



Research at a glance

Prison Gangs: A Review and Survey of Strategies

KEY WORDS: *Prison gangs, security threat groups (STG), gang management strategies.*

Why we did this study

Gangs represent a threat to the safe operation of correctional facilities. Gang members are involved in higher rates of institutional misconduct and violence as well as recidivism once returned to the community. As a result, it is important to develop effective gang management strategies.

What we did

U.S. prison systems were sent surveys asking about gang management strategies. Questions focused on: Prevention (e.g., discouraging recruitment of new members), Sanctions (e.g., investigating and controlling gangs), and Interventions (e.g., treatment or rehabilitative methods that respond to the criminogenic needs of gang members)

What we found

Most U.S. prison systems experienced an increase in the numbers of gang members over the past five years, and this was associated with violence, disruptive behaviours, and threats to staff. Gangs were reported to be increasingly sophisticated and used grievance systems and litigation to thwart investigations.

A common approach to managing gangs was the segregation and isolation of validated gang members, including the use of “gang only” housing units and facilities, as well as “gang free” prisons.

Respondents reported that including an indicator of gang membership on risk assessment and classification instruments was an effective strategy.

Few jurisdictions had formal orientation strategies at reception to discourage offenders from joining gangs.

Approximately one-half of all members were thought to join the gang after their first admission to prison. The primary reason for joining was reported to be fear, followed by gangs providing a sense of belonging and access to contraband.

Gang renunciation and treatment programs were present in only one-third of the prison systems; in these systems case management was thought to counter gang misconduct.

Most jurisdictions have not taken advantage of new technologies (e.g., data mining, crime mapping, social network analysis) to aid in investigations.

Prisoner radicalization was not perceived to be a significant problem in most jurisdictions.

Despite the fact that many respondents thought that programs or interventions were effective, few had been formally evaluated.

What it means

While gang management practices used in other jurisdictions may not always be applicable in Canada’s penitentiary system, knowing the strategies that other prison systems use to reduce gang recruitment, responses to gang misconduct, and interventions that lead to gang renunciation may have significant value to the Service. This research also suggests that the Service needs to better understand the pathways to gang membership, as well as gang structure and leadership, so that better interventions can be developed. It is also important that formal evaluations of these interventions be conducted.

For more information

Winterdyk, J. (2009). *Prison gangs: A review and survey of strategies*. Ottawa, ON: Correctional Service Canada.

To obtain a PDF version of the full report, contact the following address: research@csc-scc.gc.ca

Prepared by: Rick Ruddell

Contact

Research Branch
(613) 996-3287
research@csc-scc.gc.ca

