

CT FEATURE

GANG SUPPRESSION

INSTITUTIONAL CONTROL

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Authors' Note: *The data in this article were provided by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice under Research Agreement No. 016-R99. Points of view are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the position of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.*

“I’m convinced that if you put three people on an island somewhere, two would clique up and become predatory against the other at some point.” — Cory Godwin, former president of the Gang-Investigators Association for the Florida Department of Corrections.¹

Data on the number of gang-related inmates may be one of the most elusive figures in corrections. Most of what is known about the nature and extent of prison gangs is collected through surveys of corrections officials about their respective jurisdictions.² Despite the usefulness of such surveys, state-to-state variations in data collection and related procedures are a significant barrier to comprehensive figures on the extent of prison gangs. For example, according to the *2002 Corrections Yearbook*, most state prison systems count gang members who have been vetted through a confirmation process, although some systems count suspected and inactive members in their gang totals. In this same vein, a number of state prison systems count street gang members in their total gang member counts, while others do not. Moreover, a number of states count in

their gang totals only members of recognized prison and/or street gangs, neglecting those who may be aligned with unrecognized cliques and other security threat groups. The bottom line is that significant variations exist both within and between states on the identification and counting of gang-related inmates, and such variations prevent an accurate count in assessing gang membership in U.S. prison systems.

Despite these recognized limitations, the most recent national-level data reveal that gang members account for a very small proportion of any individual prison system. In a 2002 national survey of state prison systems and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, the Criminal Justice Institute revealed a total of 15,398 prison gang members. The survey revealed that most states had fewer than 1,000 gang members, although California and Texas emerged as anomalies by accounting for nearly 70 percent of all prison gang members, each with more than 5,000 members. Despite some variation among individual state systems, strictly prison-based gang members accounted for 1.2 percent of all state and federal prison inmates. Including street gang members and members of other security threat groups, gang-related inmates constituted less than 5 percent of all prison inmates across the country.

The best evidence suggests that the overwhelming majority of prison inmates are not gang-related. Forgetting their low numbers, however, gang and security threat group members cause a disproportionate share of problems in the prison setting and are a significant administrative issue for prison managers.³

When a Group Thrives On Prison

A prime example of the cost and mayhem created by prison gangs was uncovered by Operation Black Widow in 1998. Operation Black Widow was a three-year, \$5 million cooperation between the FBI and local authorities in California to ferret out and prosecute the most violent members of the infamous Nuestra Familia. It was and remains the most expensive investigation into a U.S. prison gang. Black Widow uncovered a complex paramilitary hierarchy within the Nuestra Familia, including insight into its recruitment and membership activities, discipline structure, communication structure and member tracking. Black Widow also uncovered information on the Nuestra Raza, a subordinate organization formed to train members aspiring to the Nuestra Familia and to distract law enforcement from Familia activities.⁴

Operation Black Widow exposed the ingenuity of incarcerated Nuestra Familia members operating inside Pelican Bay State Prison in California. Nuestra Familia members, housed in the secure housing unit, were able to order and carry out death hits and drug deals, and run extortion rackets by communicating to the outside world through notes embossed on the inside of legal envelopes and by using upcoming parolees to transport to the street notes buried in the prison’s recreation yard. This complex system uncovered by Operation Black Widow resulted in the indictment of 13 members of Nuestra Familia on 24 federal

counts in 2001, ranging from racketeering to witness tampering to murder.⁵

The Nuestra Familia is perhaps an extreme example of the consequences of gang proliferation in U.S. prisons, and they are in the company of other large prison gangs such as the Aryan Brotherhood, Texas Syndicate, Mexican Mafia and the Black Guerilla Family. But even smaller and less complex prison gangs, security threat groups and inmate cliques pose a major problem to prison administrators around the country. They are able to cause violence and disorder in and out of prisons and require special consideration in numerous areas from housing to movement and from visitation to mailing privileges.⁶ The bottom line is that they are a major source of institutional disruption and seem to thrive on the various systems created to defeat them.⁷

Add Race to the Mix

Gangs and security threat groups are primarily aligned along race and ethnicity. The racial and ethnic divide endorsed by most prison and street gangs means that race has been and continues to be one of the most dominant influences on inmate behavior, perhaps only second to gang membership.⁸ The importance of race and gang membership cannot be understated in light of the 2005 U.S. Supreme Court case of *Johnson v. California*. In this case, the Supreme Court struck down the racial segregation of inmates unless segregation was the only way that the safety and security of staff, inmates and institutions could be maintained. Even then, racial segregation must only be a temporary expedient, not a long-term blanket policy affecting all inmates.

What happens in the wider society will eventually filter into the prison walls. The racial diversification of prison housing areas is just one example of this long-documented trend that has included everything from discipline practices to health care. The move toward racial integration presents special problems for prison administrators as they attempt to break long-held racial boundaries in the looming presence of prison gangs. In some prison systems, there is considerable pressure on inmates to align along racial and ethnic lines, because prison gang politics dictate as much. The probability of a successful integration plan, like other significant prison policies, declines considerably in light of the influence of prison gangs.

A Natural Response

Imprison a large batch of others, add a competitive market, and divisions will form. The bottom line is that gangs or other illicit inmate groupings have been and will be a part of the prison forever. Perhaps this is a natural response to the organization of prisons and other places where individuals believe they must group to compete, thrive and survive. As noted at the beginning of this article, “[I]f you put three people on an island somewhere, two would clique up and become predatory against the other at some point.”

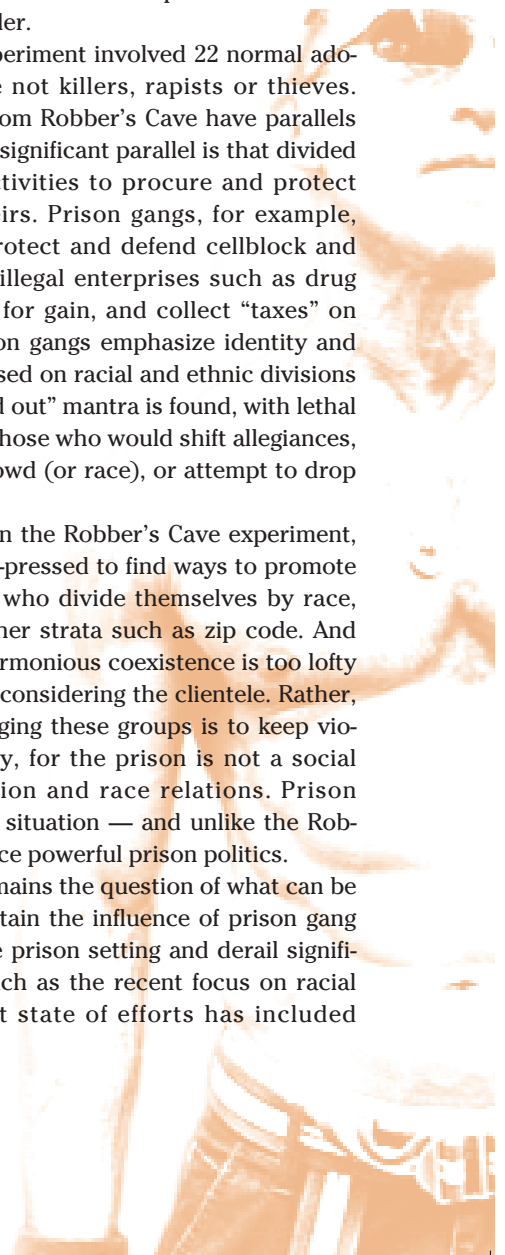
Take the following classic example, referred to as the Robber’s Cave experiment.⁹ In the 1950s, a psychologist, Muzafer Sherif, took 22, seemingly normal, middle-class adolescent boys who did not know each other to Robber’s Cave State Park in Oklahoma. Sherif divided the boys into two groups of 11, roughly equal in athletic ability and experience. Neither group knew of the other group’s presence at Robber’s Cave. Each group was situated with its own cabin, swimming hole and hideouts, and each group participated in activities such as securing tents, making meals, hiking and hunting treasure. Over time, the separated and unknowing groups developed their own rules, leaders, symbols and identity. One group adopted the name “Eagles,” and the other group adopted “Rattlers.”

Days into the experiment, both groups learned of the other group’s existence at Robber’s Cave. Pronouncements of “they better not be in our swimming hole” abounded from the boys in the segregated groups. Sherif then pitted the groups against each other in competitive contests for rewards such as medals and knives. The contests quickly deteriorated into fights, thefts, raids and general disorder as each group tried to defend what was “rightfully theirs.” The disorder continued until Sherif had the boys compete in activities that required the expertise and effort of both groups. A series of cooperative activities promoted solidarity and reduced the disorder.

The Robber’s Cave experiment involved 22 normal adolescent boys. They were not killers, rapists or thieves. Regardless, the lessons from Robber’s Cave have parallels to the prison setting. One significant parallel is that divided groups will engage in activities to procure and protect what they believe is theirs. Prison gangs, for example, engage in activities to protect and defend cellblock and dayroom “turf,” operate illegal enterprises such as drug trafficking and extortion for gain, and collect “taxes” on dealers in their turf. Prison gangs emphasize identity and symbolism, oftentimes based on racial and ethnic divisions where the “blood in, blood out” mantra is found, with lethal repercussions coming to those who would shift allegiances, mingle with the wrong crowd (or race), or attempt to drop out of the gang.¹⁰

But much different than the Robber’s Cave experiment, prison managers are hard-pressed to find ways to promote harmony among inmates who divide themselves by race, gang membership and other strata such as zip code. And some would argue that harmonious coexistence is too lofty a goal in a prison setting, considering the clientele. Rather, the primary goal in managing these groups is to keep violence and disorder at bay, for the prison is not a social experiment of cooperation and race relations. Prison inmates are in a different situation — and unlike the Robber’s Cave boys — they face powerful prison politics.

However, there still remains the question of what can be done to neutralize or contain the influence of prison gang members who disrupt the prison setting and derail significant prison initiatives, such as the recent focus on racial integration. The current state of efforts has included numerous strategies.



Dealing With Gang Members

Prison organizations nationwide have employed numerous strategies to address the influence of prison gang members. In an overall view, gang-control strategies have been implemented through organizational, legal and legislative means. These and other initiatives have increased momentum in the fight against gangs and have led to a host of specific practices.

Some systems have attempted inmate moves or transfers where gang members and their leaders are concentrated in particular prison units, dispersed or diluted throughout the entire system, or are sent to other states' institutions or to the BOP. Others use gang renunciation and debriefing programs; rival gang member integration programs; informants; free-world and in-prison prosecutions; and identification, tracking and information-sharing systems (e.g., to share with local and state law enforcement, other states, etc.). Still other systems use gang-infiltration strategies and intelligence departments with the sole responsibility of collecting and documenting prison gangs and their activities. Some systems employ all of these efforts.¹¹

The numerous strategies used by systems nationwide have not been systematically evaluated as to their effectiveness in derailing gang recruitment and growth, and their impact on the prison environment. There simply has been a lack of systematic research that can inform and guide policy-makers about what works with prison gangs. Undoubtedly, both internal and external strategies are preferable to doing nothing, and such strategies may have helped control gangs inside prisons. But mostly anecdotal accounts suggest that these strategies may only be stopgap measures to the most pressing problems created by prison gangs — institutional violence and disorder.¹²

Perhaps the most effective method for controlling prison gangs and their influence has been suppression efforts — especially if the focus is to reduce gang violence, disorder and recruitment within the institution. Suppression strategies include, but are not limited to, the separation and isolation of gang leaders, the pre-emptive segregation of confirmed gang members and prison lockdowns.¹³

Texas' Gang Strategy

Texas, being the second largest correctional system in the nation, has had its share of gang problems. The *2002 Corrections Yearbook* indicates that more than 6,000 inmates have been confirmed as members of a recognized prison gang or security threat group, and several thousands are suspected members. However, prior to the late 1980s in Texas, traditional prison gangs such as the Texas Syndicate and the Mexican Mafia were almost nonexistent — small in numbers with little organization compared with some of today's prison gangs.¹⁴

Until the mid- to late 1980s, the absence of prison gang members in Texas was attributed to the heavy-handed

methods employed by the uniquely southern Building Tender system (BTs). The BTs comprised primarily white offenders, co-opted by prison staff, who were charged with securing "tanks" and "blocks" from inmate violence and disorder. BTs had almost unlimited control over inmates. They monitored escape attempts, worked strikes and riot plans, and provided gang intelligence. For all intents and purposes, the BTs were the only prison gang that existed in any significant numbers in Texas at the time, and, according to some accounts, they maintained order instead of causing disorder.¹⁵

Over time and as the result of *Ruiz v. Estelle* (1980), a massive prison conditions suit that reorganized Texas prison operation, the BT system was dismantled, along with the methods it and correctional officers used to maintain control of inmates. The removal of the BTs resulted in inmate groupings and gangs divided along racial and ethnic lines, which clashed for control of the power market left vacant by the BTs. Not surprisingly, gangs such as the Texas Syndicate and Mexican Mafia grew, recruiting began and violence erupted, and Texas prison administrators witnessed more murders and stabbings in a two-year span than had been experienced the 20 years prior.¹⁶

During the same time as the Ruiz remedies, the Texas prison system was also under pressure to racially integrate its prison cells as a result of litigation from *Lamar v. Coffield* (1977). The Lamar case began in the early 1970s and was dealt with by consent decree in 1977, but the decree was not complied with by the Texas prison system. After years of dealing with the federal courts, and in the face of stiff contempt sanctions, in September 1991, the Texas prison system stipulated to racially integrate its prison cells.¹⁷

One of the major issues with racial integration in Texas was the presence of gangs that formed following the dismantling of the BT system. Texas had avoided the surge in gang formation experienced by most prison systems in the 1960s and 1970s, but they were squarely involved with gangs by the mid- to late 1980s and into the 1990s. Gangs and their race-based affiliates exerted pressure on other inmates to resist early efforts at inmate racial integration. In some cases, serious assaults were perpetrated on cell partners to earn a "racial restriction" and be placed in a single-race cell.

During the rising influence of gang members and efforts to maintain compliance with racial integration and Ruiz mandates, the Texas prison system embarked on a prison-building binge. The addition of nearly 60 prison units by the mid-1990s meant that the prison system had the room to deal with intransigent inmates, including gang members. And to address gang-related violence and other illicit activities, Texas administrators placed a premium on gang identification and intelligence strategies. Confirmed gang members were isolated in separation wings and/or prison units, along with other intransigent inmates who balked at the institutional regime. The intelligence-gathering and suppression activities appeared to work; data from the Texas prison system from 1990 to 1999 show that gang-related incidents were few and far between in Texas prisons. By

sending gang members to separation units and placing them on lockdown status, other inmates could coexist, often racially integrated, without the pressure and fear of lethal reprisals from gang members.

Table 1 is a presentation of gang-related incidents in the Texas prison system from 1990 to 1999. There was a total of 39,237 inmate-on-inmate incidents (excluding inmate-on-staff or single inmate incidents) during this time period. Of these incidents, only 1,136 were considered “gang-related.” This equaled roughly 3 percent of all incidents in the Texas prison system during the time.

Table 1. Rate of Gang-Related Incidents per 1,000 Inmates in Texas (1990-1999)

Year	Texas Prison Population	Total Inmate Incidents	Gang-Related Incidents	Gang Incident Rate per 1,000 Inmates
1990	43,897	3,242	28	>1
1991	47,262	3,906	34	>1
1992	48,510	4,178	51	1
1993	57,038	4,183	72	1.3
1994	65,107	3,426	82	1.2
1995	96,487	4,149	128	1.3
1996	116,121	4,136	159	1.3
1997	118,752	4,069	171	1.4
1998	123,449	4,001	183	1.5
1999	126,280	3,947	228	1.8

Table 1 reveals that the suppression methods employed by the Texas prison system effectively addressed gang-related violence, even during the implementation of racial integration. Although there were likely other influences that contributed to the low levels of gang-related violence (e.g., addition of staff, adoption of professional standards, decrease in crowding, and the introduction of multiple methods to deal with gangs, such as free-world prosecution), the suppression efforts by Texas had a major impact on inmate incidents within the prison setting. Indeed, the rate of gang-related violence never exceeded two incidents per 1,000 inmates during this 10-year period. Considering that by 1999 the Texas prison system operated more than 110 prison units and housed almost 130,000 inmates, this averaged less than three gang-related incidents per prison unit, per year.

The suppression activities employed by the Texas prison system appeared to work, but it was not without expense — both literally and figuratively. The Texas prison-building binge was the largest in the nation, and the secure cells and housing areas for gang members and disruptive inmates meant that prison operation costs soared. There were other consequences as well, such as the psychological impacts that isolation had on inmates, whether such activities led to an increase of inmate-on-staff assaults and the consequences of releasing isolated inmates from segregation to the community.¹⁸

However, perhaps the bottom line is that these activities worked to help control the influence of gang members. Although there are certain to be instances where suppression activities cannot prevent the best efforts by inmates to disrupt prison operation (such as in Pelican Bay and the Nuestra Familia) or are not appropriate, the overall suppression strategies employed by Texas resulted in a prison environment absent from major gang disruption. Of importance is that suppression efforts also allowed Texas administrators to racially integrate their inmates in cells without disproportionate racial violence and implement other sig-

nificant prison programs. Today, the Texas prison system continues to be the most racially integrated prison system in the nation, and gang members are still locked down.

Caution Should Be Noted

It should cause no surprise that some of the most violent and least stable individuals in American society will take it upon themselves to group, form gangs, and divide along racial and ethnic lines in the prison setting. This is a finding that will likely characterize prisons forever. The good news is that gangs and other security threat group members do not constitute the majority of inmates in U.S. prisons — at least according to official reports. The bad news is that in some prison systems, they contribute to a disproportionate amount of disorder and violence compared with nongang-related inmates. However, if anything can be learned from Texas, it is that inmate divides by gang, race or zip code do not necessarily equal an uncontrolled prison environment, dangerous for staff and inmates. Administrators can do something about them.

Although little systematic evidence exists concerning the success of other gang-control strategies in prison settings, perhaps the most successful gang-control strategy, from a viewpoint of reducing violence and disorder, has been the isolation of gang members, making it more difficult for them to influence and prey on the general prison population. But the concept of a successful gang-control strategy should be viewed in relative terms, because the suppression of gang members in prisons is not without consequences. Suppression, incapacitation, control and correlate strategies are not a new idea in criminal justice. Police agencies have long used similar strategies, such as crackdowns and target-hardening techniques to deal with street gangs — strategies that seem to fade in the long term.¹⁹ Whether such strategies will fade over the long term in prisons has not been sufficiently evaluated, but much can be learned from the law enforcement experience with street gangs. Another consequence of suppression efforts is that such efforts may promote substitution effects, whereby the removed gang member is simply replaced by another gang associate or recruit. Still yet, the use of suppression efforts may lead to an over-reliance on these measures and may mask other appropriate but less intensive alternatives to deal with gang members. There are certain to be gang members who require total incapacitation within the prison, but there are likely a number of peripheral or inactive gang members who could benefit from alternative programming such as gang renunciation programs, out-of-state transfers, or behavioral-based programs that progressively re-integrate gang members into the general population. This list of consequences is not exhaustive but shows that the use of suppression can have unanticipated consequences.

There are numerous other alternative programs that can be employed to quell the influence of gang members in prisons beyond suppression efforts. Many of these efforts

were mentioned earlier. At the most basic level, however, prison administrators attempting to quell gang activities in their institutions might best be served by focusing on the motivations for prison gang participation in the first place (e.g., protection). Unlike any other setting, the very nature of imprisonment exacerbates inmate beliefs that they must divide to survive. Programs and strategies that attend to those motivations, such as programs that ensure safety and protection, may be promising avenues. However, it must be noted that institutional programs are unlikely to cure all the causes and consequences of gang membership. For some inmates, gang membership is not a choice but a way of life, and prison programs that offer protection or other benefits may not provide the necessary motivation for all offenders. It is for these offenders that suppression efforts such as isolation may be the only appropriate alternative to protect staff and other inmates.

To be sure, suppression may be a necessary strategy in some systems and for some inmates. However, what works with gang members in one system may become a tragic failure in another. If suppression is the policy of choice, it should be noted that such policies do not exist in a vacuum — they must be supplemented by other efforts. Appropriate numbers of professionally trained staff are a must, for staff shortages reduce the probability of a successful gang management program. Intelligence programs and information-sharing with the local and state law enforcement community are important so that gangs and their members can be tracked in the longer term, even after they leave the prison setting, because sometimes they come back.

Other supplemental strategies to suppression efforts are important and can enhance the success of a gang management program. These include not only prison organizational strategies, such as separate housing and limited privileges, but also cooperation between prison organizations and prosecutors (both free world and institutional) in their efforts to prosecute in-prison violence and gang-related crimes. Another potential supplement would be legislative enhancements and penalties for gang-related behavior in prisons. Comprehensive strategies that rely on the resources of the prison system, law enforcement, the courts and the legislature are perhaps most effective compared with any one initiative alone — whether the policy focus is on suppression or a less-restrictive alternative.

There is much momentum for these cooperative strategies. This momentum is combined with recognition that collaboration may be the only way that complex prison gangs and their members can be effectively managed in today's prison environment.

ENDNOTES

¹ Danitz, T. 2000. *The gangs behind bars: Prison gangs*. Retrieved Nov. 8, 2005, from www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1571/is_n36_v14/ai_21161641/print.

² Gaes, G., S. Wallace, E. Gilman, J. Klein-Saffran and S. Suppa. 2002. The influence of prison gang affiliation on violence and other prison misconduct. *The Prison Journal*, 82(3):359-385.

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⁴ Berton, J. 2003. Black widow's web. *Maxim*, Nov. 2003:137-144.

⁵ See www.pressdemocrat.com/pelican/#docs for local articles on Operation Black Widow. This Web site contains a PDF file of the original indictment of 13 Nuestra Familia members.

⁶ Pollock, J. 2004. *Prisons and prison life*. Los Angeles: Roxbury. For a perspective on gang affiliation and institutional violence and misconduct, see also Gaes, G. et al. 2002.

⁷ Fleisher, M. and S. Decker. 2001. An overview of the challenge of prison gangs. *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 5(1):1-9.

⁸ Irwin, J. 2005. *The warehouse prison: Disposal of the new dangerous class*. Los Angeles: Roxbury.

⁹ Wessels, M. 1994. *The Robber's Cave experiment*. UNESCO Sources, No. 62:1-2.

¹⁰ Fleisher, M. and S. Decker. 2001. An overview of the challenge of prison gangs. *Corrections Management Quarterly*, 5(1):1-9. See also Fong, R., R. Vogel and S. Buentello. 1992. Blood-in, blood-out: The rationale behind defecting from prison gangs. *Journal of Gang Research*, 2(4):45-51

¹¹ Fleisher, M. and S. Decker. 2001.

¹² Fleisher, M. and S. Decker. 2001.

¹³ There are many variations of isolation and separation programs. For example, the Florida DOC uses what is called a "closed-management system" that locks up offending inmates for 23 hours and then follows up with further enforcement based on the inmate's behavior. Other variations include behavioral management units, which entails placing inmates in a more restrictive custody, with limited privileges, and then allowing inmates to work their way out.

¹⁴ Pollock, J. 2004.

¹⁵ Crouch, B. and J.W. Marquart. 1989. *An appeal to justice: Litigated reform of Texas prisons*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.

¹⁶ Crouch, B. and J.W. Marquart. 1989.

¹⁷ Trulson, C. and J.W. Marquart. 2002. The caged melting pot: Toward an understanding of the consequences of desegregation in prisons. *Law and Society Review*, 36(4):743-780.

¹⁸ Trulson, C. and J.W. Marquart. 2002

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