent in 1991 to 24.7 percent in 1999 (Knox, 1999). Other studies in correctional settings reported smaller proportions of gang-involved prisoners: 13 percent in prisons and 16 percent in jails (Wells et al., 2002), and 13.2 percent in a 2004 study of jail administrators (Ruddell et al., 2006). Furthermore, surveys from the American Correctional Association reported averages of 11.7 percent security threat group (STG) members in 2003, and 13.8 percent in 2008 (Hill, 2004, 2009). These averages masked a wide variation in the proportion of gang members within different prison systems, as some systems had estimates many times the mean. Extrapolating the 13 percent estimate of the gang-involved population to the entire U.S. prison population on June 30, 2008 (West &

Sabol, 2009), results in an estimated 200,000 gang-involved prisoners currently imprisoned, which is one way of establishing the boundaries of the STG problem.

Regardless of the size of these groups, their negative influences on the safety and security of correctional institutions is well-documented. The threats are expressed in a manner of different forms, ranging from involvement in major incidents, the distribution of contraband (including drugs), contributing to higher rates of violence, increasing racial, ethnic, or inter-group tensions within facilities, undermining the rehabilitative programming by supporting criminogenic values, engaging in criminal enterprises, and contributing to failure in community reintegration if parolees return to gang activities upon release (Fischer, 2001; Trulson, Marquart, & Kawucha, 2006).

Given the challenges that prison gangs pose, it is important to develop strategies that can reduce the influence of such groups, as well as thwarting the recruitment of new members. A first step is to review different gang management strategies to determine if there are successful interventions; which was the purpose of this study. In order to better understand the interventions that different jurisdictions are using to manage the threat that STG pose to prison systems, a survey of all U.S. prison systems was conducted in March 2009, and the results reported after reviewing the influences of STG on prison operations and contemporary gang management strategies.

## The negative impacts of STG on correctional systems

Gang membership is associated with higher rates of correctional violence. Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffran, and Suppa (2002) pointed out that although prison gangs are a pervasive problem in many jurisdictions "there has been very little empirical analysis of the impact of prison gang membership on violence" (p. 359). One of the

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difficulties in conducting such research is determining whether prison violence is the result of gang activities, as victims or witnesses are often unwilling to cooperate with authorities for fear of reprisals. Studies where investigators had documented these relationships showed consistent findings: Fong, Vogel, and Buentello (1992) reported that of the twenty-five homicides in the Texas prison system in 1984, twenty (80 percent) were gang related. Fischer (2001) observed that between 1994 and 2000, prison gang members in Arizona's Department of Corrections were 74 percent more likely to engage in serious violations than non-gang members. Studies by Cunningham and Sorensen (2007), as well as Griffin and Hepburn (2006) also found that gang affiliation was associated with prison violence. Last, a recent study by the Department of Corrections for Washington State reported that gang members represented approximately 18 percent of the inmate population but accounted for 43 percent of all major violent infractions inside their prisons (Dinny, 2009). Altogether, this research showed that a relatively small proportion of the incarcerated population is responsible for an inordinate amount of misconduct and violence.

Another significant challenge to the safe operations of penitentiaries is the extent to which gang members attempt to compromise staff members through their use of associates in the community. Wilkinson and Delgado (2006), for instance, found that gang members collectively tried to manipulate and/or intimidate staff members. Other jurisdictions reported that off-duty correctional officers were killed by gang members (Winterdyk, 2009). Such incidents and threats reinforce the dangers inherent in the job of correctional officer and contribute to increased levels of stress associated with the job.

In addition to violence, illegal activities undertaken by gang members include the importation of drugs into correctional facilities and the perpetuation of an underground economy (e.g., unauthorized transactions between inmates – see Reuters, 2009). Correctional officials at an International Symposium on Gangs and Drugs in December 2008 drew the link between gangs and the proliferation of drugs in prisons (Correctional Service of Canada, 2008). One of the challenges that correctional systems have to confront is that illicit drugs and the underground economy contribute to violence. Moreover, these illicit activities can be so lucrative that they have the potential to compromise staff members (see Santos, 2007), further eroding institutional safety and security.

Prison gang members may also actively undermine the rehabilitative programs within a facility. Colon (2004) found, for instance, that gang-involved juveniles attempted to weaken educational or therapeutic programs in California detention centers. It is likely that the same behaviors occur in adult corrections. A study from the Correctional Service of Canada (in press) reported that gang members placed illegal activities as a priority rather than rehabilitation and reintegration. It is possible that these prisoners might discourage other non-affiliated offenders from actively participating in their case management or rehabilitative plans.

Another current fear is the radicalization of prison inmates. Hamm (2008) reported that in the United States some gang members have become radicalized (e.g., adopting and promoting radical political or terrorist agendas – see Ford, 2009 for an example from England). Terrorist groups might also see prisons as a fertile recruiting ground as some inmates are angry and disaffected. Marchese (2009) highlighted examples of “Richard Reid (the so-called shoe bomber) and Jose Padilla (the so-called dirty bomber), both former inmates who converted to Islam and later took up the cause of terrorism” (p. 46).

Many gangs form along racial or ethnic lines, and this may contribute to higher levels of inter-group tensions in correctional facilities (Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 2002; Ross & Richards, 2002). An August 2009 riot that sent fifty-five prisoners to the hospital and resulted in the destruction of a dormitory at the California Institution for Men in Chino, California was attributed to tensions between Black and Latino prisoners (Mozingo & Roosevelt,

2009), and it is possible that these tensions were inflamed by STG activities.

Last, understanding the scope of the prison gang problem is also important for public safety, as gang membership has a high correlation with recidivism (Adams & Olson, 2002; Olson, Dooley, & Kane, 2004). McShane, Williams, and Dolny (2003), for example, found that parolees who were affiliated with gangs were more likely to be returned to prison on a technical violation or re-offend with a new offense. Huebner, Varano, and Bynum (2007) found that gang membership was a strong predictor of reconviction, and that parolees who were both gang-involved and drug dependent had the highest rates of reconviction, showing that membership in a criminal organization does not bode well for a safe transition to the community.

### Gang management strategies

STG investigators and security staff members had developed a number of intervention strategies over the past few decades to respond to gangs and their misconduct. These strategies are based upon the prevalence and characteristics of gang-affiliated populations within a prison population (e.g., the suspected and validated members, the sophistication and durability of the STG, as well as the levels of inmate commitment to the group). In addition, the interventions that evolved were also shaped by a number of organizational factors, such as management's acknowledgement of the problem, departmental policies and procedures, investigative, intelligence, and security resources, and the willingness to involve external stakeholders such as law enforcement in gang management activities.

To date, no single strategy had been proven effective at managing STGs: Interventions that were successful in one jurisdiction with a particular type of STG might be ineffective in another jurisdiction or with other types of prison gangs. For instance, managing the threats posed by members of a local street gang that has a fluid organization, a relatively short history, and members who are only loosely committed to the group are different than the interventions that targeted outlaw motorcycle gangs (OMG) that had a national presence, an organizational structure that evolved over decades, with members who identify with, and are highly committed to the organization. While no single gang suppression approach is used in all jurisdictions, many prison systems have developed a common set of strategies, such as staff training, and intelligence sharing, while others have developed more specialized interventions (e.g., isolating STG leaders, transfers, and renunciation strategies).

Intelligence gathering and dissemination is a key priority for many prison systems. Wells and colleagues (2002) reported that over three-quarters of prisons had established gang management strategies that included monitoring inmate communication, collecting and compiling information from searches, and in most cases sharing this information with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. Nadel (1997) noted that investigations may result in the development of profiles on individual gang members, gangs, as well as aiding in solving crimes committed in the community. Correctional officials routinely share information intercepted from gang members with law enforcement, and these relationships result in increased prosecutions of gang members, benefiting both parties (Thomas & Thomas, 2007).

In order to counter the impact of STG, law enforcement and corrections officials had used a variety of investigative approaches. There had, for instance, been increasing interest in using social network analysis to better understand the structure and organization of gangs and organized crime (Schwartz & Rouselle, 2009). Some jurisdictions had experimented with different technological innovations—such as data mining—to better understand STG activities. Moreover, fusion centers, where information from federal, state, and local law enforcement sources, as well as the private sector, is collated, were becoming more prevalent (Rollins, 2008). Last, some departments of correction had partnered with private sector vendors to

track goods and services used by offenders and their associates (e.g., telephone records or financial transactions). Many of these interventions, however, were in their development stages, and evaluations of the efficacy of these interventions had generally not been conducted (Winterdyk, 2009).

Information sharing leverages the results produced from internal investigations. In many jurisdictions, the aggressive prosecution of unsolved cases (whether in the prison or community) or current criminal activities (such as the distribution of narcotics) may result in additional prison terms for the gang-involved inmate and their associates. As such, these interventions increase the potential legal costs and consequences of gang membership and may deter some prisoners from associating with an STG, as well as further incapacitating those convicted of additional offenses.

In addition to information sharing, many jurisdictions used different forms of containment strategies to prevent the proliferation of STGs and to reduce the flow of new members into gangs. These strategies had taken the form of isolating leaders or validated members, and transferring leaders throughout the prison system to reduce their influence. Despite the best of intentions, however, in some cases, these interventions had proven to be ineffective. Petersilia (2006) described how "in 2004, eight leaders of La Nuestra Familia pled guilty to federal racketeering conspiracy charges for directing drug deals, ordering murders, and orchestrating robberies from their cells at Pelican Bay State Prison, California's supermaximum-security prison" (p. 33). Thus, even though these prisoners were isolated, they exerted a strong negative influence within the prison system and in the community. In some cases, trying to prevent the proliferation of gangs had the opposite effect. Transferring gang leaders within prison systems to reduce their influence may have resulted in higher levels of STG membership as these prisoners recruited new members after their transfers. As a result, it is important to consider the unforeseen or unanticipated consequences of gang management strategies.

Gang containment approaches vary by jurisdiction. Several states had experimented with isolating gang members in specific units or facilities to minimize their influence (Fischer, 2001; Hill, 2009; U.S. Department of Justice, 1992). Others introduced gang-free prisons where STG-involved inmates are transferred to designated facilities. This approach was intended to reduce the likelihood of inmates being recruited because they were fearful of gang violence or drawn to gangs for better access to drugs or other contraband (Rivera, Cowles, & Dorman, 2003). Knox (2005) reported that 11.6 percent of male inmates and 3.7 percent of women offenders first joined a gang while imprisoned (p. 1). Given these statistics, there is an intuitive conceptual appeal to the notion that correctional officials should attempt, whenever possible, to contain the numbers of gang members by preventing the recruitment of new members.

While most of the gang management strategies outlined above are based on suppression, there had been growing interest in renunciation strategies where disaffected STG members renounce their gang. Renunciation programs typically involve debriefing—where the inmate discloses their involvement in gang activities and intelligence about the STG to investigators—and a transfer to units or facilities where they will be safe from members of their former gangs. Other jurisdictions were experimenting with rehabilitative programs that provide a pathway from gang activities (Di Placido, Simon, Witte, Gu, & Wong, 2006). One of the challenges of these two approaches, however, is that the sincerity of these gang members is sometimes doubtful.

Most gang management strategies are suppression oriented, and there were few examples of jurisdictions that had used the rehabilitative resources of a prison system to thwart gang recruitment or that lead to renunciation. Di Placido et al., (2006) reported that a long-term treatment program for gang-involved offenders reduced recidivism. Furthermore, these investigators found that when treated gang members did re-offend, they engaged in less serious offenses

than a matched comparison group of gang members. Such rehabilitative interventions, however, appeared to be the exception rather than the norm for most prison systems.

A number of jurisdictions had introduced reentry courts for serious and violent parolees, including gang members. While not an institutional correctional intervention *per se*, it is important to acknowledge the importance of community-based interventions in the transition of offenders into the community. Similar to other drug and other specialized courts, reentry courts allowed members of the courtroom work group to develop expertise about the challenges of gang members reintegrating into society. Greenberg (2007) observed that such courts "employ a hands-on carrot-and-stick approach, leveraging the court's authority to: 1) apply graduated sanctions and positive reinforcement, and 2) marshal community resources to support the individual's reentry" (p. 18). These types of interventions might help bridge the often difficult transition from prison to community for some gang members (especially those with loose ties to gangs), as well as subjecting them to higher levels of scrutiny once released.

Thus, a number of gang management strategies had been introduced to control gangs. Despite the best efforts of correctional professionals, however, the efforts to date had not contained STG: gangs continue to be a disruptive element in prison systems contributing to disorder and violence and reduced public safety in the community. The aim of this research was to collect information about current gang management strategies and determine the efficacy of these approaches.

## Data and methods

Surveys were sent to all U.S. prison systems (federal and state), as well as two corporate systems in March 2009. The list of contact persons was initially compiled from the National Major Gang Task Force website. When contact information was missing or incomplete the Department of Corrections in question was contacted, and members of the research team typically communicated with Directors of Security, Investigative Bureaus, or Gang/STG Units. Most respondents held such positions, and as such, had direct and expert knowledge of the prevalence of STG in their systems, as well as current gang intervention or management strategies.

The questionnaire solicited information across six primary areas relating to prison gangs as well as prison gang intervention strategies and/or practices: the prevalence of these groups, the impact of STG on prison operations, reasons why offenders joined gangs, as well as the efficacy of different investigative strategies, gang-management strategies, and intelligence sharing. As definitions of gang-involved inmates may differ between jurisdictions, the survey instrument defined STG as "any group of three or more persons with recurring threatening or disruptive behavior," which is definition used by Knox (2005, p. 1), by most prison systems, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2009) to define street gangs or organized crime groups.

The survey was first emailed to all of the contact persons, and follow up emails and phone calls were made. In some instances, the investigators utilized a "snowball" approach whereby respondents suggested potential contacts from other jurisdictions (most often these were the Directors of Security for that prison system). Follow up calls were made to enhance the response rate. Of the fifty-three jurisdictions that were contacted, thirty-seven returned surveys, for a response rate of 69.8 percent: the jurisdictions responding to this survey held 1.19 million offenders, representing 72.6 percent of all U. S. prisoners.

## Prison gang suppression: Results from a national survey

Respondents were first asked about the prevalence of gang members, gang structure, and the contribution of STG to institutional

misconduct, and these results are presented in Table 1. The percentage of the total institutional population who were thought to be STG members on January 1, 2009 ranged from two to fifty percent with a mean of 19.1 percent. The proportion of the total institutional population who were validated as STG members, by contrast, ranged from zero to thirty-nine percent with a mean of 11.7 percent. As such, these totals are fairly consistent with earlier studies that examined the prevalence of gang members in prisons (Hill, 2004, 2009; Wells et al., 2002), and jails (Ruddell et al., 2006; Wells et al., 2002). These totals are instructive as they demonstrate the challenges of distinguishing between the estimates of validated and un-validated gang members; a problem confronted by many jurisdictions. Extrapolating these estimates to the 1,610,584 federal and state prisoners on June 30, 2008 (West & Sabol, 2009), suggests that there were an estimated 307,621 gang members in U.S. prisons on January 1, 2009 and that 188,921 of them were validated. While the true number of STG members probably lies between those two estimates, it suggests a very serious challenge for correctional systems, and ultimately public safety.

Understanding gang membership, leadership and structure is important in developing effective gang management interventions. It is possible that different strategies, for instance, be developed for highly organized gangs with long histories and a national or international scope of operations, compared to local street gangs that have recently formed. In terms of the best estimate of the proportion of STG members who had a leadership role in the gang, the responses ranged from zero to thirty-three percent of all STG members identified as leaders, with a mean of 4.6 percent. Respondents were also asked to estimate the percentage of members who were “hard core” gang members, and the responses ranged from less than one percent to ninety-three percent with a mean of 21.9 percent. These results suggest that approximately one-quarter of members were leaders or hard core members: as a result, upwards of three-quarters of STG members may have less allegiance to these gangs, and this group may be more amenable to different rehabilitative or deterrence-based interventions.

A series of questions asked respondents about changes in STG members and membership over the past five years. Three-quarters of the respondents reported that the percentage of STG members in their

correctional system had increased. In addition, 58.8 percent expressed the view that gang members with histories of violence had risen. In terms of an increase in female STG members, almost one-half of respondents (44.4 percent) felt that their numbers had increased in the past five years. In addition, 61.1 percent of the participants expressed the view that STG members belonged to more sophisticated organizations today. Knowing these trends is important, as smaller, less organized, and informal gangs may be consolidating into larger and more sophisticated STG, which may make them more difficult to manage.

The next series of survey questions revealed that negative or illegal gang member behaviors over the past five years had increased, and that these groups had become more disruptive and generally more challenging to prison staff and administration. This observation is consistent with the findings reported in the literature review. For instance, 36.1 percent of respondents said that gang members had increased the use of prisoner litigation or grievances to counter gang management strategies while over two-thirds of respondents (69.4 percent) reported an increase in the attempts to compromise staff members. This total was followed closely by respondents who said that gangs were more likely today to be involved in disruptive conduct and increased acts of violence toward other inmates (66.7 percent) compared to five years ago. These findings have implications for correctional officer orientation and training—to not only increase staff understanding of STG, but also the very real threat that these prisoners pose to correctional staff, both on the job, and in the community.

Last, a series of questions were asked soliciting opinions of the respondents about the point at which offenders became affiliated with a STG, and their motivations for joining. Surprisingly, over one-half (51.9 percent) of gang members were thought to join a gang after their admission to prison (respondents estimated that one to ninety-eight percent of prisoners were affiliated prior to admission). While speculating on the entry point of an offender into a STG is a difficult proposition due to the secretive nature of gang membership, this finding suggests that the issue be examined more closely in order to develop practices that discourage newly admitted prisoners from joining a gang. Respondents also provided insight into the reasons why offenders join STG. Fear of violence or other gangs, a sense of belonging, and to increase their status were thought to be the primary motivations for affiliating with a STG, while access to contraband such as drugs and economic gain were thought to be less important to these prisoners.

Table 2 presents the respondents' perceptions about the efficacy of different STG management strategies. Strategies that were thought to be most effective were segregation/isolation of offenders, restrictions on privileges, placing gang members in specialized housing units, as well as increasing security levels or classification for gang-involved prisoners. All of these factors make life behind bars more onerous for

**Table 1**  
Security threat groups: Prevalence, conduct, and rationale for affiliation

|                                                       | Range          | Mean           |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| STG prevalence (percentages)                          |                |                |
| Estimate                                              | 2 – 50         | 19.1           |
| Validated members                                     | 0 – 39         | 11.7           |
| Gang affiliated when first admitted                   | 1– 98          | 48.1           |
| STG structure (percentages)                           |                |                |
| Estimate – Leaders                                    | 0 – 33         | 4.6            |
| Estimate – Hard Core                                  | 0 – 93         | 21.9           |
| Changes in the past five years: affirmative responses |                |                |
| Gang members increased                                | 75%            |                |
| Female gang members increase                          | 44.4%          |                |
| More sophisticated today                              | 61.1%          |                |
| History of violence                                   | 58.8%          |                |
| Increased disruptive behavior                         | 66.7%          |                |
| Undermine rehab. programs                             | 36.1%          |                |
| Reasons for joining a STG                             |                |                |
|                                                       | Most important | Less important |
| Access to contraband                                  | 60%            | 33%            |
| Economic benefits                                     | 58.1%          | 32.3%          |
| Increase their status                                 | 70%            | 16.7%          |
| Sense of belonging                                    | 81.8%          | 9.1%           |
| Fear of other inmates/gangs                           | 90.9%          | 3%             |

**Table 2**  
Effectiveness of STG management strategies

| Programs or Responses                      | Very effective | Somewhat effective | Not effective | Not applicable |
|--------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Segregation/isolation                      | 75%            | 18.8%              | 0             | 6.3%           |
| Specialized housing units                  | 50%            | 18.8%              | 0             | 31.3%          |
| Restrictions on privileges:                |                |                    |               |                |
| Visits                                     | 64.7%          | 17.6%              | 5.9%          | 11.8%          |
| Program participation                      | 29.4%          | 58.8%              | 5.9%          | 5.9%           |
| Commissary/canteen                         | 31.3%          | 25.0%              | 6.3%          | 37.5%          |
| Participation in employment                | 31.3%          | 18.8%              | 12.5%         | 37.5%          |
| Access to community                        | 25%            | 12.5%              | 12.5%         | 50.0%          |
| Access to communication                    | 42.9%          | 21.4%              | 0             | 35.7%          |
| Loss of good time credits                  | 31.3%          | 18.8%              | 0             | 50.0%          |
| Delay parole eligibility                   | 37.5%          | 12.5%              | 0             | 50.0%          |
| Control release destination                | 26.7%          | 13.3%              | 0             | 60.0%          |
| Increase of security rating/classification | 41.2%          | 23.5%              | 0             | 35.3%          |
| Gang free prisons                          | 6.7%           | 20.0%              | 0             | 73.3%          |

the offender. There was less agreement, however, on the effectiveness of loss of good time credits or delays in parole eligibility: approximately one-half of respondents believed these to be effective strategies. Last, gang-free prisons were thought to be an effective strategy for the systems that used this approach.

One of the cornerstones of gang suppression was the investigation of gang members, their behaviors within the institution, and interactions with associates within prisons and in the community. Thomas and Thomas (2007), for example, reported how intelligence gathered by institutional staff aided investigations of crimes in the community. In recognition of the importance of such law enforcement-corrections relationships, a number of multi-jurisdictional task forces were established throughout the United States (Hill, 2009). The perceived effectiveness of these investigative strategies are presented in Table 3. Approaches that were thought to be most effective were the monitoring and analyses of phone calls and records, searching mail, as well as analyzing incidents. Fewer respondents reported that analysis of financial records or monitoring associates in the community were effective. Last, approaches that involved the application of more sophisticated computer-based investigative methods, such as crime mapping, data mining, or network analyses—which are commonly used by law enforcement—were unlikely to be encountered in prison systems.

Responses about the effectiveness of intelligence sharing are presented in Table 4. Participants were asked about their perceptions of intelligence sharing within their correctional system and with other elements of the criminal justice system. Respondents overwhelming reported that they found information sharing within their system to be very effective (78.1 percent), and they generally found that sharing information with parole authorities, other prison systems, or law enforcement to be very effective.

One of the limitations in our understanding of criminal justice interventions is that so few jurisdictions actually conduct evaluations of programs to determine their effectiveness. The final survey question relating to gang investigation (not reported in the tables) asked participants if they had ever had a formal evaluation of their gang management interventions. Only one-fifth (20 percent) of respondents indicated that evaluations had been committed. The general outcome of these evaluations were the observations that the prison gang population was increasing, and these pressures on the system were compounded by a decrease in staffing and funding, which further compromised the quality and effectiveness of the work being done by prison staff to address STGs. As a result, while many of the interventions listed above look encouraging, a lack of formal evaluations make it difficult for other jurisdictions to adopt such practices as they are not “evidence-based.”

There are a number of limitations of the study that should be noted. These results were based primarily upon the perceptions of correctional officials, and their insight may not be accurate. One of the challenges of responding to STGs in correctional settings is that their activities, including hiding their affiliation, are secretive; in part due to

**Table 4**  
STG intelligence sharing

| Intelligence Sharing                                            | Very effective | Somewhat effective | Not effective | Not applicable – missing |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Within our prison system                                        | 78.1%          | 15.6%              | 0             | 6.3%                     |
| With parole authorities                                         | 46.9%          | 28.1%              | 9.4%          | 15.7%                    |
| Prisons from other jurisdictions (state, federal, or corporate) | 53.1%          | 31.3%              | 0             | 12.5%                    |
| County jails                                                    | 28.1%          | 12.5%              | 6.3%          | 46.9%                    |
| Law enforcement (local, state, and federal)                     | 64.5%          | 28.1%              | 0             | 9.4%                     |
| Prosecutors                                                     | 37.5%          | 28.1%              | 0             | 34.4%                    |

enhanced levels of internal sanctions for these offenders (e.g., higher security ratings, restrictions on privileges, or placement in specialized housing units), and this has made it more difficult to develop a full and comprehensive understanding of their characteristics, including whether someone is actually a member of an STG or not (see Bryne & Hummer, 2007). This issue speaks to the need for future research, especially in regards to the prevalence of gangs as well as pathways, entry-points, and motivations toward STG membership. It is plausible that these characteristics differ according by region or place of incarceration, demographic factors (such as gender, age, or race), and whether the arrestee or offender is being held in a jail or prison. Until these issues are better understood, the knowledge of prison gangs and STG will remain incomplete.

## Discussion and conclusions

This study reported the perceptions of prison officials about the prevalence of gang members in their systems, the structure of these organizations, as well as the challenges that they posed. More importantly, the efficacy of a number of interventions used to manage STG were ranked and reported. These strategies take three forms, although they share the similar goal of increasing the prisoner's costs of affiliating with a gang. Thus, these approaches were all deterrence-based, and oriented toward gang suppression.

First, according to the respondents, inmate containment and sanctions were perceived to be very effective at managing gangs. These interventions isolated gang members, reduced their privileges and typically resulted in higher security levels. Not only do these approaches increase the deprivations of prison life, but they could also delay the prisoner's transition to the community on parole. The second strategy is based on investigations, which if successful, also increases the costs of being affiliated with a STG through internal and external sanctions. Respondents reported that investigative strategies based on analysis of phone records and recordings, searches of incoming mail, as well as tracking STG associates were very effective. Last, respondents placed great value on using the products of these investigations through intelligence sharing within their prison system, other correctional systems, and with law enforcement.

While STG suppression strategies are important for ensuring safety and security, it is also of vital importance that other strategies be developed. For instance, respondents in this study speculated that over one-half of prisoners were unaffiliated with a gang when they entered prison, and that the primary motivations for joining were fear of other inmates, a sense of belonging, an increase in their status, and access to contraband. Our knowledge of recruitment and how new prisoners become gang-affiliated, however, is very limited. Some offenders might have a casual affiliation with the STG, and once discharged from prison, discontinue these relationships. Others may stay associated with the gang after their return to the community. The problem is that there is so little knowledge about the pathways to prison gang membership that it is hard to craft meaningful prevention-based interventions. If the estimates reported above are accurate, one priority for prison systems is to reduce the likelihood

**Table 3**  
Effectiveness of STG investigative strategies

| Data                                                  | Very effective | Somewhat effective | Not effective | Not applicable |
|-------------------------------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|---------------|----------------|
| Analysis of financial records                         | 42.3%          | 46.2%              | 3.8%          | 7.7%           |
| Analysis of phone records                             | 73.3%          | 20.0%              | 0             | 6.7%           |
| Monitor STG member's phone conversations              | 80.0%          | 15.6%              | 0             | 3.1%           |
| Search STG member's mail                              | 83.3%          | 16.7%              | 0             | 0              |
| Analysis of prisoner incidents and/or misconduct      | 70.0%          | 30.0%              | 0             | 0              |
| Tracking the relationships of STG/criminal associates | 63.3%          | 30.0%              | 0             | 6.3%           |
| Monitor STG affiliated persons in the community       | 43.3%          | 36.7%              | 0             | 20.0%          |

that prisoners become affiliated with an STG in the first place: either through deterrence, or creating safe environments that thwart recruiting. Some potential prison-based strategies might include gang-free prisons that enable an unaffiliated inmate to survive prison without feeling the need to join a gang for protection. While only deployed in a few jurisdictions, the respondents from these states suggested that this approach was effective. It may prove fruitful to further investigate the effectiveness of this approach.

A number of scholars had identified gaps in our knowledge surrounding group processes as they relate to gangs (Griffin, 2007; McGloin, 2007). McGloin (2007), for instance, highlights the need to understand the “pushes (e.g., a need for protection and marginalization) and pulls (e.g., excitement and increased social status)” (p. 234) that propels an individual into joining an STG. Understanding these processes will aid in the development of interventions that reduce the attraction of affiliating with a gang. Such research requires a qualitative component and investigators will likely find that the pathways to membership in outlaw motorcycle gangs, radicalized groups, and hybrid prison-street gangs will be different: suggesting that interventions that work with one group will be ineffective with others. Consequently, gang investigators and STG coordinators will require a repertoire of strategies in their “toolboxes” to craft responses for members of these different groups.

A strong argument for alternatives to suppression strategies is that they might enhance institutional safety at the cost of long-term public safety. Petersilia (2006), for instance, reported that validated gang members in California were placed in special handling units that featured twenty-three-hour lockdown and remain there until their release (p. 36). The hazard of relying on such isolation-based strategies is that prisoners are returned directly to the community (often with no step-down housing assignments), and their social and interpersonal skills have decreased during their time in segregation. Griffin (2007) observed that another unanticipated consequence of an over-reliance on suppression techniques is to “increase the profile and status of a gang” (p. 228). Toch (2007), by contrast, argued that there is a wide range of gang members, from the associate to the hard core members, and applying the same label to all may push the “wanna-be” and associates who may only have casual affiliations further into the STG. As a result, gang interventions require a careful assessment not only of “what works” but the unanticipated consequences of these interventions.

STG represent a significant threat to the safe operations of correctional facilities, reduce public safety, and have a profoundly negative consequence to those who are affiliated with these organizations. Active gang members are likely to have a difficult transition to the community, re-offend at a higher rate, and have a greater likelihood of injury or mortality. Consequently, it is important that correctional administrators develop strategies that reduce recruitment, limit the influence of these groups, and sanction their misconduct. Yet, an important parallel concern is that correctional systems provide gang members with rehabilitative opportunities – even though only a small percentage may take advantage of them (see Di Placido et al., 2006). As Griffin (2007) observed, “oppressive measures to incapacitate and suppress gang behavior, when not used in concert with meaningful social interventions...may well act as an additional structural pressure facilitating the growth of prison gangs” (p. 228).

## Note

1. The terms security threat group and prison gang are used interchangeably throughout this study.

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