

Reform: Gangland

I could speak for hours about The Romanov, Windsor, Hapsburg and Hohenzollern dynasties. But my knowledge of gangs in prison is not as extensive, Why not?

I decided early on to avoid any in-depth study of prison gangs, but my observations and perspectives may help reformers inside or outside these walls. There's nothing scientific about my knowledge of gangs, merely observations.

When I was first incarcerated in a Ten (County) Man Cell, the inmates rotated in and out frequently. I never knew who was or was not a member of a gang. This was in county jail. Vident tendencies were not always visible.

However, arrival in prison changed all that. There was no shortage of prisoners who would point out members of Crips, Bloods, Folk, etc. Too many gangs for me to remember.

Early on I decided to not ask or show any interest in gang affiliation. Prisoners knew I would not speak on the subject. So I would sometimes learn - much later - that prisoners who I shared meals

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with, or played Scrabble or Volleyball with, or stood in line with were, in fact, gang members. You couldn't always know who was or was not a gang member.

I could not avoid activities that were not hidden in our 34 man dorms. I have eyes and ears. Gang members were told to assault others. Hierarchies were obvious. In one dorm, four gang members "took over," exerting power over TV programming, shower-lines, newspaper sharing, and phone use.

I've seen gang inspired fights on the yard which would become bloody - I've known gang-members who "wanted out" and didn't want to be "beaten" out. I've known prisoners who dreaded but acquiesced to the "beating in" of new membership. I've seen organized extortion.

Gang rules, language, signs etc were foreign to me. I preferred to know someone as a human being first, and I personally found gang membership to sometimes be an obstacle to

3 friendship or honest communication.

Gang members will tell you that the main attraction of a gang is group protection and "family." The price of membership is absolute fealty and obedience. I've known gang members who regretted carrying out orders that were personally reprehensible.

Gang membership can mean the acquisition of a "culture" of behavior, thinking, and violence that may be considered anti-social. It is a society within itself based on what I have seen. Fear gives them power.

To be fair I've seen groups of gang members not try to take over a dorm, and live in conditions of respect and participatory community. Unfortunately, power and control are attractions for gang members that are hard to resist.

My first prison "fight," a week in, was with a gang member who said something offensive to me. I responded in kind and quickly paid the "price" for standing up - in front of his gang buddies.

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Most of the general population here will not fight (or snitch) on gang members who are disrespectful in word or deed. The prevailing attitude is that even if one aggrieved individual fights (in the block or showers) a offending gang member and "wins" the battle, that gang member's brothers will exact retaliation. The money against the one.

I've known a prisoner who was attacked in the showers. His attacker, an "avenger" for a previous lost battle, had hid a Razor blade in his mouth as he shared the shower spaces. My friend's abdomen was forever scarred.

I've seen gang members form close relationships with officers. One officer would give my Canteen line position to a MS13 member often, until I complained to a lieutenant who stopped the favoritism.

I've known officers to share personal intimate information with gang members. The maxim here is that there is no confidentiality in prison. Snitch at your own risk. Most inmates choose to look the other way.

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Gangland

I sought help when a officer and inmate harassed
5 me. My action - resorting to help from a
prison authority - made me the bad guy
in the view of the dorm inmates.

One method of control, adhered to and
promoted by prison Thieves, gamblers, or
assault-minded, is that if "you tell,"
that makes you the offender in any
altercation, even if you are the victim
of a beat-down or harassment. Some
officers support this false "justice" in
prison. The upside-down logic promotes gang power.

At some prisons, gangs run the gambling
tables or other money-making schemes and
protect their monopolies.

I have known gang members who were
- at core - good people who felt "trapped"
in gang membership. There are some
system "opportunities" to special
de-programming programs that are
available to these inmates. Whether they
work or not to help the inmate I couldn't
say. I don't have access to most prison stats.

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Semi-Gangs

There are other prisoners with "special" memberships, official or not, that require reformers' interest. Hate groups?

I met some fellows here at Prison #4 who recruited and formed a religious group called "Asatru". They claimed to worship Thor and to educate themselves on Nordic history and culture. There were no Black prisoners recruited to Asatru. Some of them were also self-proclaimed white supremacists. The Confederate Battle flag was a popular tattoo.

One leader told me that the existence of Asatru (on this camp) was "all about me." The group didn't last long.

The point is, official gang member or not, the average, first-time felon with no other criminal history is going to be thrown in prison down in a stew of conflicting and sometimes combative philosophies.

Recruitment challenges can be daunting among them. A new prisoner may feel he has to choose a "group" to belong to, for protection. For example, the following established groups may co-exist at a NC prison, based on my observations:

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Be aware that recruiters among these groups in prison may be personable and helpful, and provide some level of group protection or services, that may end up harmful.

Ku Klux Klan. They are not (generally) going to advertise. The racial percentages here are about 60% BLACK and 40% white + Hispanic. That number varies.

Neo-Nazi. Far more than you might imagine, but still too many. They may not call themselves Neo-Nazi.

White Nationalist. This ideology crosses over into a lot of subgroups. You can't always tell who holds this belief system in prison. "Skin Head" is not necessarily a badge.

Christian or Muslim - two major religious groups. Usually, in three of the prisons where I have resided, the Christian Religious Group can best be described as fundamentalist and is a mix of Black and white prisoners.

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Neo-Confederate. I've not seen many of these - & think.

Black Separatist. A growing segment though not always labeled as such.

Anti-immigrant. All groups express a concern over immigration numbers.

Anti-LGBTG. Many prisoners express their dislike for LGBTG on one hand, but claim non-discrimination on the other. The anti-gay sentiment in prison provides much macho posturing behavior. Homophobia is rampant.

Racists. Racism, hostile or subtle is everywhere - and getting worse. The vocal and physical racial separation issues in this prison have increased in the last six years. Quite noticeable. Racists are far more open with their beliefs now. The National Black Lives Matters activities are making some positive opportunities for honest talk. Anti Muslim: Most prisoners do not understand the Muslim faith concepts, here.

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Ignorance of another faith or belief often creates obstacles to 34 men living peacefully in a block, much less on "The Yard" where we all congregate. Religious volunteers are now called "volunteers."

Anti-Semitic, I have met very few persons of the Jewish faith in NC prisons. Again, prisoner knowledge of Judaism is often stereotypical and biased.

Reformers should concentrate on building a new prison "system" that mirrors societal efforts to prepare the general population for a more diverse demographic.

Actually, this is necessary now. Imagine releasing thousands of impoverished, uneducated, biased prisoners back into a post-Pandemic society with massive unemployment, racial division, and international conflict? Imagine how destructive that added problem-ridden segment of the population could be?

The prison population often mirrors the public concerns - multiplied and more intensely acted on.

Prison Reform should:

10 Concentrate on the behaviors - which are often ignored by short-staffs:

Therapy

Harassment

Assault

Extortion

Power Control over Activities

Food Quality

Staff Professionalism

Consequences

Humane Responses

Common Sense

Personally, I have attended most religious services of different faiths, so that I may be better informed and more understanding of their deepest convictions.

I do stay as separate as possible from gang ideas and behaviors, but in a camp where one seems surrounded by gang members in tight, crowded quarters, physical separation is impossible.

We are, by nature, a species intent on social companionship; a hermit's life in prison would be unnatural and perhaps dangerous.