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Foundation for the Study

At the turn of the century, James Jacobs, New York University law professor and author of *Stateville* (1977), lamented: "It is hard to understand why the prison gang phenomenon does not attract more attention from the media, scholars, and policy analysts" (2001, vi). Certainly, prisons are dangerous places that impact communities as well as the lives of inmates and those who work there. Over the last several years, prison gangs have made headlines across the country. The 2013 inmate hunger strike in California – involving over 30,000 inmates – was organized by black, Latino, and white gang members housed in solitary confinement for indeterminate sentences (Reiter 2016); the executive director of the Colorado Department of Corrections was executed on the doorstep of his home in 2013 by a recently released 211 Crew prison gang member (Prendergast 2014); and a multi-jurisdictional task force led to the indictments of nearly seventy-five Aryan Brotherhood of Texas gang members, some of whom were implicated in the blowtorch removal of a gang tattoo, the inspiration for a *Sons of Anarchy* episode (Schiller 2016). These are just a few of the events that illustrate the significance of prison gangs for society.

Despite these important events, a recent systematic review and analysis of the study of gangs confirms Jacobs's lament (Pyrooz and Mitchell 2015). For each article, essay, or book written about gangs and gang members under any form of incarceration – juvenile, jail, or prison systems – there were twenty-five works written about gangs and gang members in street settings. Put simply, our knowledge about gangs in institutional settings pales in comparison to what is known in street settings. Such deficits come with unknown costs, particularly with respect to correctional policy and practice. This is the reason Mark Fleisher and Scott Decker (2001b, 2) described prisons as the "final frontier" in gang research. Not a lot has changed in recent years.

It is not as if gangs have magically disappeared from prisons or no longer present serious challenges to the management of prisons. Indeed, gangs remain at the forefront of issues in contemporary corrections as documented by the

three events noted above. It is clear that gangs occupy an important place in the social order of prisons despite the fact that gang members constitute a minority of inmates. Gangs are responsible for a disproportionate share of violence and misconduct and maintain a grip on contraband markets in prisons. They also influence housing arrangements and programming, as placing rival gang members in the same cell or classroom could have violent consequences. Gangs have also been implicated in the orchestration of deadly riots and serious disturbances across the nation, not unlike what occurred in California. And, not surprisingly, gang members fare worse than non-gang members when they are released from prison and return to the community, owing to their obligations to the gang.

Issues such as those described above are part of the reason why gangs rank as one of the thorniest problems in contemporary corrections. A survey of executives from twenty-eight state prison systems rated the management of gangs and security threat groups as a major correctional priority (Association of State Correctional Administrators 2013, 9). On a scale from 1 (low agency priority) to 10 (high agency priority), gangs scored an 8. Not one prison administrator assigned a score below 6, and one-fifth assigned scores of 9 or 10. Gangs and security threat groups ranked in the top five as a priority to prison administrators, just behind adhering to the standards of the Prison Rape Elimination Act, staff recruitment and retention, the cost of inmate healthcare, and managing mentally ill offenders. These are clearly important issues. There is convergence between the findings from a small body of research on gangs in prisons and the priorities of the executives of prison systems: gangs in prison pose important risks to the safety and effective management of such institutions. If prison gangs are so important, this begs the question: Why do we know so little about them?

THE CHALLENGES OF STUDYING GANGS IN PRISON

Researchers study a host of violent settings, including drug dealers and users, war and conflict zones, street gang members, active burglars and robbers, illegal gun dealers, and extremist groups. Why not prison gangs? Robert Fong and Salvador Buentello (1991) held that there were three reasons for the lack of information about gangs and gang members in prison. First, the official documentation of gangs, gang members, and gang-related misconduct was underdeveloped. Many prison systems did not even record information about gangs prior to the 1990s, while others collected this information but in databases that were outdated or poorly maintained. Some argue that even data on the number of gang-related inmates may be among the "most elusive figures in corrections" (Trulson, Marquart, and Kawucha 2006, 26). The state of gang intelligence and management of databases has improved since the observations of Fong and Buentello. However, outside of accessing actual case files of serious misconduct or gang intelligence reports, there is a severe

shortage of officially reported information about gangs in prisons. There is no central repository containing national data or even reports about gangs, gang members, or gang violence in prison (Gaston and Huebner 2015), unlike the multiple sources of information about gangs in street settings. Instead, it is often necessary to piece together estimates from disparate sources with unknown reliability and validity to make inferences about the extent and nature of gang-related activity in US prisons.

Second, prison administration is generally reluctant to grant access to outside researchers to study gang activity, which Fong and Buentello (1991) attributed to fears over safety and risk aversion. It is no surprise that most of the research on prison gangs relies not on the words of gang members or observations of the collective behavior of gangs, but on the official data gathered by prison officials and analyzed by researchers. What is undoubtedly the most important work on prison gangs in the last two decades – David Skarbek's (2014) *The Social Order of the Underworld* – was based on data derived from the research literature, official reports, legal documents, memoirs, documentaries, and conversations with correctional staff and ex-inmates. Notably missing from this detailed list are interviews with prison gang members. The same concerns may be raised regarding the important work of political scientist Benjamin Lessing (2010, 2016). Wacquant (2002) noted that researchers deserted the prison scene around the time prisons experienced unprecedented growth. Whether this was due to the shifting winds of interest among researchers, political decisions about isolating prison from public view, or the lack of funding to support such research is unclear. What is clear, however, is that access to prisons is still hard-fought; as Skarbek (2014, 10) observed: "the same walls that keep inmates locked in also keep researchers out. Getting evidence on the inmate community, and specifically prison gangs, therefore presents a substantial challenge." The walls seem even more difficult to penetrate when it comes to research on prison gangs and gang membership because researchers face a dual challenge: gaining permission from prison authorities and securing participation from prison gang members.

The third reason offered by Fong and Buentello is that gangs and gang members housed in prisons are secretive and prohibit the sharing of information with others, including researchers. This secretiveness extends beyond the "convict code" and likely has roots in the need to keep information about the exchange of prison contraband and the organizational structure of the gang discreet. Securing inmate participation and adequate response rates in prison settings is challenging, regardless of the subject of inquiry, as Derek Kreager and his colleagues (2016) have noted. Even if inmates agree to participate in a study, there is also concern that interviewing inmates using structured or even semi-structured surveys may not be an effective method of collecting information. This takes on added significance for gangs, which is why the reliability and validity of street gang members' self-reports have long been the subject of concern and empirical scrutiny (Decker, Pyrooz,

Sweeten, and Moule 2014; Esbensen et al. 2001; Thornberry et al. 2003; Webb, Katz, and Decker 2006). Many believe that gang members will not answer questions truthfully or will purposely mislead researchers about certain subjects. When questions turn to issues related to the gang as a group, rather than the individual gang member relaying information about himself/herself, some argue that gang members – especially prison gang members – must abide by a code of silence (Fong and Buentello 1991). We have witnessed such behavior firsthand. Over the course of gathering data from inmates in a county jail using self-administered surveys, an influential gang member tried to influence the responses of other inmates by reading aloud how he was answering questions pertaining to gang organization. It remains an open question as to whether or not gang members will provide reliable and valid responses during an interview. Despite these considerable barriers to doing research with prison gang members, we believe it is important to push forward on this frontier: there is simply too much at stake to not find out.

Some research on gangs in prison has been conducted. Indeed, a number of studies have been carried out by researchers in prison settings, including ethnographies and extensive surveys (Camp and Camp 1985; Fleisher 1989; Irwin 1970). There is no question that the research can be done. However, like Jacobs (2001), we find it peculiar that so little research has been conducted on gangs, gang members, and gang activities in prison settings. If we were to paint the type of research conducted on gangs in incarcerated settings with broad strokes, the picture would look something like this:

- A handful of **rich qualitative studies** on gangs that are at least somewhat dated due to period effects (e.g., Crouch and Marquart 1989; DiIulio Jr. 1987; Gundur 2018; Hunt et al. 1993; Irwin 1970; Jacobs 1974; Trammell 2012), along with a small but recent group of work conducted outside the United States (Biondi 2016; Maitra, McLean, and Holligan 2017; Phillips 2012);
- A small number of studies that **survey correctional administrators** about gangs in their facilities (Camp and Camp 1985; Pyrooz and Mitchell 2018; Ruddell, Decker, and Egley 2006; Winterdyk and Ruddell 2010; Wood and Adler 2001);
- A small number of **individual studies** that examine the causes or consequences of institutional gang activity that are nested within large, longitudinal surveys (Mears et al. 2013; Pyrooz, Gartner, and Smith 2017);
- Several studies where the **context of gang identity differs** from the context of the behavior of interest, such as surveying about gang membership in prison but behavior before or after prison (Huebner, Varano, and Bynum 2007; Rufino, Fox, and Kercher 2012) or surveying about gang membership before prison and behavior in prison (Huebner 2003);

- A large number of studies that rely only on **official data** to study gang membership or gang activities (e.g., Ralph et al. 1996; Steiner and Wooldredge 2014; Worrall and Morris 2012).

Exceptions to these categories are far and few between. Of course, there are also studies that have carried out ethnographic and survey research in juvenile facilities (e.g., Lopez-Aguado 2016; Maxson et al. 2012; Wood et al. 2014) and county jails (e.g., Fox, Lane, and Akers 2010; Kissner and Pyrooz 2009; Tapia 2013). But, as Maxson (2012; Scott and Maxson 2016) reported in her work in California juvenile correctional facilities, juvenile gangs appear to be different from the adult gangs found in prison. Others have reported that there may be greater similarities between gangs in county jails and prisons, as linkages are perhaps stronger between the two settings as inmates cycle from one institution to another (Tapia, Sparks, and Miller 2014). But that too is a question deserving of greater empirical scrutiny. Together, these prior studies have shed tremendous light on nature, correlates, and perceptions of prison gangs based on official records, media accounts, small samples, and self-administered surveys.

Our argument is that it is necessary to *interview* inmates if we want to learn about the conditions and consequences of incarceration. Self-report surveys of delinquency in non-institutional settings preceded self-report surveys with gang members by a generation. Just as in-person surveys and interviews have been a boon to street gang research, we contend that such methods of data collection are equally important for prison gang research. It is essential to contrast the prison experiences of gang members against those of inmates who have not been involved in gangs on the street or in prison. It is also necessary to gather rich content from prisoners, not just information that is gang-related, but also with respect to theories of criminal and deviant behavior and identity. Understanding the complexities (health, employment, reentry readiness, beliefs in procedural fairness, etc.) of inmate lives is necessary to paint a picture of this population that is more comprehensive, deep, and representative. We further contend that cross-walking this information with numerous other data sources such as prison misconduct data, arrest records, and prior incarceration data will yield a more complete picture about life on the inside of prison and its relationship to life on the outside.

We also argue that the best way to understand the influence of prison and gangs is to interview the same people across multiple time points, particularly as they transition out of prison and return to the community and, in many cases, back to prison. This makes it possible to determine how behaviors and identities change as individuals navigate through old and new structures, belief systems, networks, and relationships when leaving prison behind. It is particularly important to understand how imprisonment affects a gang member's involvement in crime after release. This is true of individuals who enter prison as street gang members, those who affiliate while in prison, and those who

disengage from gangs while in prison. In doing so, such a combination of rich and substantive questions, appropriate comparison groups, and longitudinal data goes to great lengths to determine the symbiosis between the street and the prison, including the distinct characteristics of each with respect to gang activity and gang dynamics. Before we can illustrate the benefits of the approach to studying gangs that we are proposing, that is, longitudinal, survey-based interviews, it is first necessary to step back and understand the context in which this circumstance emerged.

INCARCERATION AND GANGS IN THE UNITED STATES

Incarceration in the United States has seen dramatic peaks and valleys over the last century. Useem and Piehl (2008) identified four distinct periods of prison growth in the United States. While we do not discuss the sources of trends in prison growth because others have done so in great detail (see National Research Council 2014; Pfaff 2017; Pratt 2009; Useem and Piehl 2008), it is useful to consider these periods of growth as they relate to the emergence of gangs in US prisons. After all, gangs were not active in prisons during much of this period, and for some prison systems, gangs are a problem that only emerged in recent years.

Useem and Piehl classified the era from the Great Depression to the beginning of the civil rights movement (1930–1960) as the "trendless trend." Per capita, the number of prisoners in the United States remained steady, around 100 per 100,000 persons. The second period was termed "modest to large decline," where the per capita prison population actually declined by about 20 percent over the course of a decade (1961–1972). The third period of growth between 1973 and 1988, "buildup begins," represents a turning point in punishment and incarceration in the United States. The rate of incarceration jumped from around 100 persons incarcerated per 100,000 people to nearly 250 persons per capita. This led to the period of "accelerated growth," between 1989 and 2005, which is best represented on the National Research Council's cover to the volume, *The Growth of Incarceration in the United States*. By 2005, there were 491 prison inmates for every 100,000 persons in the United States. When policymakers, pundits, and scholars mention mass incarceration, this is the trend to which they are referring.

Figure 1.1 captures much of the latter two periods of prison growth in the United States, while extending Useem and Piehl's (2008) observation another decade using the most recent data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics. Prison growth did not cease in 2005, although it did begin to slow down. Each year through 2009 there were gains in the prison population, and as of 2015 the number of sentenced prisoners still exceeded Useem and Piehl's observations from 2005. However, 2009 represented the zenith in the incarceration trend, where the number of year-end sentenced prisoners topped out at 1,553,574. The country has since moved into a period of decarceration (Mears and

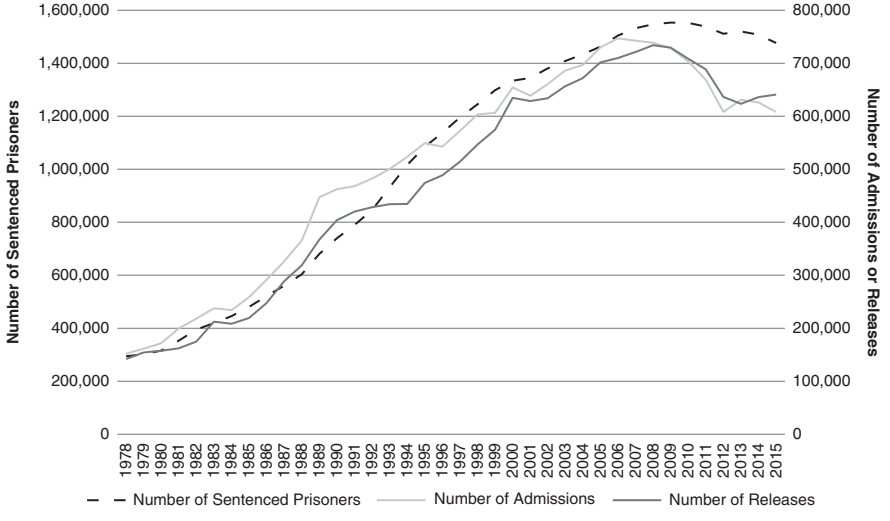

FIGURE 1.1 Year-end sentenced prison population and annual admissions and releases, 1978–2015
Data Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Cochran 2015). Indeed, there were around 80,000 fewer inmates in US prisons in 2015 than in 2009. Such a swing may not seem large, but it is. After all, a shift in the opposite direction – from 1.46 to 1.55 million prisoners – also took about five years to materialize.

Focusing on trends in prison growth tells us a lot about the story of incarceration in the United States. The most obvious observation from this is that our prison population is large, but it has not always been this way. It is safe to conclude that mass incarceration is a rather recent occurrence, emerging in the last two to three decades. While we have seen some evidence of decarceration within some prison systems, there is no doubt that we remain in a period of mass incarceration. But what is most interesting to us typically receives less attention, even though the implications for institutional corrections and communities are of considerable significance, and especially to prisons, gangs, and culture: admissions and releases.

Also included in Figure 1.1 is the annual number of admissions and releases to US prisons. Between 1978 and 2008, there were more admissions to US prisons than there were releases, hence the buildup in the prison population. This buildup, however, occurred across continuous increments rather than with a single shock to the system. Indeed, there were only four years where the prison population experienced double-digit percentage point changes – 1981, 1982, 1989, and 1993 (all increases). But focusing only on aggregate prison growth belies one important fact: both admissions *and* releases rose rapidly over the last four decades. And both admissions and releases are closely related to one

another, which indicates that the prison population is constantly churning. The turnover rate in the prison population – the number of releases divided by prisoners – has hovered between 41 and 55 percent. This means that churning is a two-way street: inmates are continually coming in to prison and inmates are leaving prison. In 2015, just over 608,000 people transitioned from "citizen" to "inmate" while 641,000 people transitioned from "inmate" to "citizen." The impact that this magnitude of churning has for individuals and institutions (such as prisons and jails, but also families and the labor force) is not well understood. One thing is clear: such churning is not conducive to producing order either in prisons or the communities that have the highest rates of incarceration (Morenoff and Harding 2014; Western 2018).

Such transitions alter the makeup of prisons, although the implications of this churning are not clear – particularly with respect to gangs. Indeed, such changes in the prison population raise a host of interesting questions about gangs in prison.

- In what ways are gangs involved in misconduct and violence in prison?
- How are gangs in prison organized and structured?
- How do gangs maintain their position in the prison social hierarchy given the constant turnover among members?
- What leads new inmates to want to join the ranks of gangs in prison?
- How do gangs select prospective members of the new class of inmates each year to replenish their numbers?
- What are the consequences of gang affiliation for inmates and prisons?
- How do gangs handle the violations of norms and rules when inmates remain in constant transition?

Before addressing these questions theoretically, as we do in the next chapter, and empirically, as we do in the remaining chapters, we first situate the emergence of gangs in US prisons historically and contemporarily.

There are two overarching issues that we feel are important to address. First, across US prison systems, did gangs emerge before or during the era of mass incarceration? A component of the answer to this is the contribution of the prison gang members to the overall prison population. The second question addresses a related question, but with an emphasis on street gang emergence. Did the emergence of gangs in prison precede or succeed the emergence of gangs on the street? Both are of fundamental importance to prisons and prison gangs, as the answers shed light on the origins of gangs. As we detail in the next chapter, there are conflicting accounts of whether prison gangs are a product of the institution or a product of the street. There is a great deal of theory and research on what gave rise to gangs in street settings, but with a few exceptions the same cannot be said about prison settings. It is therefore important to both understand the emergence of gangs in relation to mass incarceration as well as to determine the sequential order of street and prison gang emergence. In the

following analysis, we first present evidence on gang emergence based on a review of the literature, then identify several notable findings in the history of gangs in prison.

Table 1.1 examines the decade when street and prison gangs emerged across the fifty states. To populate this table, we reviewed a host of published documents, including books, articles, and reports, along with surveys that we, as well as others, have conducted (e.g., National Youth Gang Survey; Pyrooz and Mitchell 2018). The reports of gang emergence are based on the first documented activity of gangs in street or prison settings, even though it is known that gang activity waxes and wanes over time (Howell 2015). We did not assess whether the source validated the existence of a given gang according to leading definitions. However, all of the sources we drew on were gang-related studies that underwent some level of peer review. This table complements Klein and Maxson's (2006) documentation of the emergence of street gangs in US cities, while extending our knowledge to include the emergence of gangs in US prison systems. We were unable to locate information on prison for four states – Alaska, Kansas, Louisiana, and Maine – that we treat as missing rather than an absence of gangs.

There are several conclusions we reach based on Table 1.1. First, the 1980s not only marked the buildup to mass incarceration in the United States, but it was also a period that witnessed the widespread emergence of gangs both in street and prison settings. Put simply, gangs went national on the street and in prison. The number of prison systems with gangs nearly doubled, jumping from sixteen prison systems at the conclusion of the 1970s to thirty-one by the end of the 1980s. Just as it was no longer possible to claim that street gangs were a Los Angeles or Chicago problem by the end of the 1980s, it was also no longer possible to claim that prison gangs were a California or Illinois problem.

Second, gangs emerge in street settings before they do in prison systems. Although what we report does not allow us to precisely identify whether street gangs preceded prison gangs by one year or one decade, more states (twenty-one in total) experienced street gang emergence before prison gang emergence. This does not mean that street gangs are a prerequisite for prison gangs, but the high rate of criminal involvement among street gang members (Pyrooz et al. 2016) and the prospect for the importation of culture from the street to prison (Hunt et al. 1993; Irwin and Cressey 1962) does breathe life into this question. If gang members participate in high levels of violent crime and are getting arrested, particularly during the time of the prison boom, they are likely to be imprisoned and to have imported aspects of their membership, alliances, rivalries, and proclivity for violence into institutional settings. Table 1.1 also provides insight into the importation/exportation debate about street and prison gangs. It is clear that street gangs precede prison gangs, suggesting that – at least initially – gang symbols and practices are imported to prison, where they are adapted, changed, and perhaps exported back to the street.

TABLE 1.1 *The emergence of street and prison gangs in the US by decade*

State	1950s/ earlier	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s/ later
Alabama			Street		Prison	
Alaska				Street		
Arizona		Street	Prison			
Arkansas			Prison	Street		
California	Street & Prison					
Colorado			Street	Prison		
Connecticut			Street & Prison			
Delaware			Street		Prison	
Georgia				Street & Prison		
Florida			Street	Prison		
Hawaii				Street & Prison		
Idaho				Prison	Street	
Illinois	Street	Prison				
Indiana		Prison	Street			
Iowa		Prison		Street		
Kansas				Street		
Kentucky				Street & Prison		
Louisiana				Street		
Maine					Street	
Maryland				Street & Prison		
Massachusetts			Street		Prison	
Michigan			Street	Prison		
Minnesota				Street & Prison		
Mississippi				Street	Prison	
Missouri				Street & Prison		
Montana					Street	Prison
Nebraska				Street	Prison	
Nevada			Street & Prison			

(*continued*)