Chapter 11

An Exploratory Study of Prison Gangs in Contemporary Society

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the composition of prison gangs, their effects on the prison environment, and their relationships with street gangs. Through conducting an ethnographic study of an adult men’s prison in England, the chapter attempts to articulate the experiences of prison gang members, as well as prisoners exposed to high levels of gang activity. The results illustrate the established role gangs play within English prisons, but also the relevance of other groups, collectives and “sets” within the penal environment. Through analysing the gathered data, I aim to show the important - but not defining - role gangs play within an English prison. Moreover, when compared to the American prison system, gangs are far less entrenched in English prisons; this can partly be attributed to the deeper historical roots of American prison gangs, as well as their highly racialized dimensions. The chapter begins with two case-studies, the subjects of which are prisoners from the research site.

CASE STUDIES

1. Zain: “I’m Not in a Gang – I’m a Businessman”

Zain is serving a custodial sentence for a gang-related crime, but does not self-identify as being a gang member. Rather he describes himself as being “a businessman”. He does not describe his criminal history in any great length, characterising his ‘drift’ into criminality in the following terms: “Gangs are all about postcodes – areas; I got dragged into it. Actually, I started off legitimate, doing good things - just chilling out, playing football and stuff. But then I was like hanging around with 32 year olds when I was 24…and then in [name of area] you’ve got some racist police officers, so that pushes you towards it [crime].” As well as the influence of these older peers, Zain attributes a wider family role to crime commission, stating that “once you’re out and about, you end up getting to know who’s who [in the criminal world]…your cousins and whatever else”. After getting “out and about”, Zain became established with
the criminal groups who operated in his area, and these bonds continue to strongly exist in prison: “Me and my family moved to [name of area] when I was a teenager…so when I’m on [name of wing], it’s chilled out, ’cos it’s all the lads are from [name of area] and we’re all equal.” Whilst Zain is adamantly that “there aren’t no gangs in here” he conceded that in the prison “there’s just three sets of lads”, and goes on to identify each of these “sets” by racial group.

Although Zain only briefly mentions the crime he is in prison for, it is clear that his street loyalties applied in prison from the very beginning of his custodial sentence: “When I was on [name of prison wing], our group was made up of about 35/40...lads. But we stuck together. So if any dickhead comes out, we sort it out. Later, us lads got with [name of gang]. Then a couple of racists come onto our wing. They soon got filled in [attacked], and it was sorted out.” However, Zain has never self-identified as a gang member, stating that he is “more of a businessman. You see, when you say gang, I think hand signs, red bandanas, dogs. We didn’t have none of that”. Accordingly, even though his own crime was classed by the Courts as being gang-related, he blames this on the media, who “talk rubbish”, and “don’t know what goes on…They get it all wrong.” He laughs at the offences he has been convicted of and adamantly states, “I’m not in no gang!” Zain also does not appear to be focused on his past or future, instead, directing most of his attention towards his time in custody. His “group of mates” from the streets ensures that he is not victimized by other prison gangs, who “know who’s vulnerable” and who “sniff you out” if your enter prison knowing no-one: “They’ll be waiting at the gates…that’s jail life”.

2. Martin: “The Old Gangsters Had Time for You”

Martin is older than most of his fellow prisoners, and has been in prison many times. Although not a gang member himself, he has associated with several ‘gangsters’ both in prison, as well as on the streets. For example, he grew up on the same council estate as one prominent gang-leader and says: “I grew up with [name of gang leader] and he was a decent fella; went to borstal with him an’ all. I’ve never got no trouble from him. If you’re good to him he looks after you”. Maintaining informal, social connections with ‘old school’ criminals have helped Martin during his various sentences. Moreover, he realizes that there are particular ways to behave in order to make one’s time in prison easier: “There’s an easy way to do prison, and a hard way to do prison; and respect’s a two way street – if you want the officers to treat you with respect, you gotta show them respect. The gang members of today don’t show that”. Martin has never been gang affiliated, and his offence history illustrates that he has almost exclusively operated as a ‘lone offender’. When asked why he never joined a gang, Martin pauses, and replies that he was “too busy playing sports and stuff. Plus, none of my family was ever involved in gangs”. In spite of this, he believes that gangs have profoundly changed over the past decades, and explains these changes in the following terms:

In the ’80s, you had groups of fellas – the old gangs. They owned their own businesses, but they didn’t agree with burglaries and stuff. They was respected as gangs, you know? They got collateral and families got looked after...But in the last 15 or 20 years it’s become all about the drugs and guns. Look, the gangs have morphed into different things...a lot of it is to do with drugs. In the ’80s, I’d never even heard of heroin and crack cocaine.

Due to his age, Martin may be romanticizing some details about the past. However, the changes he describes are corroborated by other prisoners and prison officers. In particular, Martin emphasizes that