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Reviews

Competing for control: Gangs and the social order of prisons

By: David Pyrooz and Scott Decker

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Gangs have become one of the enduring fears of contemporary life. As I write this review, the headlines for the day included fears about rising violent crime and the undermining of public policy:

'Profoundly worrying': Knife-wielding gang members now 'aiming to kill rather than frighten'

*Covid loans 'exploited by crime gangs'*²

There is deep concern about the impact of gangs in exploiting vulnerable people through drug distribution networks known as 'county lines'³, while a cross government strategy has been developed to promote early intervention and protect those vulnerable to gang involvement⁴.

In prisons, there has also been anxiety about gangs. This has included the involvement of gangs in prison violence and the illicit economy⁵, as well as the spectre of 'Muslim gangs' perceived by some to be threatening radicalisation and criminality⁶.

Inside and outside of prisons in the UK, therefore, gangs are particular concern for the public,

media, politicians and practitioners. It is in this light that David Pyrooz and Scott Decker's extensive research on prison gangs in Texas, provides a particularly important exemplar for integrating research, policy and practice.

This book reports the findings from The LoneStar Project, Pyrooz and Decker's five year long gang research project in Texas. This was partly funded by the National Institute for Justice, an agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. Texas is the largest state prison system in the US, with a population of nearly 160,000 inmates, twice the size of the England and Wales prison population. The general population of Texas, at 29 million, is about half that of England and Wales. Texas has, in the past experienced high levels of gang violence in prisons, although in recent years this has reduced. There are over 11,000 confirmed gang members in Texan prisons, from 67 different groups. The research involved interviews with over 800 prisoners (368 gang members and 434 non gang members), as well as analysis of inmate records and statewide law enforcement records. The study examined a number of questions, including: how and why do inmates organise themselves into social groups like gangs; how do these groups govern themselves

and maintain external relations inside and outside of prison; who gets involved in these groups and how do they join and leave them, and; what are the consequences of group involvement for misconduct and victimisation in prison. There was a particular focus on transitional points, such as entering and leaving prison as well as joining and leaving the gangs.

One of the most obvious questions is defining what a gang is. There have been various definitions proposed, which often encompass a group of people who see themselves (and are seen by others) as a noticeable group, and engage in a range of criminal activity and violence. In this study, Pyrooz and Decker focussed on self-identification, in others words they asked people to identify themselves whether or not they were gang members. They found that there was significant overlap between those that self-identified as gang members and those that officials classified as gang members. This finding suggested that, in contrast to some work on street gangs⁷, that gang membership is not a stigmatising label, the classification is legitimate and has validity in Texan prisons.

The research findings are presented in significant detail, with carefully analysed data. This reveals

1. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/10/03/profoundly-worrying-knife-wielding-gang-members-now-aiming-kill/>
2. <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/covid-loans-exploited-by-crime-gangs-xv3grnmj>
3. <https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/what-we-do/crime-threats/drug-trafficking/county-lines>
4. HM Government (2016) *Ending gang violence and exploitation* available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/491699/Ending_gang_violence_and_Exploitation_FINAL.pdf
5. Horan, R., Dean, C. and Sutcliffe, P. (2015) *Reducing Gang Related Prison Violence* in *Prison Service Journal* p.42-46 available at <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/PSJ%20221%20September%202015.pdf>
6. Powis, B., Dixon, L. and Woodhams, J. (2019) *Exploring the Nature of Muslim Groups and Related Gang Activity in Three High Security Prisons: Findings from Qualitative Research* available at https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/806660/exploring-nature-muslim-groups-related-gang-activity.pdf
7. For example Williams, P. (2018) *Being Matrixed: The (Over)Policing Of Gang Suspects In London* available at https://www.stop-watch.org/uploads/documents/Being_Matrixed.pdf

some new insights into the workings of prison gangs in Texas. This includes that the identity of 'gang' or 'non gang' member was not fixed, but could change on entry into prison, on leaving the prison, or at other points. Contrary to popular belief, gang members were not members for life, but could opt out and leave. Those that did could be anxious about potential repercussions, but in reality there was rarely any violent retribution for leaving gangs. Those that did disengage usually did so not for positive reasons such as family, employment or education, but more often because they became disillusioned with gang life. They often sought a sense of belonging in alternative communities, including faith.

The findings also explored the impact of gangs on prison life. Inmate behaviour and misconduct was shaped by gang membership. Those that were members of gangs were more likely to both be the perpetrators and victims of violence. Most of the violence was between gangs and the others forms of misconduct were generally to do with drug dealing and other contraband. While there have been

many different explanations offered for prison violence and misconduct, Pyrooz and Decker argue rather than looking to individual explanations (focussing of factors such as psychology and socio-economic background) or ecology (the prison culture and environment) that:

'Prison gang membership is a leading explanation for misconduct and victimisation, and ignoring this fact misrepresents our understanding of their occurrence in prison' (p.180)

In relation to the social world of prisons, the authors describe that although prison gangs are important in the production of social order, they do not hold primacy. The gang culture and hierarchy plays a significant role in governing the lives of members, but is less influential for non-gang members and these groups 'operate in different social worlds' (p.152).

This study has significant implications for practice. In Texas, it can certainly be used to inform management strategies to promote safety, as well as design and target interventions at critical

points. For the UK, this really points to the need for similar large scale research on prison gangs in order to inform a more effective strategy. There are also other groups that could usefully be the subject of similar attention, including peer groups (where the association is not necessarily linked to offending or only lower level non-violent offending) and organised criminal networks (involved in persistent criminality which is causing significant harm to the community). Pyrooz and Decker are to be applauded for producing such an extensive and illuminating study of prison gangs, which really cuts through many assumptions and offers a grounded, empirical analysis. This has the potential to shape policy and practice in Texan prisons. It also offers a blueprint for the exploration of gangs and criminal networks in UK prisons as well as being a wider model for integrating research, policy and practice.

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