

Re: Tony asks - what about the gangs?

Once, again, I have been moved to another prison. It's different in many ways, but one thing remains the same: gang violence. Although you in Freedomville probably have little reason to give gangs much thought, this is not the case for the almost 30,000 inmates in Tennessee prisons. We can't move to a new, gang-free neighborhood. We have no choice: we are stuck right in the midst of these terrorists.

I've only been here for two weeks, and I have already witnessed two major gang fights. In one, blood was splashed all over my back and head when a homemade butcher knife was viciously plunged into the person right behind me in the chow hall. During the last 13 months, I have personally witnessed seven prison gang fights where homemade knives were used to severely injure others. Of course there were many more such incidents at prisons all across Tennessee. Gangs seem to dominate the Tennessee prison culture. The prisons, it seems, have lost control and now both gang and non-gang members are daily victims of these prison terrorists. How has this happened?

The answer mostly lies in how Tennessee classifies and houses inmates. The classification system already in place rates inmates according to:

A. History of institutional violence

- B. Recent assaultive behavior
- C. The severity of the offense that brought the inmate to prison
- D. Escape history
- E. Most severe disciplinary received (last 18 months)
- F. Detainers, or outside charges pending
- G. Prior felony convictions

Depending on these criteria, points are added to or subtracted from the inmate's classification score. This score then determines the inmate's custody level for housing.

- A. 17 or more points = close custody
- B. 7-16 points = medium custody
- C. 6 or less = minimum custody

Inmates are insured a classification hearing each year, or sooner if an incident occurs, so that the points can be reduced or raised according to recent behavior. If an inmate scores 17 or more points, current policy dictates that he be housed separately from lower custody level inmates. This should automatically ensure that violent inmates are housed separately from the general population of non-violent inmates.

However, in Tennessee prisons today, gang members are not housed separately from general population inmates. Presently, inmates who have been deemed non-violent are housed together with inmates with proven records of

assault against other inmates and even staff. The flaw in today's system is that many inmates who are involved in violence, including stabbings, are intentionally not being scored properly, making it look like separate housing is not warranted. In fact, most of the inmates I witnessed stabbing other inmates went to segregation (the hole) for several days but then were returned right back into the general population, often to the very same unit where the stabbing occurred!

Why does this matter?

- A. Inmates and staff are unnecessarily being injured or even killed!
- B. Living among terrorists who are armed with weapons, who are using and selling drugs, and who are extorting and robbing makes it almost impossible for those inmates who are trying to rehabilitate themselves in order to return home better than when they left. In Freedomville, no student would be expected to go to school and learn anything if a mad man were loose on campus, brandishing a weapon and attacking people around him.
- C. Because of the gang violence, prisons are continually being locked down (no inmate movement). Thus, inmates cannot regularly attend programs, therapy, church, work, or other positive activities that could help them get out and stay out of prison.
- D. The constant state of gang-related fear and anxiety that most inmates face daily produces emotional scarring that cannot easily be healed. Inmates often end up leaving prison not better, but worse than when they entered.

Certainly, with or without gangs, prisons are not wonderful places. But, shouldn't taxpayers at least expect the people they send to prison to receive effective rehabilitation services? This cannot happen when inmates live under the constant threat of gang terrorism.

Possible solutions.

- A) Tennessee should house confirmed gang members in separate units, away from general population inmates. Separating inmates according to their prison behavior would greatly reduce gang activity because their freedom of movement would be limited, and their association with non-violent people would be curtailed.
- B) The gang units should operate at a maximum security level to ensure the safety of inmates and staff.
- C) Gang members could earn their way to a lower custody level as their behavior warrants. Remember, gang members chose this lifestyle and pledged themselves to the group. Therefore, it must be up to them to choose a different path.

So, without the gang threat, will violence still occur in prison? Certainly, but not to the extent or to the degree that generates current extreme levels of fear and injury. An individual inmate is much more likely to stand up against the

threat of one man when he doesn't have to face retaliation by an entire gang family.

There seems to be no logical reason why Tennessee could not house inmates according to the system already in place. With multiple prisons around the state, currently existing facilities could be reorganized so that some would house close custody inmates, others would house medium custody inmates, and still others would house only minimum custody inmates. Many other states already do this.

What can be done?

- A) Taxpayers need to challenge those they elect to address the hard questions about housing gang members in the general prison population. Tell our governor and state legislators your thoughts about this.
- B) Find out if your tax dollars spent on prisons are being used effectively. And, if not, why not? Remember, you have a voice.

I'm going to die in prison, but most other inmates will get out and possibly be your neighbors. Wouldn't you like your neighbors to have received rehabilitation while incarcerated? Wouldn't you like your neighbors to be free of rage about the prison "fear-pit" they were left in without protection or challenge? We were not sentenced to undergo rape, stabbings, and gang wars. We were not

sentenced to die in prison. Yet, left unchallenged, the gang wolves are eating us  
alive.