

Gangs vs. Teams

"There is safety in numbers." This well-known principle is easy to understand and is found throughout the Animal Kingdom. It's also utilized in almost every corner of human experience.

From multi-national peace treaties, to handling schoolground bullies, to standing up to a brutish boss in the workplace, people are social creatures that will naturally seek the strength and advice of allies, and try to avoid the criticisms that could result in loss of this benefit.

Being sentenced to prison (by so-called "peers" or not) does not nullify this principle. If anything, struggles and deprivation make the need for allies much more pronounced.

Additionally, once incarcerated, this need is much more continuous as well. In prison, you cannot simply step away for a day if the hardships feel overwhelming, nor do you have at your disposal the Nuclear option of relocating to a new neighborhood.

For these reasons, and others, unless you are one of those rare antisocial types who prefer isolation, group adherence saturates a prisoner's day-to-day outlook and choices. But what groups are there?

When you step off of a prison transport bus for the very first time, you're arriving at a unit that's about to be your new home,

for however many months or years, and you are stepping into a brand new world. This new world pre-existed your arrival, yet now you are a part of it; with new peers, new threats, and new rules. And, you are alone.

If you are lucky, on the hour or so bus ride there, you sat next to a kind soul who has been 'down' before, who could give you a little heads up on the intake process and what to expect. Maybe he also gave you a few words of wisdom on how to steer clear of trouble. That is, if you trusted that it wasn't 'bad' advice; out of ignorance, amusement, or ulterior motives.

More likely, though, you'll be shackled to someone who is either new to prison like you, or spinning yarns of braggadocio, or is just too concerned with their own struggles and image to open up. Hollywood and history will have taught most new and returning prisoners the same lesson: only the tough survive. Ergo, the more aggressive or indifferent you can appear, the better.

Now let's be clear, this mindset doesn't form as a manifest flaw in character. For it was not at all long ago when, sadly, stepping off a prison bus in America for the first time could absolutely be a matter of life and death. If you wanted to better survive it, you had to defend yourself and find some allies. You had to join a gang.

It's common, almost automatic, to villify gang members for being in a gang, but we've got to better understand the dynamics

at play.

As any sports nut can tell you: the best defense is a good offense. Gang members, like many politicians, apply this concept intuitively. If you strike first, you have the advantage of setting the agenda, and your opponents can't attack as well when they're preoccupied with defense. Gangs use their numbers, crime, and threats of crime to establish their needs and safety.

Whatever ethnic cloth you're cut from, there's a gang in prison to invite you in; provided you don't stand out too much. There's a reason for this. For to question the actions or crimes of fellow members too openly isn't respected as mature inquiry, it's potentially revealing to the rest of the group that you are too weak to belong.

Furthermore, rational hesitation to carry out a gang's expectations carries with it the risk of being labeled a traitor or snitch. If you guys get busted for something later, even if you didn't betray the gang or tell, previous dissents might now be viewed with a new suspicion and place you on the business end of your own gang. This intense pressure to assimilate also reinforces one another's mentality.

The worst retribution of all is saved for the unaffiliated loner who has the gall to attempt to counter a gang's operations by himself.

As a gang member behind bars, you will receive increased safety and some new resources, but this requires toeing the line, and

squelching external disrespect. In the prison days of old especially, it was far better to go with the flow as a participant in crimes, and endure any legal consequences that might arise from that tomorrow, then to have that same flow turn against you and there was no tomorrow.

While 2021 American prisons are still inexcusably violent and impoverished, they're not quite the pre-PREA (Prison Rape Elimination Act), pre-video surveillance warzones they once were. Even so, gang identities and mindsets still remain largely the only nonreligious community prisoners have available to them to be a part of something bigger than themselves.

Citizens all across the industrialized world join clubs and groups for almost every conceivable interest. Chess clubs, theater troupes, Elk lodges, and neighborhood BBQs all consist of people seeking a sense of community. In Texas prisons, on the other hand, your options for belonging to a community are gangs, religions, or nothing. Depending on your geography, unit, and personal beliefs, even prisoners with sincere spiritual longings might not have a physical gathering available to them either.

If you don't have family or friends in the freeworld keeping regular contact with you, or if proselytizing and prostrations aren't your proverbial cup of tea, then your aloneness is complete. To some, the community of a gang, even with its own dramas and dilemmas and bad choices, sure beats the unnatural loneliness of

no community at all.

American prisons have long approved and facilitated faith-based gatherings, religious events, and festival banquets; IF you happen to share the beliefs of these precious few allowances. And yet, as far as I can tell, they haven't ruined institutional security, nor upended the mission of these prison administrators. Actually, it doesn't take a very lengthy search to find a wealth of celebrated success stories and changed lives from these allowances.

Differing faiths may refer to elements of their faith to explain these successes, but we need not pit one claim against another to take an impartial step back and see that they can all, by degrees, present example after example of success.

This highlights none other than the strength of human on human influence; like begets like. Except in these benevolent communities, instead of instilling gang survival techniques of machismo and aggression, they're channeling responsibility and growth.

You cannot make somebody change who adamantly refuses to. That is simply a fact. And hurting others should not be minimized. But it is also deeply immoral, and exquisitely unhelpful, to completely write someone off who has committed a wrong, make their life far, far more difficult, then point to any subsequent drowning as proof they're irredeemable. Citing post-incarceration misbehaviors is almost always guilty of this.

However, the successes of faith-based initiatives across the country, and across a wide spectrum of beliefs, are accumulating a vast amount of proof that watering a garden works better to bring plants back to life than does lopping it off and forcing it to fend for itself.

Prisoners need more, much more, of what these faithful volunteers are clearly showing us all: encouragement, inclusion, and accountability to a community with other prisoners who can teach and model what they are interested in WORKS.

We must viscerally understand that isolation will never mature as well as inclusion. We tried the Age of Cages, and it didn't work. It ended with mass-incarceration.

If prison administrators of the future are serious about change, another instructor-led program or three that serves .01% of a prison population isn't the answer. Prisoners themselves need to have a hand in improving their prisons, and each other, from the inside out. Prisoners must be permitted to gather with other growth-minded helpers to form positive, law-abiding communities where they can learn from each other (in a myriad variety of human interests), set and pursue goals, and lead by example. We can already show this works. Like begets like.

Of course, nearly everything about life has a potential for misuse. People misuse medicines, hedge funds, charities, government positions, and everything else you can think of. But

we don't scrap whole programs people genuinely need because someone somewhere misused it, or could in the future; we intervene on the individual infractions, and think of ways to make it better. Include prisoners by offering them a voice on how to safely improve their circumstances, and how they might begin to approach restitution for their crimes.

These altruistic groups can be monitored, like rec and church services are, and group members can work with unit authorities to ensure certain conditions are met. They can also collaborate with other units to exchange ideas on what's working.

[Note: Groups need a neutral location to meet. It cannot be while in their regular living quarters, which subjects it foremost to the suspicious and criminal mindsets that currently hold the leverage, and would prohibit participants from speaking freely, or even put them in danger. A groundrule would be participants can't ever identify non-participants or their behavior by name.]

Moreover, by making these fellowship gatherings an 'earned' privilege—meaning attendance can be lost for a time if they're caught breaking unit rules—this also incentivizes good behavior more generally. Each personal success or institutional improvement that results from them would also inspire honest, lawful avenues in the rest of the prison population (of 'every' belief and academic disposition), who are truly invited to ~~follow~~^{Follow} the rules and join along.

Prisoners need this sanctioned place and formally recognized

way to think proactively, and to find rule-abiding allies who can empower each other through fellowship; and often. Prison gangs already do this, and have for decades. And these gangs, which never had administrative approval, should not have the near monopoly on the "strength in numbers" principle. Yet they do.

America's 20th century trend of scarce education programs, highly restricted religious participation, and absurd mailroom censorships can be well-intended and 'also' be nonetheless responsible for a spirit-crushing isolation and desperation further harming these individuals and, in the long run, society itself. Collective reform can't form in a vacuum.

When you take away from prisoners the ability to find positive allies to encourage them and feel a part of—that is, to join constructive communities that free Americans themselves seek out and rely on—this leaves only the illegal and underground groups. And when criminal options are honestly understood by prisoners as the only ones available, correction becomes the exception instead of the expectation.

The ideas and voices of other prisoners can help. Let us.

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