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Prison Gangs

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Prison Gangs

The prison gang concept is ² one of the greatest challenges in the United States' criminal justice system. They are criminal organizations developed within the penal system and occur in the nation's prison facilities. The gangs have symbols and other ways they identify with the groups drawing a clear line between the members and the non-members. The prison gangs developed as early as the 1950s, and as time pass, more are being developed, making the criminal justice system encounter problems in carrying out its roles. One of the nationally known prison gangs is Aryan Brothers, established in San Prison, California, in 1967. The group consists of white males, whose responsibility is to recruit more members and push them to make a permanent commitment. Notably, between 1975 and 1985, about 40 homicide cases were reported in the Californian prisons, and Aryan Brotherhood members committed 26.

Black Guerilla Family is the other popular gang started in Quentin in 1966 by Jackson. Their symbol is BGF, and the members are black males. The group mostly recruits street gangs after they are imprisoned. Like other gangs, one has to pledge permanent membership or death oath. The gang's leading aim is to overthrow the US government, making it dangerous towards law enforcement and political leaders. Another gang is the La Nuestra Familia, also developed in California in the 1960s. It was developed to shield the rural Mexican prisoners from the EME. Therefore, the members are mostly Mexican and Hispanic males, who become members of the NF street gang after leaving the prison. Other famous prison gangs are the Mexican Mafia and Neta Gang, which also operates like the rest and willing to distract the nation's peace. Therefore, prison gangs in the US are common, whose objectives threaten fellow prisoners and the society outside.

Why Prison Gangs Form

Gangs become part of the social structure in male prisons due to representation attitude and discrimination. In the past years, young Hispanic prisoners in Texas have had affiliations with a subgroup named "Tangos" (Tapia et al., 2014). The group works closely with the Latino prison gangs that act as leaders. When imprisoned, young people claim to either work with or cooperate with their hometown. The Tangos were formed as a backup in case conflicts between the parent group and other races developed. Thus, it means the teams were formed for protection purposes, which made them reject being identified as prison gangs. Recent documentaries show that Latino inmates have adopted the name "together against negative gang organizations" (Tapia et al., 2014). The name implies that the existence of different races in prisons contributes to gangs' formation, as each ethnicity tries to 'protect' itself and the parent group from harm. Therefore, gangs are integrated into prisons' social structure as inmates represent and protect their races from being discriminated against.

Another way gangs become part of the social structures in prisons is because of codes and convict norms. They make their rules, which usually are more straightforward than those by the official control team. Several factors push them to develop their orders, for example, cultural and racial differences. The inmates have varying backgrounds concerning race, meaning they do not agree on most things. On the other hand, overcrowding and the scarcity of resources demand them to cooperate to survive in the prisons (Pelz et al., 1991). The issues make them cooperate and influence one another. Inmates who were part of the gangs before incarceration plays a significant role, recruiting the new members. The search for identity motivates the inmates to join the gangs, as it is the only way to survive in the prisons. As a result, in adhering to the codes and convict norms established to ensure a smooth stay, gangs become part of the prisons' social structures.

According to the importation theory of prisons' subcultures, the beliefs and norms adopted in the prisons are based on offenders' practices before the imprisonment. It means the subcultures preferred by the inmates reflect their lives outside the institution. Even though one's background has a significant influence on their behavior, the theory is criticized. One reason is that socialization outside the prison is usually longer than that in prison, where adopting is hard. The prison environment is also traumatic and would easily change an individual as they seek identity and survival. On the other hand, the exportation model claims that the socialization inside the prisons establishes subcultures. The ¹inmates are deprived of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and personal security. As a result, the situations make them develop strategies to cope, resulting in subcultures. Therefore, though the theories raise different ideas, they help understand how inmates' cultures are made.

Why They Persist

Gangs persist in prisons because of the social dilemma created. In daily interactions, social dilemmas occur, and everyone tries to implement their rational behaviors. Cooperation is either done by each inmate minding their businesses or working as one for mutual benefits. Inmates try to attain loyalty, affection and respect, making them bind together. On the other hand, one would go against the rest to gain trust and assistance from the staff.

The formal actions in place determine if the inmates would attain their goals or not. Since the staff procedures keep changing, the prisoners find it better to incorporate a self-enforcing equilibrium of cooperation. However, challenges are experienced because the inmates have different release dates, and some of them would last forever. The meeting of common objectives makes it hard for inmates to cooperate. The varying situations, therefore, prevent the inmates from having cooperating perfectly.

The Hobbesian solution claims that punishing the defectors is the formal solution in ensuring the inmates conform (Skarbek, 2012). However, the correctional officers do perform this task well due to the lack of information. As said above, the prison code prohibits inmates from trusting the officers. Thus, it becomes hard for them to differentiate between genuine and fake claims. For example, an inmate could fake injury or sickness to move to another cell, where their plans are efficiently executed. In some instances, they bribe the officers, but in the end, their needs are not fully met, and therefore have to rely on self-enforcement strategies. The social dilemmas support the gangs to persist as they form rules and regulations for the inmates to follow. As explained, the inmates cannot cooperate due to differences, while the correctional officers do not access the needed information. For that reason, the sole solution for the prisoners is to allow the gangs to rule them. The leaders assign tasks and communicate to the inmates letting them know the punishment resulted when one violates the codes. Therefore, they persist because the inmates conform to the codes to avoid being punished, and it is the only way to deal with the social dilemmas in prisons.

Consequently, the relationship between institutional gang activity and free gang activity affects the structural elements that give rise to gang alliances' projection and persistence. Considering the Mexican Mafia, control and cellblocks support gang alliances. When inmates report, they have limited resources and are unarmed, meaning they would not defend themselves (Skarbek, 2012). Moreover, in the Californian correctional facilities, overcrowding is evident, where the newcomers sleep in hall-like houses, implying minimal protection. On the other hand, the gangs have resources and knowledge as they have stayed longer, making them gain power. In case one does not pay the needed taxes or follow the rules, they are killed. The harsh punishment pushes the members to conform easily, unlike outside, where everyone is armed. In short, the

gangs take advantage of the prisons' situations to force the inmates to depend on them, thus gaining the power to control.

Another reason why gangs develop and succeed in prisons is because of the restrictions put in prisons. The free gang has freedom of movement and autonomy, as long as they are not caught. In the prisons, these aspects are deprived, making the inmates need a connection with the outside world. The Mexican Mafia, for example, helps the members' access narcotics from the mainstream society. Considering the gangs' powers, they are trusted, and their actions are assumed to benefit the members (Tapia et al., 2014). For example, green lights are put, that certain people could be killed without the fear of being punished. The people killing the gangs' enemies are given high positions among the inmates, making them respected. Moreover, the gangs teach the members how to access the goods and services they need implying that they rule as they meet their needs. Therefore, gang alliances develop and persist in prisons due to structural elements making the inmates desperate while the gangs offer solutions and power.

How They Behave

Prisonization, prison code and argot contribute to making up inmates' cultures. Notably, prison subcultures are different from other prisons and societies. The newly incarcerated people have to be taught the prison's style, where the process is called Prisonization (Schaefer et al., 2017). In most cases, they learn the statutes and the responsibilities of different prisoners. The subcultures are much determined by the formal and informal organizations in the place. For example, the subcultures assess the inmates' demands and form a subculture to survive. Prisonization is done so that more members are recruited into the gangs, to make the team bigger and the operations smoother. Notably, the inmates refusing to join are discriminated against and treated harshly leaving most of them with no otherwise other than joining the rest. Therefore, the

prison gangs behave so that the new inmates are motivated to work with them to better cope with the facilities' conditions.

Prison code refers to the norms and expected behaviors of the inmates. Its purpose is to create loyalty among them while distrusting the prison staff. The staff monitors the external and internal actions of the inmates. With that, the prison gang leaders have to develop ways to communicate with each other without the police officers understanding their terms. They use unique terms serving as codes of communication. However, with the development of technology, the FBI and other parties have controlled the gangs' communication. For example, in 2017, an FBI staff in Fulton County Atlanta intercepted a letter by an inmate that seemed innocent but had an encoded message giving instructions on how staff would be murdered. Therefore, the technology has been introduced in the prisons, helping the staff identify some of the hidden messages by inmates, thus destroying their plans.

The hierarchy is the opposite of American society because while communities reject murderers, they are considered powerful while in the prisons. Some standard codes are that one should not interfere with other inmates, everyone should mind their business, complaints and exploitation should be minimized, and no one should trust the staff (Schaefer et al., 2017). Prison argot, on the other hand, is the language the inmates use to communicate. They use unique words, so the staff does not understand their plans and subcultures. Therefore, prisonization, prison code and argot are essential in establishing the inmates' culture.

What Can Be Done to Address the Problem?

The prison gang problem needs to be resolved for the criminal justice system to correct the wrongdoers and release them back to the community as law-abiding citizens. One of the ways to do so is through research collaboration. As noted, the prison gangs' concept is

complicated, making it challenging for lawmakers to identify the needed actions (Mitchell et al., 2018). Most of the ideas today are influenced by studies in the 1980s, which are unreliable as things have changed. For example, with the high involvement in technology and social media, the gangs communicate better and faster. Relying on past research would not develop better ideas because today's practices are different from those in the past. The policymakers need to restart their efforts by implying research designs that address the specific today's operations. Engaging in research would offer qualitative and quantitative information on how best to control the groups and their operations.

The issue would also be resolved by placing the gang affiliates in restrictive buildings. According to statistics, prison gang members engage in violent and non-violent actions more than non-members (Beck, 2015). Therefore, eliminating them from the general population would lower misbehavior cases and bring tension, making the rest abide by the formal rules. Most of the corrections officers agree that the actions would control the prison gangs' operations. Dan Mears and other researchers did research, saying that 67% of the nation's prisons have restrictive houses for the affiliates (Pyrooz, 2016). Those utilizing the houses well have controlled murder and other cases in the prisons. They, therefore, concluded that restrictive housing was a reliable option, if well implemented.

However, the idea has been debated because the inmates separated from the general population are selected based on opinions. It is not that they deserve to be separated or have violated the rules, but it is a safety measure to protect the rest. Some scholars find the technique harsh because all inmates deserve equal treatment unless evidence shows that they need to be separated. A study by the National Inmate Survey between 2011 and 2012 ³ by the Bureau of Justice Statistics showed that gang activities had increased after the restrictive housing measure

was implemented (Pyrooz, 2016). It is the case because the police officers lack enough resources to investigate the inmates, so the chances of actual gang members being left in the general population prisons are higher while the rest are separated. The findings imply that the restrictive houses technique would be successful if the criminal justice system has adequate resources to different gangs from other members. The study also reported that the gang affiliates spend too much time in the restricted houses, as they are not regulated like the rest. It gives them time to organize more crimes that harm society. With that, the police officers in the facilities need to monitor the separated inmates and deny them the chance to plan more harm.

Importance of Analysis Prison Gang Issue to the Prison and Free World Cultures

Addressing the prison gang problem is crucial as the activities impact the prisons and the free world cultures. Accessing full details on how they operate is difficult because they hide most of the information and kill those who learn their ways. David Skarbek, the author of the book "the social order of the underworld," provides insights on the need to address the issue. The writer focuses on California, as it has the largest number of inmates in the nation. He says that order in the prisons is met due to considering what other people would perceive as disorder (Skabbek, 2011). Most drug dealing and other deviant behaviors are led by the gangs, where cellphones are used behind bars to delegate responsibilities. Governance in the prisons apply brutal strategies, but they are effective. Everyone is forced to take responsibility making the processes smooth (Ortiz, 2019). The gangs have businesses in the streets, but their main activities and power are found in the prisons. The outside gangs are like lookers ensuring the goals are met, and after being imprisoned, they officially join the gangs.

Considering governance is prison gang operations, the problem needs to be addressed if the United States and other nations fight crime in society. The Mexican Mafia Prison Gang is an

example of how the gangs control the prisons and society. It was formed in 1956 when the Hispanic inmates in California combined efforts to overcome the harsh prisoners. After some time, the gang grew and acquired power adopting the name Mexican Mafia. Today the group is the most powerful in the Californian system. According to estimations, the gang has about 300 members and over 900 associates who aspire to become permanent members (Mize, 2016). They conduct illicit enterprises mainly in the nation. Notably, the members are found in the prisons and also in the streets. The membership is permanent, in that when the street gangs are imprisoned, they have to be loyal to the group, and after leaving the prisons, they must keep working for the gang.

As the Los Angeles Region Attorney leader said, the Mexican Gang conducts most of the organized crimes reported in the United States. since they operate in prison and outside, their operations are divided into two. They engage in conventional crimes, for example selling hard drugs, robbery with violence and murder. They also have governance institutions that control the illicit industry exchange by handling property, signing agreements and solving the street groups' conflicts. American society has been fighting crimes for decades, but the battle would only end if the prison gangs are controlled. The Hispanic street gangs are mostly found in Southern California with the symbol 'southerners.' There are over 21 000 members with more than 400 gangs in Los Angeles county alone. With the advancement in technology, the numbers are expected to increase. All the members are engaged in narcotics substances distributed across the nation. As noted, the members have to serve the gangs, whether in or out of prison, making their operations progressive. If the US and the rest of the world are to control crimes and narcotics business, ending prison gangs should be the primary goal.

In a nutshell, having discussed the ways gangs persist in prisons and the social structures, making them a thrill, it is clear that they persist due to the social dilemma among the inmates. Some of them want to alienate from the rest, while others prefer to cooperate for mutual benefits. On the other hand, others wish to bribe the correctional officers, so they benefit, but in the end, the need is not met. The situations force the inmates to develop self-enforcement strategies where gangs come in, form rules, communicate and punish the enemies. Unlike other prisoners, the gang leaders have the resources and knowledge to meet the needs despite deprivation. The desperation among the inmates and the need to cope with prison situations make them trust and support the gangs making them powerful. Therefore, gangs which affect the correctional interventions would be overcome if the structural issues are resolved. For example, the officers should understand the prisoners' needs and meet them, so they need to cooperate with gangs to eliminate them. Also, overcrowding should be limited, so the inmates do not find enough time to interact and form the codes and norms, making it hard for officers to access factual information. The application of restrictive houses would also apply, in that the gangs are placed separately from the others, but measures such as better resources to identify them and heightened monitoring needs to be applied. The criminal justice sector would be done, engaging in more research to determine the current strategies used by gangs, other than relying on past research that does not answer today's questions. The action would empower the sector to determine the necessary actions to ensure that criminals do not execute their plans. Addressing this topic, as described in the paper, is necessary because it empowers the justice system to execute its roles, thus maintaining order and peace.

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