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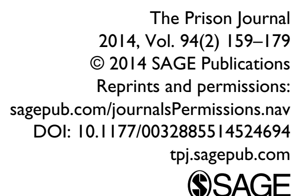
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Texas Latino Prison Gangs: An Exploration of Generational Shift and Rebellion

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Abstract
This article addresses what many observers of Texas' prison gangs perceive as significant changes in the hierarchical structure of various Latino groups. Focusing on the state's central and eastern regions, we provide a brief historical context and overview of contemporaneous gang factions. We attempt to understand gang dynamics as a function of emerging demographic patterns in the prison population. Examining prison admissions trends for males from Texas' four largest counties, we illustrate ongoing changes in race-age composition for these metropolitan areas that reinforce depictions of changing gang structure in unofficial reports, print media, and prison documentaries. We emphasize the need for multimethod approaches and analyses of the United States–Mexico Border region for a more complete view of the Texas gang landscape.

Keywords
Latino prison gangs, Texas prison gangs, changing prison gang structure

Introduction

Race-based gangs in Texas prisons date at least as far back as the early 1980s and remain normative today. Their formation was aided by systematic racial

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segregation and an inmate-based informal control mechanism prior to the implementation of reforms (Fong, 1990; Pelz, Marquart, & Pelz, 1991; Trulson & Marquart, 2002). Although racial segregation in Texas prisons has been legally prohibited since 1979 (Marquart & Crouch, 1984), the ad hoc social grouping of inmates continued to occur along racial lines over the next full decade. Court-mandated integration quotas for the general prison population were achieved as of the early 1990s, but for security and facility management concerns, gang members continue to be grouped by race and gang faction (Trulson & Marquart, 2002). Another characteristic that informs the classification process for the gang population is geography, or more specifically, the jurisdiction in which inmates were convicted. This is especially true of gang-involved Hispanic inmates, where subgroupings occur by major Texas cities and regions.

Over time, these largely metro-based subgroupings have developed rivalries and alliances with other factions, both within and between cities. An added layer of these prison gang "politics," perhaps now equally as salient as city-based identifiers, are intergenerational dynamics. A recent, but common observation of any concerned with prison gang developments in Texas is that intergenerational conflict has been underway for the past decade among Latino gangs, and possibly dating back to the late 1990s. Prison-site documentaries and other media depictions of this phenomenon have also recently surfaced (Eiserer, 2008; Ross Smith, 2010; Tyson, 2008), in turn, reinforcing and perhaps fueling this tension.

Where the strains that intergenerational conflict has placed on Texas jails and prisons appear to be significant (Tapia, 2013), it has yet to be met with adequate research or policy attention. So far, only cursory descriptions of the newly emerged prison factions and police intelligence efforts on their "free world" activities have surfaced (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2007, 2011). This article addresses the phenomenon with an analysis of age-race trends in male prison admissions from Texas' four largest metropolitan counties. These are cities in the central and eastern regions that best exemplify the emerging tensions among Latino gangs.

The Literature on Chicano Gang Structure

The Latino portion of our sample is primarily Mexican American/Chicano in ethnic origin as per the geographical and historical context of the four "sending" cities generating our prison admissions data. Chicano gang structure is known to be hierarchical in nature, organized by age-graded "klikas," ranging from the teenage "pee-wee" sets to the more sophisticated adult prison gangs (Horowitz, 1983; Moore, 1978, 1991; Sanders,1994; Valdez, Cepeda,

& Kaplan, 2009; Valdez & Sifaneck, 2004; Vigil, 1988, 2002). Despite this well-noted fact, very little research has explored the organizational dynamics that occur among the various ranks (Fleisher & Decker, 2001; Valdez et al., 2009; Valdez & Sifaneck, 2004). Very little is thus known about the prison-to-street politics that govern the gang-based activities of these groups and about the interplay among the ranks in this hierarchy.

One reason for the lack of research on such topics is the perceived danger (real or imagined) associated with investigations into the dealings of Chicano prison gangs by non-justice system personnel. Such undertakings are all but taboo, even among gang researchers (see Davidson, 1974 for a rare exception). As a result, power struggles among the gang groups and rebellion by younger factions largely go undocumented in academic investigations. To circumvent this methodological challenge, we use a macro-level approach to explore whether recent demographic conditions in Texas prisons may have contributed to a "next generation" rebellion in various parts of the state. This shift has been characterized anecdotally by Security Threat Group practitioners, the media, police, and Chicano gang members alike as a new generation of prison-to-street hybrid groups that is challenging traditional prison gangs for dominance in the spheres where they operate (Eiserer, 2008; Ross Smith, 2010; Texas Department of Public Safety, 2007, 2011; Tyson, 2008).

Tango History and Its Break From the Gang Hierarchy

For the last several decades, many young Hispanic inmates in Texas prisons generally, but especially those with prior street gang affiliations, have gravitated to city-based sub-groups known as "Tangos." These groups have traditionally been affiliated with Latino prison gangs that function as parent organizations. A young Hispanic male inmate from a given Texas city who was imprisoned might choose to "roll with" or "represent" his hometown while serving out his sentence (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2007). This was done for protection, camaraderie, and/or as a natural extension of his street gang affiliation. The deeper implication was that the inmate served as part of a reserve army and might be asked to perform illegal acts within the facility to benefit the parent group.

Earlier in the history of these groups (ca. 1990), affiliation with a *Tango* amounted to serving as "*esquina*" ("backup") for violent or political conflicts between its parent group and gangs of other races or conflicts with Latino gangs from other cities or regions. Historically, then, *Tangos* were not only considered foot soldiers, but the fiercely loyal among them achieved a more distinguished level of recognition that could ultimately result in one

becoming a "Prospect[ive]" member of the prison gang. Each higher level of affiliation (e.g., "*esquina firme*") carried both increased privileges and respect among Latino prison gangs and other inmates generally.

It appears, however, that playing the role of foot soldier was not historically a rewarding experience for most *Tangos.* By many informal accounts, too few of them were afforded the opportunity to become full-fledged recruits despite putting in ample "work" in the penitentiary to become worthy of consideration toward membership.[1] In short, the reward structure of the parent group failed to accommodate a large base of gang hopefuls over time. The widely heard claim among gang and non-gang members alike is that too many young Chicanos were being "used" and filtered out by the existing hierarchical system, leading to the disillusionment of the next generation of would-be recruits (Eiserer, 2008; Ross Smith, 2010; Tyson, 2008).

Changing Mantras, Changing Structures

Whether to avoid the stigma of classification as a Security Threat Group in prison or for ideological or other functional reasons, so far, the *Tangos* of this generation resist the "prison gang" label. Members of these loosely affiliated groups claim they are a support network for inmates who want to do their time peacefully and avoid coercion from traditional Latino prison gangs. According to recently filmed documentaries and other media accounts, T.A.N.G.O. has been reclaimed and re-identified by the younger generation of Latino inmates as an acronym meaning "Together Against Negative Gang Organizations" (Eiserer, 2008). Similarly, according to several *Tango* members and members of its parent group,[2] *Orejón*, the San Antonio-based *Tango*, has also taken on a new meaning from that of the past few decades. By these accounts, O.R.E.J.O.N. is newly construed as an acronym meaning "One Race Equally Joined or Nothing," a far cry from its original connotation as being the eyes and *ears* (i.e., *oreja*) of the Mexican Mafia.

These mantras reflect a changing mind-set among the new generation toward a horizontal versus a hierarchical structure and a new function for the *Tango*-type organization in Texas jails and prisons. Perhaps the most relevant policy question is whether a transition from the defensive posturing of *Tangos* to one in which they assume the organizational characteristics of the traditional gangs is inevitable.[3] Recent work on theories of prison gang formation within the California state system offers some of the potential structural, if not cultural dynamics driving this phenomenon.

Assuming that gangs in the correctional setting form for protection, as is the claim made by the *Tangos*, Skarbeck (2012) discusses how a capable defense illustrates the power and ability to go on the offense. Stemming from

the idea that inmates establish order among themselves on a level below that of official facility governance, it gives rise to the inmate code and development of convict norms. Issues such as overcrowding, scarce resources, and cultural or racial differences create the need for sub-governance. However, when a larger proportion of inmates have never served time, the norms associated with the inmate code are less effective where "new inmates misinterpret and disregard signaling mechanisms and disrupt the social system more frequently" (Skarbeck, 2012, p. 23).

When new inmates are unfamiliar with the convict code, they are reprimanded or perhaps bullied by inmate leaders, who in effect, are also the prison gang leaders (Davidson, 1974; Jacobs, 1974). The newer class of inmates eventually reaches some tipping point in terms of size or shared negative experiences, then seeks an alternate method of providing governance, and hence, a new organization is born in the facility. Using prison data for California, Skarbeck (2012) illustrates that the rise of prison gangs in the 1950s and 1960s corresponds with a dramatic rise in the size of the prison population and a much younger age structure. This suggests that demographic changes made norms less effective and led to more inmate conflict, a springboard for the current article.

The Size of the Prison Gang Population

Reliable estimates of the size of a prison gang population are difficult to obtain due to the varying methods used to count them across systems. Trulson, Marquart, and Kawucha (2006) noted that while many states now use a strict confirmation process to identify gang members, others still include street gang members and other security threat groups in their counts. An additional complication is the conceptual fluidity of gang membership. As with street gangs, there are varying levels of individual involvement by prison gang members, from associate to core member, replete with routine attempts to conceal one's level of affiliation. This fluidity is important to understanding the ambiguous nature of the *Tango* population in Texas, as they are characterized by justice system practitioners as a "hybrid" group that is neither a prison nor a street gang per se (Tapia, 2013)

A group of studies using recent surveys of state prison administrators and other personnel have produced various estimates of the gang population. Winterdyk and Ruddell (2010) reviewed this literature and found that prison officials' perceptions tend to hover around 12% to 13%, with at least one estimate as high as 24% in 1999. Using somewhat more official counts of confirmed gang members in the federal prison system, Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffran, and Suppa (2002) found that 9% of male inmates

were gang-involved. Finally, a 2002 national survey of state and federal prison systems, using a Bureau of Prisons designation of gang membership, reported only 15,398 prison gang members (1.2% of the total prison population) with fewer than 1,000 gang members in most states (Trulson et al., 2006). California and Texas accounted for a large majority of these (nearly 70%) with more than 5,000 prison gang members each.

Based on the latter estimate, the size of the prison gang population in Texas appears to have remained steady over the past decade. The *Houston Chronicle* recently reported that 5,205 Texas inmates were in a 23-hr per day administrative segregation specifically for issues related to their gang affiliation (Schiller, 2011). This number reflects about 3.5% of the total prison population in that state. While some portion of the *Tango* population may be held in solitary confinement in Texas jails and prisons, its members are primarily found among the general population of inmates in these facilities. Although many practitioners believe that classification of *Tangos* as a bona fide security threat group for their disruptive nature and clashes with prison gangs is inevitable, as of the time of writing of this article, it had not yet materialized. The following section describes the state's major *Tangos* and their posturing relative to each other and relative to the traditional prison gangs from whom they are breaking away.

Texas Chicano Gang Factions

Although Chicano prison-to-street gang dynamics in Texas are somewhat amorphous on their fringes, there are at least five distinct *Tango* factions throughout the state who seem to have broken rank with their parent organizations, and several others that are somewhat less visible. While both the Texas Syndicate (TS) and the Texas Mexican Mafia (*Eme*) have vast networks reaching every major city and other smaller places throughout the state, each has predominated in certain places. The nucleus of the TS structure is Austin (Travis County). Indeed, as one of the TS's adopted symbols is the Texas Longhorn logo of the University of Texas at Austin, the gang is often referred to on the street as "*Los Cuernos*" (the Horns). Austin ranks as the state's fourth most populous city and, as such, commits a substantial number of inmates to prison. As the oldest and most established Latino prison gang in Texas (Fong, 1990), the TS are most prominent in the central and eastern region and least prominent (but certainly not absent) in San Antonio.

The other *Tango* factions that have traditionally come under TS influence are Dallas, Houston, and Fort Worth/Arlington. The *Tango* known as "H-town" or "Houstone" is the originator and largest component of "Tango Blast," a statewide confederation of *Tangos* from different cities that have

challenged TS and the other traditional Latino prison gangs. Together, under the rubric of the new generation of *Tangos*, Austin, Dallas, Houston, and Fort Worth are known as the "Four Horsemen," as all have a standing alliance, and thus may be considered part of *Tango Blast* (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). Note that although San Antonio is in the same geographic region as these cities, its gang factions are not part of this alliance.

The *Eme*'s home base is widely known by justice system practitioners to be San Antonio (Bexar County), the final prison inmate sending community in the study. As the third largest city in the state, San Antonio's influence via the Mafia and *Tango Orejón* is felt throughout the prison system. Over the past 3 to 5 years, however, media and correctional officials' attention has been focused on a fierce generational-based power struggle occurring within San Antonio itself. The *Eme* and its former underling, *Orejón*, are in the midst of an intense conflict in Bexar County Jail that is creating an extraordinary level of disruption and the need for drastic, often experimental control measures (CBS, 2012; Ross Smith, 2010).[4]

Besides TS and *Eme*, a number of formidable Chicano gangs have dotted the prison and urban landscape over time (e.g., *Los Pistoleros*,[5] *Raza Unida*, Texas Chicano Brotherhood), each with networks in most major Texas cities. The state's remaining largest urban center seems to stand alone in this arrangement. El Paso's *Tango-915* is affiliated with the *Barrio Azteca* prison gang, which in turn has ties to the Carrillo-Fuentes (Juarez) drug cartel in Chihuahua, Mexico (Beittel, 2012; U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). Whether relations between this parent group and its *Tango* are as strained as those throughout the rest of the state is not known and is not addressed here. Two lesser-known *Tangos* are those representing the south Texas Valley (*Vallucos)* and West Texas' *Puro Tango Blast*. Like the *Tangos* from El Paso, these groups along with South Texas Valley's Texas Chicano Brotherhood may now be forming stronger ties to Mexican drug cartels (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2011). Altogether, there are a total of about eight or nine different *Tangos* in Texas (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2007; U.S. Department of Justice, 2012).

The Current Study

We attempt to gain insight on the recent restructuring of Chicano gang-type factions in Texas by examining prison admissions trends for males from its four largest counties. We conduct an exploratory analysis of age-race trends in commitments of inmates from 2003 to 2010. This time frame corresponds to an acute period of uprising and conflict among Latino prison gangs and *Tangos*. We display descriptive information and interpret the data using several themes

from the conceptual framework we have established. As traditional prison gangs are expected to be an older cohort (Davidson, 1974; Fong, Vogel, & Buentello, 1992) than the *Tangos*, we aim to identify sizable segments of younger inmates from the various cities and note shifts in age structure that seem to form a critical mass of young inmates.

Data

Combined, Bexar, Dallas, Harris, and Travis counties contributed 125,209 (about 40%) of the state's new and returning prison inmates across all years (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011). We use the counts of male prison admissions in the various race-age groups from these counties over a recent 8-year span. These aggregate data were provided by the Legislative Budget Board of Texas, an agency that tracks and compiles a wide range of demographic, legal, and institution-based information on prison populations. We also use the following state-level indicators to give context to the analysis: prison intakes, releases, custody levels, average sentence lengths, and the gender and age composition of offenders (Coyle, 2003; Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, 2003; Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011).

There are two state-level characteristics of the Texas inmate population that bolster the representativeness of our sample. The first is that the average sentence length during the 2003 to 2010 period is about 7 years, that is, approximately the number of consecutive data-years we analyze (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011). The second is that there are nearly as many releases from prison as intakes in a given year (Texas Department of Criminal Justice 2004, 2011). This means that by 2010, our 40% sample of intakes for 8 consecutive years has in effect, replaced the cohort of prisoners released from 2003 to 2010. Our sample is thus very likely representative of Texas' urban, male prison population.

Method

Our central premise is that the rapid, disproportionate growth of young Latinos in the general prison population roughly over the past decade would provide a large pool of potential members for recruitment by the *Tangos*. This would contribute to our understanding of how this group became more of an autonomous force in Texas jails and prisons. We, therefore, model growth with trends in the general prison population by race-ethnicity and in more specific prison admissions trends by age and race-ethnicity. We attempt to illustrate the disproportionate growth of Latinos relative to other race groups in prison, and relative to growth of the normal (non-prison) population.

Table 1. Race Composition of Prison Admissions.

	2003				2010			
	Urban males		State		Urban males		State	
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
White	4,857	29.1	13,759	33.0	2,460	16.2	13,071	30.6
Black	6,943	41.5	14,947	35.9	6,491	42.5	14,074	33.0
Hispanic	4,908	29.4	12,905	30.9	6,301	41.3	15,540	36.4
Total	16,708	100.0	41,611	100.0	15,252	100.0	42,685	100.00

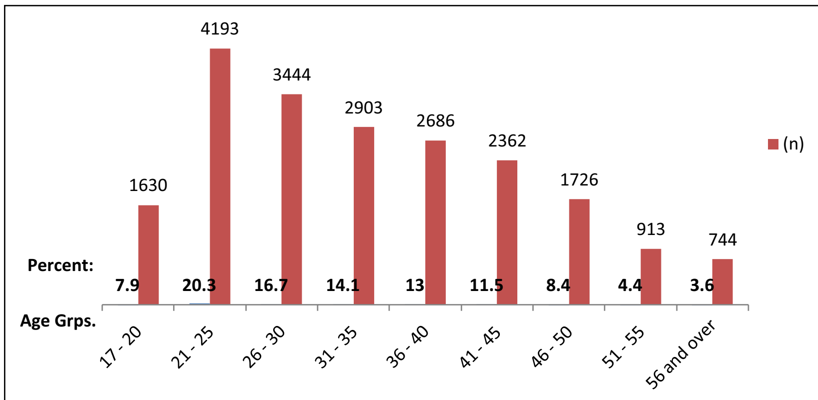

Figure 1. Bexar county males admitted to Texas prisons, 2003 to 2010 (*n* = 20,601).

In assessing potential shifts in age cohort composition by race over time, we apply demographic techniques to analyze male prison intakes from the various counties. We first juxtapose the race composition of our sample to that of intakes for the entire state in Table 1 to illustrate two points. We note how well the 40% urban sample matches the state on race and we note shifts at these two levels of geography over time. Next, we present male prison admissions by age for each county in Figures 1 through 4 to obtain a sense of the general age distribution.[6] Then, to compare the trends in the relative growth of the younger and older age inmates, we calculate annual growth rates for each age-race group. As we are primarily interested in the shifts for younger versus older age inmates over this time period, we split the data into two age groups. The first represents new inmates up to 40 years of age (16-40 years), and the second of those aged 41 years or above.

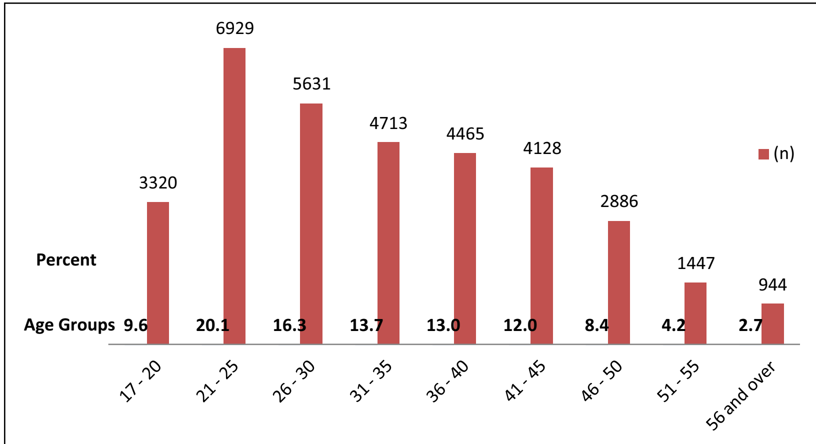

Figure 2. Dallas county males admitted to Texas prisons 2003 to 2010 (n = 34,463).

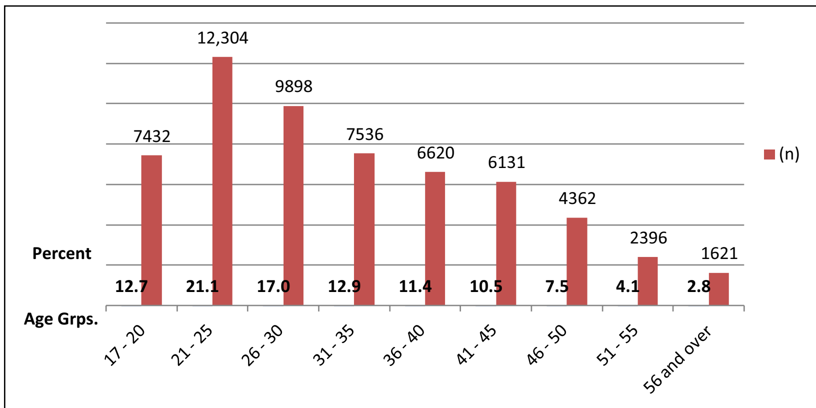

Figure 3. Harris county males admitted to Texas prisons, 2003 to 2010 (n = 58,300).

To examine relative changes in these two demographic groups, we calculate population growth rates for each age and race group as: $r = ln[P(a)_{t+1} / P(a)_t]$, where $P(a)_{t+1}$ is the number of inmates age a admitted to prison at time $t + 1$ (e.g., 2004), while $P(a)_t$ is the number of inmates age a admitted at time t (e.g., 2003). This measures the relative annual change in intake for each age group (<40 and 41+ years) of males (Preston, Heuveline, & Guillot, 2000). This is done for each race group in each of the seven time periods

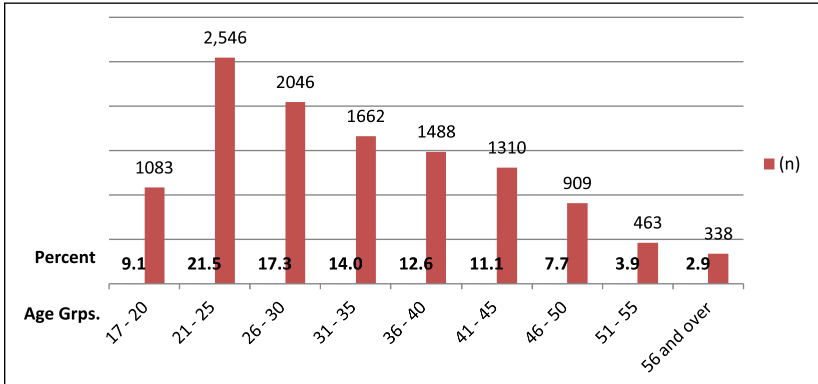

Figure 4. Travis county males admitted to Texas prisons, 2003 to 2010 (*n* = 11,845).

(2003-2010) and then averaged. An average growth rate avoids random year-to-year variations, assessing the general trend in population change. We also analyze the total population of each county to examine how well the change in the inmate population over time matches that of the general population.

Findings

Table 1 examines the race composition of prison admissions for the four-county sample and for the state in 2003 and 2010.[7] This allows for comparisons between and within these two populations over time. Examining first between the groups, in 2003, White males are slightly underrepresented in our urban sample vis-à-vis the state, Blacks are overrepresented, and Hispanics are present in nearly equal proportions. By 2010, this pattern holds for Blacks, whereas Hispanics are now overrepresented in our data and Whites grossly underrepresented. These changes are attributable to shifts in the sample and in the state over time. In the urban sample, the proportion of White males sent to prison in this 7-year period dropped by nearly half. Meanwhile, that of Blacks was stable, and that of Hispanics increased by nearly 30%.

Results in Table 1 show that racial minorities are overrepresented among inmates from the state's largest urban centers as compared with the state's total inmate population. Whereas a stated function of the *Tango* is to protect against coercion and other threats posed by prison gangs (both Black and Latino) via "power in numbers," this finding provides some preliminary evidence of an inflated base of minority inmates from the larger urban centers where much of this action has been reported. A second key result is the rapid

growth of Hispanic admissions to prison in a short time frame. That Hispanic growth in the urban group outpaces that of the state is consistent with the purported rise of the *Tangos* in each of those specific counties.

Looking to other state-level indicators for context, in 1998, Latinos comprised 26% of prison admissions in Texas (Texas Board of Pardons and Paroles, 2003). As seen in Table 1, by 2010, this figure had risen to 36%, an increase of nearly one third. In 2002, Whites comprised 45% of the Texas prison population, with Blacks at 41%, and Latinos at 28% (Coyle, 2003). At this time, Latinos were the only group for whom admissions outpaced releases. They were also the group with the largest proportion of first-time prison admissions (Coyle, 2003). Note that this is consistent with the mechanism Skarbeck (2012) identified as a driving force behind the formation of prison gangs in the California system.

Turning to the age composition of our sample, Figures 1 through 4 show that the largest groups of male inmates sent to prison from each county are in the 21- to 25-year age group. From there, the proportion declines with age. It is a general finding, but this too is likely to be, in part, a reflection of the influx of young Latinos into Texas prisons, forming a critical mass of inmates to fuel the *Tango* phenomenon. For more specificity, the Appendix A splits the sample into younger and older age groups for each race and county.[8] It shows higher concentrations of young Latino inmates in Dallas and Harris counties than in Bexar and Travis counties. In Bexar County, the proportion of Hispanics remains very high across age categories and the proportion of Whites and Blacks remains low. In Travis County, Black and Hispanic inmates dominate the younger admissions group, while all three race groups are rather evenly distributed among the older admissions.

Figure 5 shows the average annual growth rates by race (r) for young (<40 years) and old (41+ years) inmates for the four counties from 2003 to 2010. An interesting pattern of growth trends emerges over this period. Essentially, Hispanic groups experienced growth nearly across the board, whereas White groups uniformly experienced declines. Blacks had a much more mixed set of results that varied by age and county. Older Hispanic inmates experienced the largest amount of absolute growth in Dallas and Harris Counties. This is not all too surprising given the low proportions of this group in those counties in the Appendix A (i.e., modest changes will appear pronounced in a small population).

Figure 6 compares the trends observed in prison intake with patterns of growth in the total populations of the counties. With the exception of Hispanics, growth patterns in prison do not tend to reflect those of the regular population. There is small positive growth among Black citizens, slight declines in the young White population, and mixed growth in the older White population.

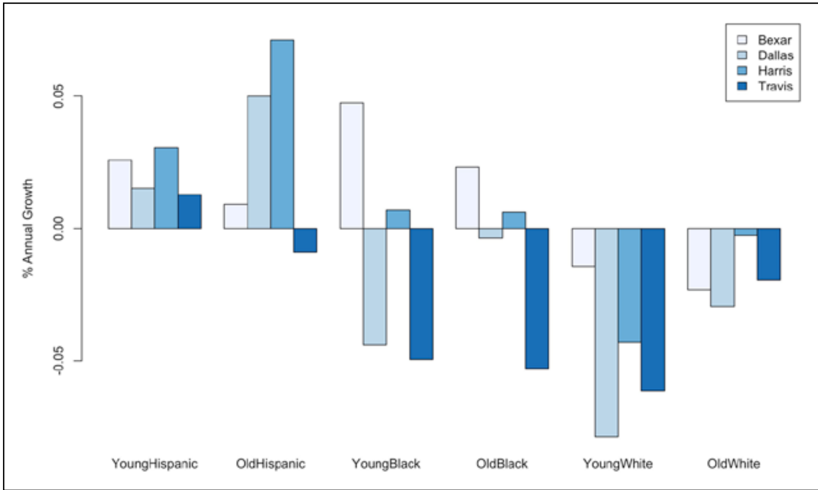

Figure 5. Average growth rates in prison intake, 2003 to 2010.

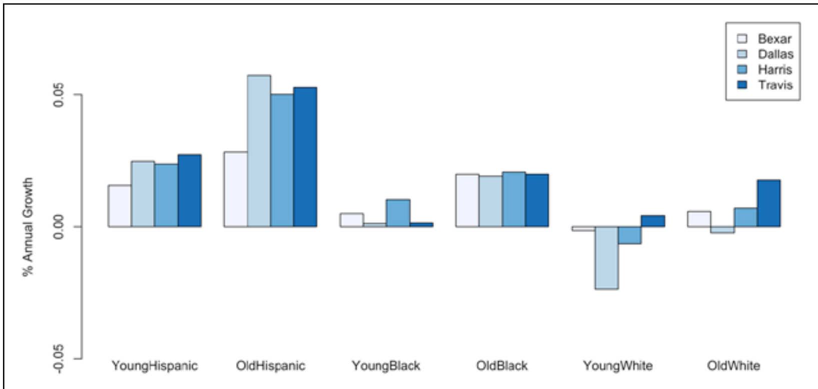

Figure 6. Average growth rates in county total Population, 2000 to 2009.

Conclusion and Discussion

Many observers of Texas' prison gangs perceive recent, significant changes in the organizational structure of Latino gangs, tied to the emergence of a new breed of street-to-prison hybrid groups among younger cohorts of prison inmates. Although these groups, the *Tangos*, are becoming more disruptive to jail and prison operations (Tapia, 2013), seemingly on the verge of

advancing to the status of a full-blown security threat group in Texas, to date, few have addressed this topic. We have approached the issue from a demographic perspective to evaluate whether there is a basis for a structural explanation of the phenomenon. As an exploratory analysis, we are encouraged by our findings, but support for the premise could be stronger. Alternative demographic modeling in future efforts may improve upon this benchmark to strengthen the notion that there is a demographic basis for the purported shift away from the traditional hierarchical structure among adult Chicano gangs in Texas.

A competing explanation of why this is occurring might draw on period effects, wherein status frustration reaches a tipping point after several decades of an overtly restrictive and unrewarding hierarchical structure that abused its power over younger, willing foot soldiers. This type of explanation would not necessarily require a critical mass of younger inmates to overpower the traditional prison gangs, but a change in their group psychology as an evolution of rational actor sensibilities. Other potential explanations are changes in opportunities for lucrative street activities, that is, the availability of drug market connections, access to weapons, the flooding of such markets by Mexican cartels, and so on, wherein younger cohorts are less reliant on older prison gang members. To investigate this further warrants methodological triangulation, perhaps involving formal interviews of law enforcement and gang members themselves to learn more about the nature and intensity of intergenerational conflict.

While prison gangs have long been known to organize around race-based conflict, clearly this article is more focused on intergenerational conflict *within* a specific ethnic group. Our chief concern is with the role of age cohorts in prison and adult street gang politics, while trying to remain cognizant of the region and other place-based factors that temper these generational elements. One problem that arises with this cohort-driven approach is that the interaction of age and place becomes complex outside of jail or prison walls in terms of *Tango* loyalties. Whereas "inside," affiliations and rules for comportment relative to other groups is rather clear-cut; keen observers of these groups' "free world" dealings know that faction loyalties are far more tenuous on the street.

Given that Latino prison and street gang operations are reciprocal in nature (Valdez et al., 2009) a demographic analysis set solely in the prison context can only offer limited insight. This research agenda begs a richer level of detail to better understand relations between the traditional parent groups and younger "rebel" groups. There is some uncertainty regarding the selection of an appropriate age cutoff for demarcating between members of *Tangos* and prison gangs, for example. Although faction-based

dynamics are seemingly fueled by a young age cohort's frustration with the status quo, one of the nuances alluded to above is that many younger inmates, for familial reasons, and out of preference for the lore or prestige that for so long has characterized the traditional Latino prison gangs, continue to be recruited into these older gangs. Therefore, age is not an absolute determinant of *Tango* membership. This is a problem in the opposite direction as well, where some former inmates who were *Tango* members in the 1990s, and who never graduated to prison gang member status are now well into their 30s and 40s, further complicating the use of age to demarcate gang factions.

Although we are confident that our sample, eight consecutive waves of prison admissions from large counties, is representative of the urban prison population if not that of the state,[9] they are also limiting in several ways. One disconcerting finding from state data is that the mean age among prison inmates did not change over time (33.1 years in 2003 and 33.6 years in 2010). Although the bulk of intakes in our sample are young inmates, what might otherwise be a declining mean age is offset by the aging prison population in Texas (Murdock et al., 2003). This pattern, also seen in prisons throughout the nation (Aday, 2003), is a likely reflection of sentencing policies of the past several decades.

Unfortunately, with data aggregated into 5-year age groups, we cannot compute a mean age for our specific intake sample. If we could, we might find that in this sub-sample from urban centers, younger Hispanic influx to prison is driving down the mean age, but this is not yet reflected in the total inmate age structure. Also more generally, this analysis could benefit from more years of data to note prison admission patterns over a longer period to more fully evaluate trends and relate the data to the article's themes. If historically, the proportion of young Hispanic inmates was not as high, it would strengthen the case for a demographic explanation of the recent gang conflicts. An analysis that shows that the "pool" of *Tango*-eligible members was larger now than in years past will make a better case that a "critical mass" has formed to rebel against the old guard (mafia and syndicate).

A final potential limitation of our analysis is that it does not adequately narrow down the population of interest. Where prison gang populations typically comprise a very small proportion of the overall prison population in Texas (Fong et al., 1992; Schiller, 2011), some may argue there is a need to better isolate this population rather than to take the broader approach of identifying a swelling of the general pool of potential recruits to the *Tangos*. We cannot emphasize enough however, that Texas prison agency literature on security threat groups does not include the *Tangos* in this category (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2007). Thus, where future research might

analyze trends among inmates of certain custody levels (i.e., administrative segregation or other gang-related classifications) that better approximate the gang population, the *Tango* phenomenon distorts this because there has been some hesitation to classify them as a prison gang. Despite its large size and ample resources, perhaps it is implausible for the Texas prison system to consider use of its segregation facilities to deal with the large number of members belonging to *Tango* groups in a meaningful way. Given their size in the prison's general population, it may simply not be a practical solution. Therefore, our broader approach to exploring potential causes of the issue seemed fitting.

As the Texas prison system is the second largest in absolute size and third in the nation in the rate of imprisonment relative to the population (Coyle, 2003), there is much more work to be done in this arena. Future research should attempt to analyze inmate sending patterns to other salient secure correctional contexts such as state jails, where many young prisoners are held for shorter sentences. Finally, there are prison admission trends in other large, metropolitan Texas counties along the United States–Mexico border that also warrant exploration. Prison gangs and *Tangos* operating in El Paso County in far west Texas and Hidalgo County in far south Texas are said to be forming stronger ties to Mexican drug cartels (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012), which is sure to cause even more power struggles in these regions' underworld spheres.

Appendix A

Race–Age Structure for Male Prison Admissions by County

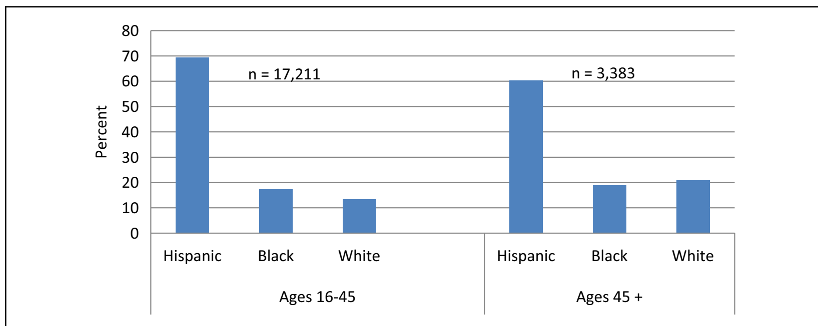

Figure A1. Bexar county males admitted to Texas prisons from 2003 to 2010 by age group.

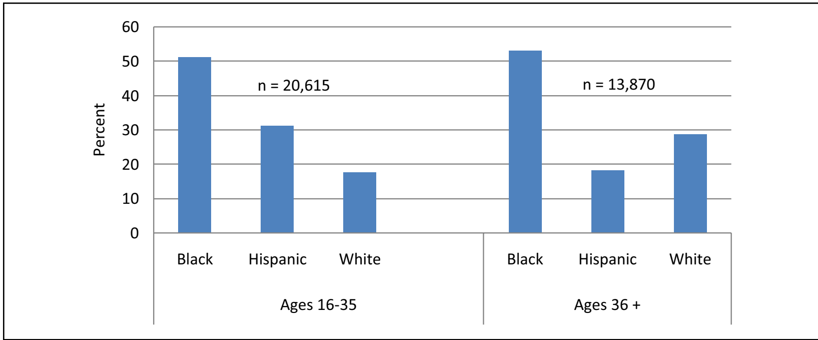

Figure A2. Dallas county males admitted to Texas prisons from 2003 to 2010 by age group.

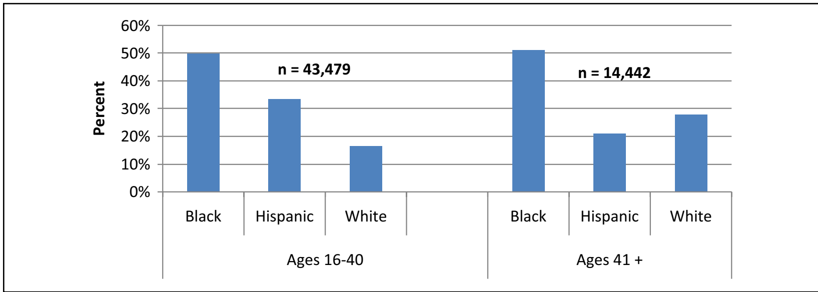

Figure A3. Harris county males admitted to Texas prisons from 2003 to 2010 by age group.

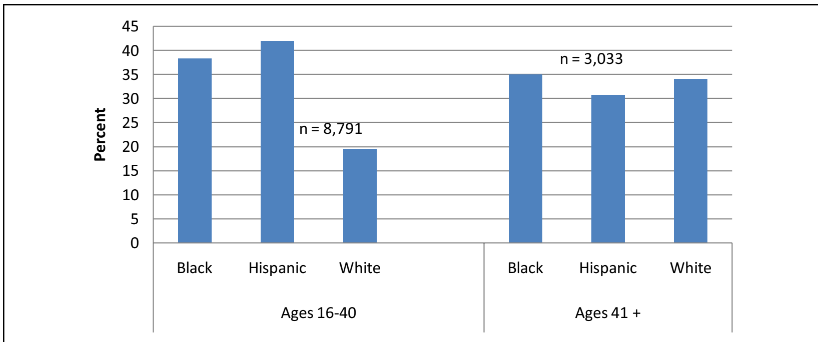

Figure A4. Travis county males admitted to Texas prisons from 2003 to 2010 by age group.

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Notes

1. The most valued *caméos* (jobs) consist of assaulting rival gang members or members of one's own organization as a disciplinary measure.
2. As evidenced in recent jail and prison gang documentaries and as informally expressed to the authors by police and gang member sources.
3. One example from San Antonio's *Tango* is a much-talked about renegade group known as *Nuestro Tango Orejón* (NTO) who have widely made claims of aspirations to organize like a "familia" (i.e., Mafia).
4. This was captured by National Geographic Channel's *Lockdown* Series in 2010 and most recently, in a news story about a large riot between the groups in March 2012. A significant reassignment of inmate housing was required, including several transfers of gang leaders out of the facility.
5. Hermandad de Pistoleros Latinos (HPL).
6. Appendix A presents race by age distributions for males in each county.
7. The state's figures include females, who comprise 9.5% total admissions.
8. The age groups in Appendix A were informed by more detailed trends in 5-year age groups by race for each county (online appendix available upon request from the lead author). For example, in Dallas, the proportion of Hispanic prison admissions ranked second behind Blacks up to 35 years of age, where it dropped below the proportion of White prison admissions. For this reason, 35 years of age is used as the cutoff to lump the inmates into two age groups. In Harris County, this switch in rank occurred at 40 years of age, and is thus used as the cutoff there. The average age of prison intakes for the state is 33.5 years, and for all prison inmates, it is 37.4 years (Texas Department of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011). Fong et al. (1992) note that the average age for Latino prison gang members in Texas is in the early to mid-30s (varies by gang).
9. The prison receives in our sample totaled 125,209 over this time frame, which is nearly the same number of the full population of prison inmates in a given year (male and female).

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