The Amplifier of Gang Culture: Prisons

Kevin Konnayil

Abstract

This paper examines how the prison system amplifies gang culture and fosters gang involvement among incarcerated individuals, particularly marginalized youth. It argues that instead of rehabilitating offenders, prisons serve as environments that facilitate gang recruitment, leading to their growth. To support this claim, three key ideas are analyzed. First, social and economic conditions drive marginalized youth towards violent behaviours and gang affiliation. Second, the prison environment exacerbates gang connections. Finally, the convergence of street and prison cultures has established a vicious cycle that deepens marginalized youth's entrenchment in gang life. The paper highlights systemic issues, such as poverty, ineffective foster care systems, and historical trauma, which create vulnerabilities that gangs take advantage of to recruit new members. This exploitation frequently happens in prisons, where gangs offer protection, identity, and economic opportunities. Additionally, the convergence between the "code of the street" and the "convict code" reinforces dangerous levels of hyper-masculinity, mistrust of authorities, and retaliatory violence. As a result, it has become a new cultural norm that sustains the cycle of gang involvement that extends far beyond incarceration. To conclude, responses from institutions have failed to disrupt this cyclical pattern. Instead, it has exacerbated it, allowing gangs to use the prison system to accelerate recruitment, thus proving how prisons no longer and have never served as a deterrent.

Introduction

The term "gang" or the concept of what defines a gang or criminal organization varies based on the source of the definition. Nevertheless, to establish a foundation, a gang or criminal organization, as per the Canadian government, is identified as a group of three or more individuals who commit serious crimes for financial gain. This definition applies to both organized and informal gangs. Gang culture is deeply embedded in the social structure; it thrives on loyalty, hierarchy, and strict codes of conduct. Many individuals, particularly from marginalized communities, perceive gangs as entities that fulfill their needs. Gangs provide a sense of identity, belonging, and protection that is often lacking in their lives. However, gang culture extends beyond the streets and infiltrates the prison system, where the environment's conditions and the violent behaviours of inmates reinforce and exacerbate gang involvement. Prisons were established under the assumption that they would rehabilitate offenders. However, they have transformed into breeding grounds where gang culture flourishes, and its influence becomes unavoidable. The raw violence and criminal behaviours exhibited within prison walls further intensify the culture's hold and create a self-sustaining system where the street code and the convict code intersect and influence one another, deepening the entrenchment of young offenders into its influence and capitalizing on the psychological, institutional, and societal vulnerabilities they have faced.

The question this paper aims to address is: How do prisons amplify the effects of gang culture and its impact on individuals? To answer this, three themes will be explored. First, it will discuss alternative causes of violent and destructive behaviours, arguing that marginalized youth do not engage in crime solely out of criminal intent. Second, it will analyze how gang affiliation develops within prisons, emphasizing how gangs use multiple strategies to help in the expansion of gang culture while concurrently reinforcing gang loyalty. Third, it will explore how the street and convict codes are converging, demonstrating how the cultural norms associated with these codes of conduct create a self-sustaining system that further entrenches offenders into gang life both inside and outside of prison. Prisons no longer rehabilitate offenders; instead, they have become conduits that indoctrinate offenders into gang life. By examining these themes, it can be argued that prisons and life within these institutions exacerbate the conditions that drive offenders towards gang involvement, fostering cycles of violence.

Alternative Causes of Violent and Destructive Behaviours

Before exploring how prisons exacerbate violent and destructive tendencies, it is essential to understand what behaviours get amplified and how these behaviours develop prior to imprisonment. Traditional perspectives concentrate on the individual and the criminal tendencies reflected in typical behavioural patterns such as aggression, drug use, and possession of weapons (McGloin, 2007). However, contemporary studies emphasize multiple alternative factors deeply rooted in social, economic, and psychological conditions and provide insights into why Aboriginal and Indigenous youth engage in violent behaviours. These factors include financial hardship, the broken foster care system, poor role models and peer influence, and psychological risk factors (Sinclair & Grekul, 2020).

Financial hardship is a massive indicator of whether a person adopts violent behaviours. Positive parenting practices refer to a nurturing approach that includes physical support, emotional availability, discipline, open communication, and clear expectations that reinforce respectful behaviour with an emphasis on becoming a model individual. However, when these practices are stricken with financial hardship, it often leads to significant strain on developing such behaviours and an increase in delinquent practices. Hautala et al. (2015) argue that economic hardship undermines positive parenting practices, thus increasing the odds of delinquency. Indigenous youth facing economic deprivation are found to experience environmental conditions that push them closer toward illegal activities and gang involvement. This form of financial instability is often accompanied by weakened social mechanisms, like fragmented family bonds, lack of family structure, abuse, drugs, and unstable living conditions.

Youth from marginalized groups and dysfunctional foster care families have turned to gangs and their culture as a substitute. For example, "Gangs offer members the opportunity to feel a sense of self-worth and identity" (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008, p. 68). These gangs are substitutes, filling the void of protection, identity, and economic support created by absent family members. Indigenous youth face unique sets of social, economic, and psychological risk factors due to historical trauma, including geographic isolation, lack of positive role models, substance abuse, and exposure to violent environments, resulting in them seeking ways to cope or make sense of their experiences. This is common in social institutions

like foster care, where alcohol is abused. Yang et al. (2020) explain how youth with a history of foster care placement are significantly more likely to engage in alcohol and drug use compared to their non-foster care counterparts.

The foster care system exemplifies how economic instability, weakened social systems, and psychological risk factors are interconnected. It has been identified as a major contributor to chronic violent tendencies and high recidivism rates. Yang et al. (2020) argue that children in the foster care system are more likely to experience mistreatment and abuse due to unstable living conditions, inadequate social support, and frequent changes in placement. This instability results in youth lacking essential bonds and facing challenges in forming stable, meaningful relationships, including those with parents, peers, and their social environments, such as jobs and schools. The absence of these social bonds leads to developmental issues on both psychological and emotional levels. Psychological risk factors, like emotional distress, negative self-identity, hyperactivity, impulsivity, and poor mental health, are frequently observed in individuals from broken families and the foster care system, especially when alcohol remains a persistent factor. Aboriginal communities exhibit considerable variation in suicide rates. Contributing factors include educational and employment disparities, alongside the marginalization of Aboriginal youth, which leads to heightened frustration levels. This results in a sense of diminished socio-economic potential, lowered self-esteem, and various psychological and emotional conditions that are conducive to the adoption of street and prison cultures.

Yang et al. (2020) state that youth in foster care face various risk factors influencing the link between foster care and offending. Peer relationships, especially with family, are crucial in adolescent development. Family dysfunction can lead to gang involvement and recruitment (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Environments lacking good social behaviours can push youth towards violence as a survival mechanism (Sinclair & Grekul, 2020). This fosters alienation and impulsive behaviours, susceptibility to aggression, and peer influence, which may result in them committing a crime like robbery or assault. Hautala et al. (2015) highlight that peer influence predicts gang involvement. Marginalized youth often seek belonging and validation, drawing them into violent gangs that offer identity and economic opportunities through crime. These influences perpetuate violent behaviours and increase the likelihood of ongoing criminal activity and incarceration.

How Gang Affiliation Grows Within the Prison

Violence, distrust, racial tensions, and weak social controls define the prison environment and amplify gang culture's effects. Offenders seek safety and support, leading to the rise of prison gangs as a protective social structure against untrustworthy inmates and correctional officers. Gangs recruit younger prisoners, especially those from vulnerable backgrounds. For instance, Aboriginal youth gangs in Canada attribute their formation to prison processes (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Young inmates with limited external support often join for protection and camaraderie, as "gangs offer material aid (e.g., food, clothes, hygiene products), emotional support, and protection" (Pyrooz, 2022, p. 15). This protection is vital in facilities with high interpersonal violence, where gang membership can be the difference between survival and victimization.

Furthermore, another crucial element of gang formation is the emphasis on prison governance. Skarbek (2014) argued that gangs form in prison when there is a demand for extralegal governance and official governance mechanisms are ineffective or unavailable. To adapt to the hostile environment within prisons, gangs have developed complex systems that help maintain their control and influence. These systems include structured hierarchies, strict codes of conduct, and connections to the outside criminal world. Gangs fill the void where institutional governance is lacking in the prison system and serve as facilitators of trade, often selling goods and services, including protection, rule enforcement, and conflict resolution (addressing any troublesome disputes or individuals). This internal organization allows gangs to function efficiently, enforce discipline, and sustain their operations over long periods while also exerting their control over their members.

Prison gangs operate under a structured hierarchy with designated roles, with a clear outline that marks who the leader is and the following chain of command. For example, Crouch and Marquart (1989) outlined the structure of the Texas Syndicate, which included a system-wide president and vice president, unit-level vice chairman, captain, lieutenant, and sergeant-at-arms, followed by soldiers and non-member associates and sympathizers. Members are anticipated to adhere to strict codes of behaviour, and transgressing these codes has harsh penalties, which can involve physical violence or death. Obedience and loyalty are of the utmost importance, and members attempting to exit the gang routinely suffer retaliation, causing other members to fear and get further pulled into gang life. However, Decker et al. (2014) note that ties to the gang often linger when a gang member exits. Some connections are significant due to neighbourhood alliances and previous criminal involvement. For most ex-members, the ties that kept them connected to the gang are more symbolic; they provided roles that gave them a sense of purpose and belonging. Once a gang member decides to leave, he trades those roles and purposes for what is essentially his old life.

Convergence of Two Codes of Conduct: Street Code and Prison Code

Although the relationship between gangs and prisons is not clear, there is certainly a connection that exists between them. Mitchell et al. (2020) note that the prisons and the street operate under two unique cultures that function in a cyclical pattern. They describe them as the convict code and the code of the street. The convict code is a set of informal rules focusing on elements like mind your own business, toughness, autonomy, and hatred/distrust of police (Mitchell et al., 2020). The convict code serves as a mechanism for prisoners and criminals to save face. It assists them in maintaining their status, identity, and ability to retain influence among others while also functioning as a form of deterrence and self-protection. Likewise, the code of the street also serves as a set of rules that keep people in line and save face. The code of the street emphasizes similar codes, such as toughness and hatred/distrust towards police, while promoting self-reliance and respect. Although the street and prison are often divided by brick and barbed-wire walls, culture quickly penetrates these physical boundaries; the symbiotic relationship between the prison and the streets renders them indistinguishable.

Marginalized youth from Aboriginal and Indigenous communities often lack financial resources, strong family bonds and trust in authorities, creating a sense of vulnerability, loss of

identity, and distrust towards police. As a result, they often adopt the code of the street to save face. Doing so allows them to gain respect and status while reducing any social and physical discomforts they may experience. Impoverished neighbourhoods that are riddled with high rates of crime, discrimination and financial hardship often feel alienated from the police, making it difficult to trust or rely on them when they are victimized (Mitchell et al., 2020). Both cultures carry strong values that emphasize hyper-masculinity and distrust of control agents, such as police and correctional officers. Incarcerated individuals deeply embedded in prison gangs are often encouraged to distance themselves from correctional officers. They believe that people need to stand their ground when faced with violent situations, and they value retaliation against any threats to manhood or violations of respect.

Incarcerated people who came from disadvantaged neighbourhoods prior to prison adopt both codes of conduct. This highlights how the convict code and the code of the street are the strongest and most prevalent in places where the greatest deprivations exist, such as prisons and foster care. Gang members themselves state that their peers who have been raised in foster care make good targets for recruitment because gangs promise to act as family substitutes (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008). Incarcerated youth and adults join prison gangs to gain the respect and recognition they lacked previously. A correctional officer notes, "With Redd Alert — many found recognition in gangs. They were abused and disregarded all their lives. Joining a gang gave them a name, a sense of identity: 'I'm somebody.' They gained recognition and belonging" (Grekul & LaBoucane-Benson, 2008, p. 42). This demonstrates how prisons have become conduits where gang culture expands, and methods used by these institutions to stop recruitment fueled its momentum and failed to stop its expansion. For instance, Aboriginal gangs that were established in Saskatchewan through the federal and provincial correctional centres saw their numbers grow following the 1997 riot that took place in Stoney Mountain Penitentiary. In response, the penitentiary separated the Manitoba gang leaders and moved them to different institutions (Sinclair & Grekul, 2020). However, "This redistribution of gang members into other prisons ironically facilitated widespread recruiting, therefore expanding their territory and control" (Henry 2009, p. 16). A Saskatoon gang exit program coordinator, when asked about her experiences, described the Saskatchewan correction system as a recruiting ground for Aboriginal gangs. Aboriginal youth who are newly sentenced or first-time offenders are particularly likely to join a gang for protection purposes, and released prisoners continue recruitment and gang activity upon release (Sinclair & Grekul, 2020).

Individuals with a history of gang involvement carry their street-learned experiences into prison. This transfer adopts the prison culture, which then influences and transforms new recruits. Institutional gang activities overlap with street-oriented youth during their incarceration or upon release from institutions. As a result, gang members apply their newly developed street code to continue recruitment and partake in illegal activities, ultimately leading them back to incarceration. This cyclical pattern, created by the convergence of these two cultures, creates an environment where individuals have no choice but to join a gang as a means of survival. Thus, further entrenching individuals into gang life and perpetuating the cycle of violence and victimization that they had experienced themselves.

Conclusion

The prison system does not dissolve gang culture or its impacts; instead, it serves as a conduit where it reinforces and amplifies the very behaviours and actions that society as a whole and institutions aim to extinguish. From what we have discussed, individuals, specifically those who are marginalized, are becoming further entrenched in gang culture, primarily due to the need for protection, identity, belonging, and survival. As youth and many other adults continue to experience these challenges prior to imprisonment, the more likely they will be drawn to the lure of gang culture/life. Prisons have become a place where these needs are often exploited and used as a means to coerce, influence, and expand for the purpose of exerting control. Recruitment in the traditional sense has become much easier as prisons allow for gangs to recruit new members as they are surrounded by broken and vulnerable people. Intervention methods used by the institutions to try and reduce gang recruitment have failed, leading to the opposite of what they intended. As a result, vulnerable communities are left to suffer the cyclical pattern of violence and victimization, especially in areas where there are high rates of recidivism. The social/systematic structures in place have undermined and or failed to address social issues like racial inequality and trauma that the vast majority of those who are incarcerated are from marginalized communities, like those of Aboriginal and Indigenous populations, thus failing to tackle the source of the issue and continuing to let the cycle of gang involvement and gang culture still perpetuate.

Acknowledgements

References

Crouch, B. M., & Marquart, J. W. (1989). *An appeal to justice: Litigated reform of Texas prisons*. University of Texas Press. https://doi.org/10.7560/704077

Decker, S. H., Pyrooz, D. C., & Moule, R. K. (2014). Disengagement from gangs as role transitions. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *24*(2), 268–283. https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12074

Grekul, J., & LaBoucane-Benson, P. (2008). Aboriginal gangs and their (dis)placement: Contextualizing recruitment, membership, and status. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice/La Revue Canadienne De Criminologie Et De Justice Pénale*, *50*(1), 59–82. https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj.50.1.59

Hautala, D. S., Sittner, K. J., & Whitbeck, L. B. (2015). Prospective childhood risk factors for gang involvement among North American Indigenous adolescents. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, *14*(4), 390–410. https://doi-org./10.1177/1541204015585173

Henry, R. (2009). *Just another thug: The implications of defining youth gangs in a Prairie city.* MA thesis, University of Saskatchewan. http://hdl.handle.net/10388/etd-04152009-161318

McGloin, J. M. (2007). The continued relevance of gang membership. *Criminology & Public Policy*, *6*(2), 231–240. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-9133.2007.00431.x

Mitchell, M. M., Pyrooz, D. C., & Decker, S. H. (2020). Culture in prison, culture on the street: The convergence between the convict code and code of the street. *Journal of Crime and Justice*, *44*(2), 145–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/0735648X.2020.1772851

Pyrooz, D. C. (2022). The prison and the gang. *Crime and Justice*, *51*, 237–306. https://doi.org/10.1086/720944

Sinclair, R., & Grekul, J. (2020). Aboriginal Youth Gangs in Canada: (De)constructing an epidemic. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, *7*(1), 8–28. https://doi.org/10.7202/1068862ar

Skarbek, D. (2014). *The social order of the underworld: How prison gangs govern the American penal system*. Oxford University Press.

Yang, J., McCuish, E., & Corrado, R. (2020). Is the foster care-crime relationship a consequence of exposure? Examining potential moderating factors. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, *19*(1), 94–112. https://doi.org/10.1177/1541204020939643