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Prison Gang Activity: Crime That Happens Behind Bars

One would think that prison is a place where no crime occurs. It's the place where crime is stopped. But prison gangs are real and they cause most of the crimes that occur behind bars. Prison gangs are one of the most daunting issues that corrections officials face in managing prisons. Due to mass incarcerations in the United States, prison gangs have grown dramatically. About 200,000 of the 1.5 million U.S. residents are affiliated with gangs, and there is no sign that prison gang activity is abating (Pyrooz, 2018). Prison gangs are responsible for a disproportionate amount of prison crimes and violence (Pyrooz, 2018). Prison gang activity includes assaults, sexual assaults, homicides, and riots. Unfortunately, a lot of these crimes go unreported and nothing is done about it even when it is reported. This op-ed takes a brief look at the impact prison gangs have on the prison system and crime behind bars.

Within our prisons, almost 20% of all male residents have been assaulted by other residents. In prison, males are 18 times more likely to be physically assaulted by another resident than males outside of prison. Several years ago, a federal prison in Texas experienced a brawl between two gangs which resulted in 22 residents being injured and one killed. The one resident who was killed was Servando Rodriguez, and he was stabbed and bludgeoned to death. His death was particularly violent. Another prison gang brawl occurred in a Detention Center in Houston, Texas. This brawl involved 80 residents! Nine of those residents were injured and three prison staff were injured as well (Blumenthal, 2008). Sexual assaults in prison happen to between 1% and 40% of residents. In 2007, the US Justice Department conducted a survey where they asked

60,500 prisoners about their time in prison. The survey showed that 2.1% of prisoners reported inmate-on-inmate sexual crimes and 2.9% staff-on-inmate.

With the severity and frequency of violence occurring in prison, also comes a new set of problems. Other residents that have witnessed gang violence have reported to have “anxiety, depression, avoidance, hypersensitivity, hypervigilance, suicidality, flashbacks, and difficulty with emotional regulation” (Widra, 2020). Additionally, their prison time had adverse effects on them. Some of the emotional and psychological effects of sexual assault include depression, feeling distrust, nervousness, social apprehension, and feeling unsafe (Modvig).

So why are prison gangs so rampant and how is it that such violent crimes can occur behind bars? Interestingly, prison gangs often operate like a business. They make money, offer “opportunities” to members, and provide other perks. But the business is an illegal business and involves criminal activity like drug trafficking. Prison gangs are also attractive to new carceral residents because they feel it is one of the ways they can survive by joining a gang for protection. The problem is worsened by prison staff who are not experienced and become intimidated by prison gangs. Prison staff often give in to the gang’s violence, and some staff are compromised and aid them in their illegal activities. Also, lowered security measures have allowed prison gangs to flourish. For instance, some residents reported that the lack of guns inside the prison presented them with the opportunity to do whatever they wanted (Camp, 1985). When they see that there is lack of security measures, prisoners view the institution as their turf and not the guards. This results in prison gangs having control and continuing their operations without accountability or consequences.

Due to the fact that prison gangs control the drug businesses and other criminal activities within prisons, they are the ones who are responsible for a lot of the violence that takes place in

prisons. Studies find that prison gangs make up 3% of the prison population, but they cause at least 50% of violence (Fleisher & Decker, 2001). Prison gangs bring drugs in and out of prisons which obviously has a huge negative effect on the prison system as a whole, and the residents and staff as well. Moreover, because prisons are so overcrowded, gangs now have a larger population of people to recruit additional members. Solutions to this issue can be specialized housing units, enforcing restrictions on privileges such as visits, access to communities and communication, participation in employment, delay parole eligibility, and segregation/isolation. Enforcing these rules and protocols can help reduce the presence of gangs and the violence that follows it.

Obviously, prison gangs are a significant issue that requires addressing. But prison systems face many obstacles, and this is just one. Some other concerns include overcrowding, poor health care, racism, privatization, assaults and understaffing (Davis, 2021). There is racism between residents and officers that often results in residents having their rights violated. All of these issues are critical, but because gangs make up a good portion of the population, they created a significant number of issues for prisons and must be remedied.

Instead of retribution, prison has become a place where violent crimes occur and a place that changes a person for the worst. Indeed, about a quarter of the entire prison population in the United States have been a victim of physical assault due to gangs. Prison is known to be a violent and dangerous place and the main source of this violence is from the gangs within. Perhaps shining a light from the outside on the inside of prisons and gangs will force the government and other authorities to correct this issue.

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