

# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

September 2015 No 221



*Special Edition*  
**Reducing Prison Violence**

# Reducing Gang Related Prison Violence

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**When considering how violence can be reduced in prisons, it is important that violence committed by groups is acknowledged and understood. Violence may be committed by individuals affiliated with various types of group, such as extremist or terrorist groups, organized crime groups or criminal gangs. The focus of this article is on understanding and reducing violence committed by criminal gangs in custody. To establish how such violence can be reduced, this article will outline and explore some key issues which help to address this question: What do we mean when we talk about 'gangs'? How is gang-affiliated violence different to other violence? Why do people join gangs? Why do they leave? What role can prison staff, policies, environments and interventions play in reducing violence?**

## **Gang: An Elusive Definition**

Gang is a word frequently used, yet there is little consensus or agreement about its definition. Definitions vary amongst academics and criminal justice agencies. The Home Office<sup>1</sup> define 'gang' as 'a group of three or more people who have a distinct identity (e.g. a name/badge/emblem) and commit general crime or anti-social behaviour as part of their identity. This group uses (or is reasonably suspected of using) firearms, or the threat of firearms when carrying out these offence.' The Centre for Social Justice paper 'Dying to Belong'<sup>2</sup> provides the following commonly accepted definition: 'A relatively durable, predominantly street-based group of young people who:

1. See themselves (and are seen by others) as a discernible group and
2. Engage in a range of criminal activity and violence.  
They *may* also have any or all of the following features:
3. Identify with or lay claim over territory
4. Have some form of identifying structural feature

5. Are in conflict with other similar gangs.'

An advantage of having a clear definition is that this helps to distinguish between different types of criminally-orientated groups and how they should be managed. The 'street orientation' identified in the above definitions appears to be a helpful marker to discriminate gangs from other criminally-orientated groups. However, whilst street orientated gangs from the community may operate in prisons, it is questionable whether this adequately defines similar groups who form in prison. A prison gang has been defined as:<sup>3</sup>

'an organisation which operates within the prison system as a self-perpetuating criminally orientated entity, consisting of a select group of inmates who have established an organised chain of command and are governed by an established code of conduct'.

Forming and belonging to groups in prison (or having peer relationships) are not inherently problematic behaviours, but are a normal part of being human. Not all groups in prison are gangs. To survive and 'get on' in prison, forming relationships in small groups for many will be an inevitable and necessary part of prison life. Improving ways of distinguishing between groups who define themselves through committing indiscipline, criminality or violence from those who do not, is important if prisons are to effectively target and manage those groups and individuals of genuine concern.

## **The Nature of Prison Gangs**

Research suggests that prison gangs are likely to be more stable, controlled, organised versions of street gangs who commit more co-ordinated acts of violence.<sup>4</sup> They tend to be comprised of members from more similar ethnic and racial background; have more unqualified loyalty to the gang and engage in more instrumental violence, covert activity and collective drug dealing than street gangs.<sup>5</sup> In U.K prisons, regional affiliations have been identified as a key feature of prison gangs as individuals from the same regions tend

1. Home Office, (2008). *Tackling Gangs: Practical Guide for local authorities, CDRPS and other local partners*. London: Home Office. p.23.
2. Centre for Social Justice (2009) *Dying to Belong: An In-depth Review of Street Gangs in Britain*, London, Centre for Social Justice. p. 2.
3. Lynman, M.D., (1989) *Gangland*. Springfield, Il: Charles C Thomas. In Pyrooz, D.,C., Decker, S.H., and Fleisher, M. (2011) From the street to the prison, from the prison to the street: understanding and responding to prison gangs. *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research, Vol. 3, No. 1. Pier Professional Ltd.* p.48.
4. Klein, M.W., Maxson, C.L. (2006). *Street gang patterns and policies*. Oxford University Press, New York.
5. Pyrooz, D.C., Decker, S. H., Fleisher, M. (2011). From the street to the prison, from the prison to the street: Understanding and Responding to Prison Gangs. *Journal of Aggression and Peace Research, Vol. 3, No. 1, 12-24.*

to associate with one another.<sup>6</sup> Theories seeking to explain why gangs form in prison tend to argue this is because individuals bring their community gang affiliations into prisons or because they are an adaptation to the structure, culture and dynamics of prison life.<sup>7</sup> Both theories may be valid, suggesting that prison gangs may both reflect those from 'the street', those created in prisons or a combination of both.

### Gang Violence

To warrant placing specific attention on prison gangs, valid questions to ask are whether gang violence is different to other violence and are gang members more likely to perpetrate violence than non-gang members? Research in the USA has consistently shown gang membership to be associated with violence and crime.<sup>8</sup> Research suggests they are also frequent offenders who are criminally diverse.<sup>9</sup> One study,<sup>10</sup> suggests that individuals who join gangs are, in general, more delinquent than their peers before they join the gang. However, this study also found that their level of violence significantly increased after becoming gang members.

Why do gang members increase their violent behaviour when joining a gang? It is likely that gang violence (both inside and outside prison) occurs because of a variety of motives and circumstances, for example, to control or maintain control of high value resources (money, power, drugs etc), to impose power and influence and to enhance group status and worth. Social psychology as well as criminology provide various theories to help answer this question. Violence may occur when gang members come to see themselves primarily (or exclusively) as gang member rather than an individual. In gangs,

individuals may see themselves as less identifiable, responsible and accountable for their behavior, which can allow for empathy, moral values, consequential thinking and perspective taking to be dismissed, ignored or overlooked. Group-based justifications and attitudes which legitimise violence may also allow conventional moral values to be overcome.

When individuals identify strongly with a gang or group, they can be strongly motivated to enhance or preserve the status of their group, especially when they feel this is threatened by other groups.<sup>11</sup> Perceptions of other groups or rival gangs develop which can encourage and enable violence, such as 'us and them' thinking and the demonisation and dehumanisation of other group members.<sup>12</sup> Such thinking can prevent people from recognizing and respecting the values of others; prevent similarities and commonalities from being acknowledged; fuel a sense that other groups deserve to be harmed and strips away the human qualities of other group members making it easier to harm them.

### Why Do People Join Gangs?

There are a range of theories for why individuals form and join gangs from both sociological and psychological perspectives. Factors identified include breakdown of social order, communities no longer being able to meet the needs of individuals, ties being cut with other important social groups (such as family, friends and school); being surrounded by delinquent peers; the absence of positive male role-models and social exclusion.<sup>13</sup> Whilst these factors have been identified as typically 'pushing' people towards gang membership, factors which attract and 'pull' individuals into gangs have also been highlighted. These include money; protection against

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6. Wood, J.L. (2006) Gang Activity in English Prisons: The Prisoners' Perspective. *Psychology, Crime & Law*, Vol. 12, 605-617.  
7. DeLisi, M., Berg, M. T. & Hochstetler, A. (2004) Gang Members, Career Criminals and Prison Violence: Further Specification of the Importation Model of Inmate Behavior. *Criminal Justice Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 369-383.  
8. Decker, S. and Van Winkle, B. (1996). *Family, friends and violence*. Cambridge University Press.  
9. See n4.  
10. Melde, C and Esbensen, F. A. (2013). Gangs and violence: disentangling the impact of gang membership on the level and nature of offending. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, Vol. 29, 143 – 166.  
11. Tajfel, H. & Turner, J.C. (1986) The Social Identity Theory of Inter-Group Behaviour, in Worchel, S & Austin, W. *The Psychology of Inter-group Behaviour*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall. P. 7-24.  
12. Wood, J., and Alleyne, E. (2010) Street gang theory and research: Where are we now and where do we go from here? *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, Vol. 15, 100-111.  
13. Marshall B, Webb B, Tilley N. (2005). Rationalisation of Current Research on Guns, Gangs and Other Weapons: Phase 1. London: Jill Dando Institute of Crime Science.

victimisation; love; excitement; belonging; status and respect.<sup>14</sup> Many of these factors such as belonging, security, worth, significance have been labelled as 'identity needs' or needs which are met when people identify with particular aspects of their lives.<sup>15</sup>

Once individuals join gangs, the factors which maintain their involvement may be different from those which got them involved initially. Factors that have been identified which maintain gang involvement include: An ongoing source of money; loyalty and ties of reciprocity; force of habit and being 'stuck'.<sup>16</sup>

The reasons why gangs form and individuals join gangs in prison do not appear to be significantly different to those in the community for example for survival/protection; power; identity; security; to access drugs. These may vary however depending on the dynamics of individual prisons. Consideration therefore needs to be given to both the individual motives and external circumstances that may encourage or necessitate gang membership in individual prisons.

Understanding individual motives for joining or remaining in gangs is important if such behaviour is to be understood and appropriately managed. Prisoners who *identify* with a gang (i.e. it becomes important to how they defines themselves as individuals and significantly influences their lifestyle) may need to be managed differently to those who simply associate with a gang for more opportunistic reasons, such as to access drugs or to exploit others.

### Gang Disengagement and Exit

An individual's likelihood of offending is significantly reduced when they disengage or exit a gang. In one study,<sup>17</sup> participants said that joining a gang was a part of a transition stage prior to adulthood, suggesting it is a phase individuals may go through as they search for a sense of who they are and what their place in the world is. Factors that seemed important in why these individuals left the gang (or disengaged) was a desire to leave; a turning point or life

event such as becoming a father and alternative path to follow such as gaining legitimate employment.

Researchers have identified other factors and circumstances which may encourage disengagement. These include: the availability of alternative and attractive activities and and criminal justice involvement;<sup>18</sup> maturity, increased family commitments and peer victimisation;<sup>19</sup> exposure to gang related violence (to themselves, friends or family);<sup>20</sup> fatherhood, conventional aspirations and increased responsibilities.<sup>21</sup> Researchers have suggested that suggested that 'where they may once have been uninterested or disdainful of various job opportunities, training, or educational programmes, after fatherhood many gang members were increasingly desirous of such supports, but sometimes found them difficult to access'.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, a number of these factors are consistent with those found to support desistance from offending more generally although a focus on supporting individuals to disengage or leave a particular group does appear to be different. Disengaging from a gang can require significant changes in the way people think, socialise, strive to earn a living, and ultimately behave.<sup>23</sup> Those individuals who have turned their backs on gang affiliated violence appear to have done so because their particular lifestyle no longer fulfils their needs, expectations values, and priorities. Exploring identity is important to understand how and why an individual may leave such a lifestyle behind. Perhaps most importantly, association with their gang no longer seems to reflect the type of person they want to be and therefore something they no longer want to identify with. The role of identity is therefore considered central in understanding why individuals become part of a gang that offends.

Potential barriers involved with this process that have been highlighted include: Potential gang leavers continuing to receive threats of violence; mistrust and labelling by statutory agencies; the challenge of renegotiating relationships with extensive networks of relatives and friends; underestimating the challenge of

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14. Young, M.A. and Gonzalez,V. (2013) *Getting Out of Gangs, Staying Out of Gangs: Gang intervention and Desistence Strategies*. National Gang Centre, USA.
  15. Vignoles, V.L., Gollledge, J., Regalia, C., Manzi, C. and Scabini, E. (2006) Beyond Self-Esteem: Influence of Multiple Motives on Identity Construction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 90, No. 2, 309-333.
  16. Aldridge, J. and Medina, J. (2007) *Youth Gangs in an English City: Social Exclusion, Drugs, and Violence*. Swindon: ESRC.
  17. See n16.
  18. Decker, S. H. and Pyrooz, D. C. (2011) 'Gangs, terrorism, and radicalization. *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 4, 151-166.
  19. Vigil, D. 1988. *Barrio Gangs: Street Life and Identity in Southern California*, Austin, Texas. University of Texas Press. In Young, M,A. and Gonzalez,V. (2013) *Getting Out of Gangs, Staying Out of Gangs: Gang intervention and Desistence Strategies*. National Gang Centre, USA.
  20. Decker, S. H., and Lauritsen, J. L. 2002. 'Breaking the Bonds of Membership: Leaving the Gang,' in C. R. Huff (ed.), *Gangs in America III* (pp. 103-122), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc. In Young, M,A. and Gonzalez,V. (2013) *Getting Out of Gangs, Staying Out of Gangs: Gang intervention and Desistence Strategies*. National Gang Centre, USA.
  21. Maloney M., MacKenzie K., Hunt G., and Laidler, J. (2009) The Path and Promise of Fatherhood for Gang Members. *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 49, 305-325.
  22. See n21. p.318.
  23. Harris, D, Turner, R., Garrett, I. and Atkinson, S. (2011) *Understanding the psychology of gang violence: implications for designing effective violence interventions*. Ministry of Justice Research Series 2/11.

leaving home areas; a lack of acknowledgement from criminal justice workers in the positive changes they had made in their lives; unpreparedness of schools, health, and prison services to collaborate or respond adequately to the problems brought about by gangs.<sup>24</sup>

### Interventions to Prevent Gang-Related Violence in prison

Understanding why people join gangs and offend and why they may disengage from gangs and desist all provide important indicators as to how we can effectively intervene to prevent offending.

At a primary level, preventing people from joining gangs and committing group-enabled violence is a critical aspect of intervention and multi-agency approaches. At a secondary or tertiary level, interventions and multi-agency responses with particular features have been identified as those most likely to be effective. Such features include: Targeting risk factors for gang membership and offending; utilising appropriate assessment; focusing on facilitating gang disengagement and disidentification; empowering individuals to desist; addressing gang -related anti-social thinking and behavior; accommodating wider social circumstances and embracing evaluation.<sup>25</sup>

NOMS Interventions Services have recently developed an intervention called *Identity Matters* which incorporates the aforementioned features and has been acknowledged by academics with expertise in this area as an innovative, important and promising addition to the field.<sup>26</sup> It has been specifically designed to encourage offenders to reduce their affiliation and identification with gangs in order to reduce their likelihood of committing serious violence because or on behalf-of their gang. The intervention focusses on various areas including supporting participants in addressing issues which contributed to them joining a gang, encouraging disillusionment and dissatisfaction with gang involvement, managing group influence and challenging their perceptions OF other groups that make them willing to commit violence. An initial process evaluation of this intervention suggests that IM has promise in enabling gang members to reexamine their involvement and offending and make

steps towards desisting from group-related offending in the future.

### Conclusions: Reducing gang-related violence in prisons

Gang violence is different in some ways to other forms of violence, and gang members are more likely to commit violent crime than non-gang members. In coming to better understand why individuals join gangs, why they commit violence in gangs and why they leave gangs or stay in them, we are developing insight into how we can reduce such violence in both custody and the community. Opportunities to prevent individuals from joining or identifying with gangs as well as supporting them in exiting or disengaging

from gangs once involved, appear crucial. Options need to be available for prisoners to meet their needs legitimately in prisons to support desistance, without seeing gang membership as the only pathway to meet these. Similarly, making those involved in gangs less willing to offend on-behalf of their gang through addressing their attitudes, challenging their perceptions other groups and disrupting peer influences which can facilitate such violence. Staff can play a crucial role here in modeling respectful, non-

judgmental, and pro-social values and behaviours through their daily interactions. Emerging interventions such as Identity Matters may provide promising new options for addressing these issues. Ensuring interventions are part of holistic multi-agency approaches which empower individuals to make lifestyle changes through enabling environments and supportive relationships in prisons perhaps offer the most likelihood of success. Below are some suggested principles derived from the literature and practice to guide how prisons can proactively develop policies, processes, interventions to reduce gang-affiliated violence.

1. Social groups that are not criminally orientated should be promoted in prisons, especially those that provide opportunities to develop pro-social identities and fulfil personal needs for belonging, purpose, significance and worth.

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24. See n16.

25. Personal communications: Prof Scott Decker; Asst Prof Caleb Lloyd; Asst Prof David Pyrooz and Dr Jane Wood (2015).

26. See n25.

2. Assessment and monitoring frameworks should be in place to help identify why individual prisoners join and maintain their membership of gangs.
3. Pro-social alternatives to gang activity such as sport, facilitated family access, resettlement support, should be available (either in prison or in the community) to make joining or remaining in gangs less attractive to prisoners.
4. Support that includes interventions such as Identity Matters and holistic multi-agency responses should be provided to prisoners who show signs of wanting to reconsider their gang involvement. Care should be taken to ensure such approaches are discrete and avoid putting the individual at risk from group reprisals.
5. Specific interventions should be made available to prevent individuals identified as vulnerable to gang recruitment from becoming affiliated with gangs.
6. Prevention strategies in custodial establishments should limit opportunities for gangs to form and sustain themselves. Processes should include community liaison and intelligence sharing, promoting non-criminally orientated groups and early identification of vulnerable individuals.
7. Consistent and comprehensive processes for the identification and management of those recruiting prisoners into gangs should include awareness training for establishment staff, intelligence sharing within and external to the establishment and family support via multi-agency partnership working.
8. Processes should be agreed with agencies outside of the prison (including police, probation, local authority community safety partnerships and social services) to prevent offending both inside and outside the prison (including 'real time' information sharing arrangements about those at risk and those identified as being affiliated to gangs).
9. Processes are in place to monitor the relationships of outside visitors and gang members in prison especially in specific areas of the prison (such as in visits).
10. Processes to review serious incidents involving gangs and incorporate learning into revised policies, guidance or actions.