

Inmates of Neves jail, Rio de Janeiro, are segregated by gang affiliation. Cells hold 60-70 inmates, measure only 18m², and can reach temperatures of 56°C. © Benjamin Lessing



The Danger of Dungeons

PRISON GANGS AND INCARCERATED MILITANT GROUPS

INTRODUCTION

Prison gangs have long been recognized as a challenge for penitentiary administration¹ and studied as a central factor structuring life behind bars.² For the most part, however, they have not been analysed as a primary threat to public security. And yet, as worldwide inmate populations have grown, prison gangs have expanded in size and reach, and in some places now constitute major criminal organizations, capable of instigating significant episodes of armed violence. Between 2002 and 2004, for example, prison riots sparked by clashes between jailed members of rival Central American *maras* (street gangs) claimed at least 216 lives (Jordan, 2004), and led governments throughout the region to adopt a policy of segregating prisons by gang affiliation. While this reduced the incidence of violence, it gave imprisoned gang leaders control over inmate life, effectively turning prisons into gang recruiting and training centres (USAID, 2006) and allowing the *maras* to consolidate into transnational networks (Cruz, 2007).

In Rio de Janeiro, Brazil,³ de facto segregation of prisons by gang affiliation resulted from the ascension, some 25 years ago, of a group of inmates that came to be known as the Comando Vermelho (CV) to a position of absolute dominance within many of the state's prisons, and the need to isolate dissenters and rivals in safe (non-CV) units. Control over the penitentiary system allowed the CV to expand beyond the prison walls in the mid-1980s, dominating Rio's retail drug outposts and the *favelas* (slums) out of which they operate (Amorim, 2003); prison control has also been crucial in maintaining that dominion despite two decades of militarized police repression (Lessing, 2008a). Meanwhile, throughout the 1990s the techniques pioneered by the CV were copied and improved upon by the São Paulo prison gang Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), which shocked the world in 2006 with a series of synchronized prison riots and coordinated attacks on police and civilian targets that brought the city of 15 million to a standstill (Cano and Alvadia, 2008).

Prison gangs have thrived in the United States as well, in spite of a well-paid guard corps, high-tech prison installations, and extensive anti-gang efforts. In April 2009, a US District Court handed down life sentences to five members of Texas's Barrio Azteca prison gang on federal Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act (RICO) charges.⁴ Evidence presented at the trial made it clear that Barrio Azteca's imprisoned leaders not only controlled many smaller street gangs in El Paso and elsewhere in Texas, but also had established major operational links with the Juarez drug cartel in Mexico, committing contract murders on both sides of the border and organizing the distribution of drugs once they entered US territory (Logan, 2009). Since Barrio Azteca's locus of power is within the prison system, jailing its leaders may have little or no effect on the gang's operational capacity (Burton and West, 2008).

These examples, and others like them, make it clear that from a public security perspective, putting criminal actors in jail is in many ways the beginning, not the end, of the problem. While incarceration can neutralize individual threats to public security, at the aggregate level it provides both the means and incentives for inmate organizations

to form, consolidate, and expand. As prison gangs grow, they take on increasing importance in the delicate equilibrium between inmates and guards by which order is maintained, and repressing them can lead to short-term eruptions of violence. Yet if left to their own devices, prison gangs can spread through the penitentiary system, simultaneously exploiting and deepening corruption within the guard corps.

Crucially, gangs can also use their power within prisons to expand onto the street and exert influence over outside criminal actors, often organizing illegal activity (especially drug trafficking) in ways that increase the flow of profits to the prison-based leadership. Prisons can thus become resilient criminal headquarters, and gang leaders who are jailed can often continue to run their operations not just *in spite of* but in part *thanks to* the fact that they are incarcerated. Meanwhile, gangs' capacity for violence increases both within and beyond the prison walls, often invisibly, in the lulls between incidents that grow ever more lethal and disruptive.

While the problem admits no simple solution, government responses have been hampered by an official 'corrections' view of prison gangs as purely criminal and violent security threats to be eradicated or suppressed. This approach ignores important gang functions—such as identity, protection, and codes of conduct (Jacobs, 1974)—and the incentives that gang members have to band together, factors that make gang eradication a very unrealistic goal. Indeed, anti-gang measures can have a 'hardening' effect, solidifying group identity and focusing energy on organized resistance. The repressive approach also soft-pedals the interdependence of prison gangs and officials—particularly the guard corps—both in maintaining order and in administering a system of illicit rent extraction within prison. Finally, it obscures the fact that, in the highly circumscribed space of prisons, state policy and the actions of officials overwhelmingly shape the conditions that gangs and individual inmates respond to and take advantage of.

Gang leaders often continue to run their operations thanks to being incarcerated.

This chapter seeks to shed light on (1) the strategies and mechanisms by which prison gangs *consolidate* control within prison units, *propagate* throughout prison systems, and *project* power beyond the prison walls (see Box 6.1); and (2) their implications for armed violence and public security in general. Its main conclusions include:

- The problem of prison gangs and prison-based criminal organizations needs to be integrated into a larger public security strategy. It is not just a 'corrections' question.
- Many aspects of 'state capacity', as well as policies and initiatives designed to weaken prison gangs, have unintended, hidden, or long-term consequences that end up helping gangs thrive.
- Increased incarceration can inadvertently strengthen prison gangs, which can recruit and draw political support from the inmate population as a whole. Gangs also rely on re-incarceration to make their threats over their non-imprisoned members credible.
- Segregation of prisons by gang affiliation has an immediate, short-term effect of reducing prison violence, but also a hidden, long-term effect of increasing gang strength, both within and beyond the prison walls.
- Prison gangs can help outside criminal actors and groups coordinate their actions and strategies, settle disputes, and weather the loss of leaders. The resulting prison-based criminal organizations are networked, resourceful, and highly resilient.
- There is no simple relationship between the strength of prison gangs and levels of armed violence. Rather, prison gangs organize and focus the means to commit violence. As they grow, conflict, when it does break out, tends to be extreme.

The first section of this chapter surveys the diversity of prison gangs and the problems they engender for prison administrators and society as a whole. The second section presents a case study of Brazil's prison gangs—some of

Box 6.1 Conceptual framework: key dynamics of prison gang expansion

This chapter distinguishes three key dynamics of prison gang growth: *consolidation*, *propagation*, and *projection* of power beyond the prison walls.

Consolidation denotes a gang's degree of control over the prison units where it is active, and the resilience of that control. A key component is the extent to which the gang can distribute benefits (such as cell assignments, jobs, and contraband) and punishments among inmates. Given competition among gangs, strong consolidation usually requires eliminating or dominating rivals and neutralizing threats. When entire units are segregated by gang affiliation, consolidation usually occurs by default (see Box 6.3).

Propagation is the spread of a prison gang to multiple prisons within a penitentiary system. The most common channel of propagation is the transfer of gang members from their 'home' unit to other prisons, but it can also occur through prisoner release and re-imprisonment, as well as 'mergers' and 'franchising' involving initially unaffiliated groups.

Projection of power refers to a prison gang's ability to control, coordinate, or influence actors beyond the prison walls towards the gang's own ends. It can take the form of an active expansion by freed members into outside activity, or the organizing of outside actors (not necessarily members) from inside prison. It is precisely this ability to project power that transforms prison gangs from a 'corrections' problem into a threat to public security in general.

These dynamics can be mutually reinforcing, in that each provides resources with which to pursue the other two, but empirical research shows that gangs pursue these strategies in different combinations and with differing degrees of success. None of them is sufficient or necessary to achieve another.

the most powerful in the world—to develop the consolidation/propagation/projection framework. The third section explores the implications of prison gang activity for armed violence both inside and outside prison. The chapter concludes with implications of the principal findings.

PRISON GANGS AND ARMED GROUPS IN PRISON: A BRIEF SURVEY

The term 'prison gang' suggests a somewhat informal group dedicated to self-preservation and perhaps predatory or illegal activities. Even more than the term 'street gang', it is inadequate to describe what in reality is a wide variety of organizations and groups, each with different strategies, membership profiles, degrees of institutionalization, and historical trajectories. This chapter considers as its topic all self-identifying associations of inmate groups that exhibit some form of collective behaviour. Notably, this includes jailed members of militant and insurgent groups, even though few would consider them 'gangs'. It also encompasses groups that transform over time, such as São Paulo's PCC, which has taken on a politicized, anti-state stance and grown so powerful that it resembles a full-blown insurgency in some respects.

This inclusive approach provides a comparative perspective on the dynamics that underlie the birth, operation, and growth of inmate organizations, as well as the dimensions along which these groups vary:

- **Size.** Some gangs are small, local, and essentially self-protective; others actively recruit, expand throughout prison systems, and dominate criminal markets both within and beyond the prison walls.
- **'Style'.** Gangs often have distinctive cultures that shape their behaviour: some are highly predatory, others enforce 'fair' codes of behaviour and provide a modicum of social order for all inmates. Some tend to form alliances with other gangs; others do not.

- **Membership.** Some gangs form around racial, ethnic, religious, or geographic cleavages among prisoners, while others distinguish themselves with ideological or behavioural codes, or purely symbolic identities. In general, the more ‘universal’ a gang’s membership basis, the greater its potential to consolidate control.
- **Strategies and paths of expansion.** Gangs grow in different ways (and not all gangs grow); consolidation, propagation, and projection of power are observed to different extents and in varying combinations.
- **Origin.** This study distinguishes prison gangs that arose within the prison system (called here ‘natives’) from those that arise as ‘prison branches’ of organizations that already existed on the outside (‘imports’). Native groups’ norms and culture—initiation rituals, rules about homosexual sex, compartment and relations with guards and non-members—tend to have a strong ‘prison character’. These traits can persist when native gangs project power beyond the prison system: even if outside operations become relatively autonomous, imprisoned elders and leaders often retain significant influence and prison remains an important locus of power.

When members of outside gangs are imprisoned, they arrive already marked by a strong group identity, behavioural norms, and often their publicly known histories and reputations. While this gives imports an ‘automatic’ basis for cohesion within prison, it may also make them less well adapted to prison life, and hence less ‘successful’ at consolidation than native gangs (Jacobs, 1974, p. 405). The same holds true with projection of power. Imports already have outside operations, and the mechanisms that allow native prison gangs to expand beyond prison would permit imports, in theory, to centralize control over their outside members, formalize rules and rankings, routinize succession, and generally become ‘institutionalized’ (Hagedorn, 2007, p. 303). But this requires a restructuring of the gang, and not all imports end up making prison a locus of power.

The state largely determines the conditions to which prisoners and gangs respond.

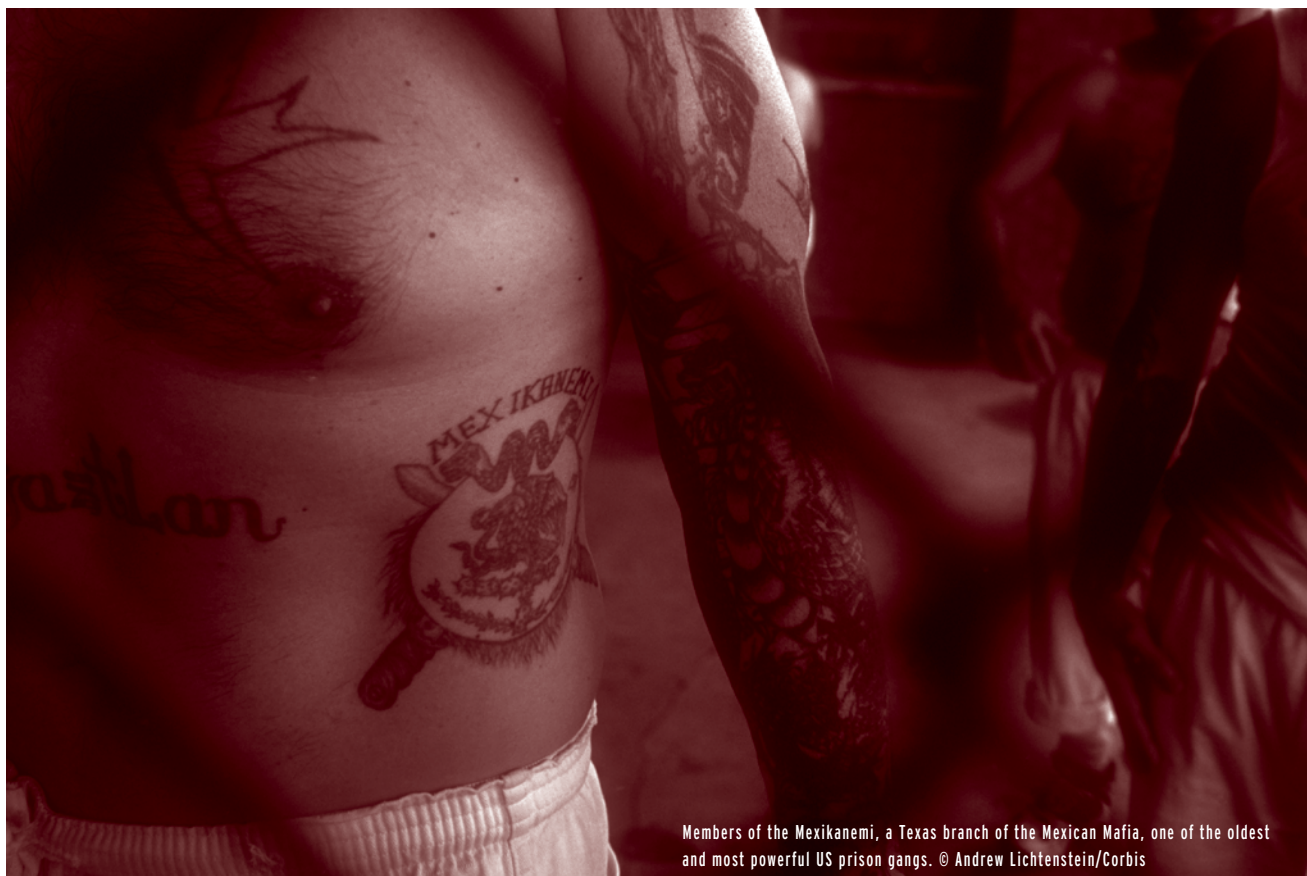
- **State actions and policies.** Perhaps the most crucial ‘variable’ of all is the state itself, which to a large extent determines the conditions to which prisoners and gangs respond. After all, the very notion of the prison is a space in which the state controls the minutest aspects of inmates’ lives (Foucault, 1977). States build and maintain the physical prison grounds; set sentencing standards; hire guards and arm them with weapons and directives concerning their use; formulate policies concerning prisoners’ rights, prison conditions, punitive regimes (such as solitary confinement), and family visits; and frequently take actions to contain, neutralize, pacify, or negotiate with prison gangs. And of course states engage in such actions with differing degrees of capacity and legitimacy, all of which plays into the strategies that prison gangs adopt.

The comparative study of prison gangs is in its infancy. Little is known about important cases such as the Russian Federation and China (with the world’s second- and third-largest prison populations, respectively⁵), and even in Western countries there is a dearth of relevant statistics and reliable information. Governments, even democratic ones, are rarely forthcoming about the existence and power of criminal groups within prisons. Most of the available information comes from journalistic and ethnographic sources; the basis for comparison across cases and countries is essentially qualitative. The cases presented here are not meant to be a representative sample of prison gangs around the world. Rather, from the very limited universe of cases about which there is ample information, these were chosen to demonstrate the variety of prison gang types, strategies, and trajectories.

‘Classic’ prison gangs

United States

The dominant characteristic of US prison gangs is their racial character. The very names of the main California prison gangs, the country’s oldest and largest, tell the tale: Mexican Mafia (MM), Aryan Brotherhood (AB), Black Guerrilla



Members of the Mexikanemi, a Texas branch of the Mexican Mafia, one of the oldest and most powerful US prison gangs. © Andrew Lichtenstein/Corbis

Family (BGF). Ethno-geographic cleavages within racial groups are also important: the MM, made up of Chicanos⁶ from Southern California, is the sworn enemy of the Nuestra Familia (NF), representing Northern California Chicanos. Indeed, the MM–NF rivalry is so strong that they have traditionally allied with the AB and BGF against one another (Valdez, 2009). Still, the membership basis of each group, and of virtually all US prison gangs, remains racial, and cross-racial alliances are usually born of necessity.

In a process that seems self-perpetuating, many gangs form in response to perceived threats to their 'kind' from other gangs: the Texas Syndicate, another major California gang, formed in response to abuse of native Texan (mostly Chicano) inmates within California prisons (Fleisher and Decker, 2001); the Barrio Azteca was founded in the Texas prison system by inmates from El Paso, who were discriminated against by dominant gangs. Splintering of gangs is common, particularly across state lines, and in recent years large, 'institutionalized' street gangs such as the Bloods and the Crips have established prison cells, rather than be absorbed into the older, native prison gangs as was common in the past (Hagedorn, 2005, pp. 162–63; Hunt et al., 1993). The result is a proliferation of prison gangs: a 2004 survey that asked correctional officials nationwide to list the top three gangs in their facility yielded 71 different groups (Knox, 2005, p. 38).

Because of this multiplicity and the narrow, cleavage-based nature of gang membership, it is virtually impossible for a US prison gang to establish hegemony within a prison unit, much less across a prison system. Instead, many

prisons are characterized by shifting alliances among gangs and an unsteady equilibrium that frequently collapses into generalized racial violence.⁷ As a result, US prison gangs are generally seen by correction officers and analysts primarily as agents of violence, extortion, and illicit economic activity, a view reflected in the official term for prison gangs, Security Threat Groups. This formulation ignores, perhaps wilfully, the protective role that gangs play for members, the incentives inmates have to join, and, most of all, the crucial interaction between prison guards and gangs by which day-to-day order is maintained—including the corruption that permits illicit prison economies to function. This in turn contributes to the tendency to take a repressive, ‘zero tolerance’ approach, aimed unrealistically at eliminating gang activity, without much analysis of the efficacy of specific anti-gang measures (Forsythe, 2006, p. 4) or of their entrenched role in the ‘equilibrium’ of order provision.

Discussions of prison gangs in the developing world emphasize the lack of physical prison infrastructure, poorly trained and paid guards, and dysfunctional criminal justice systems. The US case is striking in this respect because, in spite of enormous economic and institutional advantages, so many of the same dynamics persist. For example, it would be difficult to imagine a prison regime more secure than the high-tech Security Housing Units of a US ‘Supermax’ facility such as Pelican Bay in California (Weinstein and Cummins, 1996). And yet, even there, authorities are unable to prevent gang leaders from communicating with and coordinating the actions of outside members (Geniella, 2001; Montgomery, 2009). Mobile phones run rampant in US prisons (Besier, 2009), as they do throughout Latin American jails. Attempts to neutralize gangs by breaking them up and transferring leaders to different units have inadvertently helped them propagate throughout state prison systems (Parenti, 2000, p. 196), just as happened repeatedly in Brazil. Perhaps most ominously, the Barrio Azteca case mentioned above has demonstrated that US prison gangs—like São Paulo’s Primeiro Comando da Capital—can successfully project power, organizing the retail drug trade in entire cities by integrating small street gangs into a standardized system of prices, quotas, and rules.

Prison gangs can project power, organizing the retail drug trade in entire cities.

Along some dimensions, increased state capacity almost certainly makes dealing with prison gangs easier—as the successful prosecution of the Barrio Azteca on federal RICO charges demonstrates. However, some components of state capacity can inadvertently strengthen prison gangs (see Table 6.1), which may explain why it is not a decisive variable in predicting prison gang strength.

Another possibility is that in the United States, increased economic resources for corrections are being outstripped by an enormous and ever-growing inmate population, by far the largest of any country in the world today.⁸ Prison gang formation and activity seems to be, by its nature, subject to network effects, which raises the question—and important avenue for future research—whether their growth and potential negative impact increases non-linearly with the size of the prison population. This possibility is consistent with the fact that the US states with the highest prison populations, California and Texas, also have, arguably, the worst prison gang problems.⁹ If, beyond a certain point, the marginal cost of repressing prison gang activity is *increasing* with the absolute size of the prison population, then higher per-prisoner spending may be needed to keep gang problems in check. Even the more than sevenfold increase in corrections spending since 1982¹⁰ may be inadequate to manage such a large and unprecedented inmate population.

South Africa: the Numbers, the Americans, and the Firm¹¹

South Africa’s prisons have been dominated by the presence of three related gangs, the 28s, the 27s, and the 26s—known collectively as the Numbers—since the early 20th century. The Numbers constitute a unique and highly resilient gang ‘system’. Each gang maintains a complex and rigid hierarchy with dozens of different ranks and ‘lines’ of ascension, as well as distinct rules of conduct. For example, 28s permit homosexuality while 26s do not; 27s earn membership



A former member of a South African Numbers gang, Cape Town, 2007. © Araminta de Clermont

through violence, 26s through cunning and theft (HRW, 1994, p. 52). Each gang also maintains its own baroque variation on a common foundation myth involving the 19th-century anti-colonialist bandit Nongoloza, inspiring complex rituals involving imaginary but meticulously remembered Boer-war era uniforms and weaponry. Unlike in US prison gangs, membership is not determined by race or ethnicity, surprising given the two countries' similarly strong racial divisions. The Numbers are notoriously brutal, both towards their own initiates, who are often hazed to within inches of their lives, and towards the larger prison population, which the Numbers frequently exploit. Though the gangs often compete over resources and recruits, and occasionally engage in overt attacks against one another, they understand themselves to have complementary roles.¹² The Numbers system has thus propagated throughout the entire South African prison system, and for nearly a century has kept all other prison gangs from making more than minor inroads (HRW, 1994, pp. 51–52).

From a public security perspective, the Numbers are problematic primarily in terms of within-prison violence and human rights violations. Gang leaders can punish prisoners with executions, beatings, gang rape, and sexual enslavement; indeed, one entire 'line' of the 28s consists of essentially feminized sex slaves (Gear and Ngubeni, 2002). Chillingly, wilful infection with AIDS also counts among the punishments (Reuters, 2002). However, the Numbers never sought to project their power beyond the prison walls. Indeed, their long-standing traditions and harsh entrance requirements gave high-ranking Numbers a certain disdain for street gangs, whose members frequently

claimed to have operational linkages to Numbers gangs, or to be initiates though they had never been in prison. Rather than co-opt and organize these small-scale street gangs (as, say, the Barrio Azteca has done in Texas), Numbers leaders preferred to draw a stark distinction between themselves and criminal activity outside.

This began to change in the 1990s, however, with a reconfiguration of South Africa's illicit markets in the wake of globalization and the emergence of large-scale drug-trafficking 'supergangs'. As with the smaller gangs that preceded them, the two largest supergangs outside of prison, the Americans and the Firm, both claimed alliances with Numbers gangs. In this case, though, the economic and political resources of supergang leaders were so great, and the ageing Numbers leadership in such decline, that the latter was forced to accept the alliance in spite of the supergangs' unfamiliarity with the Numbers traditions (Steinberg, 2004, pp. 39–44). Interestingly, a similar 'watering down' of gang principles to accommodate new members flush with cash from a booming drug trade occurred in the case of Rio de Janeiro's Comando Vermelho (Coelho, 1988).

Central America: institutionalizing the maras through mass incarceration

Segregation by gang affiliation transformed prisons into an organizational resource. In 1995, a change in US immigration law facilitated the deportation of non-citizens convicted of certain offences. Together with California's anti-gang laws and 'three strikes' sentencing requirements, this led to a wave of deportations of Central American criminals—46,000 between 1998 and 2005 according to one estimate (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers, 2009). Many of these deportees were members of the two largest US-based Central American street gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS) and the Mara Dieciocho (18th Street Gang, or just 18). Gangs were not new to El Salvador, Honduras, or Guatemala, but the arrival of deported *mara* members from the United States, and the larger wave of return immigration of which it was a part, resulted in the penetration of Southern California gang culture into Central America. The vast array of local, turf-based gangs soon became *clikas* ('cliques') of the MS and 18 franchises, taking on the symbols, slang, and structure of the US-based gangs, including a propensity for warfare between the two rival *maras* (Cruz, 2007). Gang membership expanded rapidly and crime rates rose, setting off a 'gang crisis' that politicians in the region responded to with repressive *mano dura* policies (Arana, 2005).

These policies in turn led to mass incarcerations and intense overcrowding in the region's poorly maintained prisons, some of which housed members of both MS and 18. Between 2002 and 2005, a series of deadly prison riots, assaults, and fires broke out, leaving hundreds dead. The events made clear that prisoners had access to firearms, explosives, and mobile phones, and that prison guards were complicit in providing such items. Prison authorities naturally responded by segregating the prisoners, in effect turning entire prisons or wings over to each gang. While this did reduce the level of prisoner violence, it also had the predictable effect of transforming prisons into an organizational resource. As a USAID mission to Guatemala put it, 'prisons have evolved into graduate schools or training camps for gang members' (USAID, 2006).

The extent to which the *maras'* outside activity is controlled or influenced from within the prison system is not clear, nor is the degree to which they are currently organized. Some analysts emphasize the fact that neither gang has a hierarchical command and control structure (Jütersonke, Muggah, and Rodgers, 2009, pp. 380–81), and that claims of great influence made by imprisoned gang members to reporters may well be exaggerations.¹³ Others argue that imprisonment in segregated facilities has provided the *maras* with important organizational resources—such as a physical headquarters where members from different regions can come together—and ample opportunities for leaders to reward loyalty and punish transgressions, leading to an 'institutionalization' of the *maras* (Cruz, 2007).

Fears of reverse infiltration into the United States of a new breed of ultra-violent, highly disciplined *maras* controlled from 'nerve centres' ensconced in inmate-run Central American prisons (Lopez, Connell, and Kraul, 2005) may be

overblown. Coordination of action across international boundaries would probably require a greater flow of members from the US street to Central American jails than is realistic. But some of the other prison gang experiences related in this chapter suggest a number of troubling potential developments. For example, it certainly seems plausible that the activity of Central America's street gangs could become increasingly coordinated by the imprisoned *maras* leadership. Given the general lack of state capacity and the sheer number of gang members in these countries, the way might then be clear for the kind of violent confrontation with state forces that have made Brazil's prison gangs notorious.

Militant groups in prison

Unlike criminal groups and street gangs, militant and insurgent groups are generally organized around a concrete political goal (often the overthrow of the state) through force. While some militant groups engage in illicit activity, it is generally not central to their recruiting, training, or operations. Their jailed members certainly do not fit the image of a 'classic' prison gang. However, many of the underlying dynamics present in the case of criminal prison gangs operate in the case of jailed members of militant groups, and the dilemmas facing the state are in many ways similar. Moreover, Brazil's powerful prison gangs incorporated techniques gleaned from contact with militant groups in ways that profoundly shaped their strategies and directly contributed to their 'success' (Auler, 2008, pp. 109–11). Including militant groups in this survey is intended to offer further comparative perspective, not associate or equate these groups with purely criminal street and prison gangs.

Imprisoned militants bring with them extensive human and social capital, often including norms of collectivist behaviour, a hierarchy or command structure, organizational and guerrilla tactics, knowledge of the legal system and prisoners' rights, and well-articulated ideological positions and strategic goals that can focus energy and maintain unity during incarceration. As a result, imprisoned members tend to act collectively, providing for and protecting their own members, negotiating as a group, engaging in organized protests such as hunger strikes, and making use of available legal channels to denounce mistreatment and poor prison conditions.

On the other hand, imprisoned militant groups may be less likely to propagate and recruit within the prison system, for a number of reasons. First, many militant groups see themselves as political prisoners and go to great lengths to physically and symbolically separate themselves from common criminals. This is particularly true when governments have deliberately mixed them together precisely to deny the militants political status, as was the case with both the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the leftist opponents of Brazil's military dictatorship. Militant groups may also keep to themselves for strategic reasons: groups that pursue a vanguard-based strategy may feel that common inmates lack the technical and ideological training—or simply the trustworthiness—required to join their movement. When militant groups do recruit and propagate, it tends to be part of a larger strategy of ideological proselytizing and conversion to the cause of some marginalized 'base', as was the case with Peru's Sendero Luminoso.

Ireland: the IRA's Prison War¹⁴

In 1976, the UK government changed its policy towards captured Irish republican militants; previously, they had been afforded a quasi-political status within the prison system, but they were henceforth to be considered common criminals and mixed in with the general prison population. While the intent of this measure was surely to demoralize the IRA and delegitimize armed resistance in the public eye, the end result was almost the opposite. Imprisoned IRA members refused to wear the prison uniforms of 'common criminals'—the only clothes available to them—and instead remained in their cells, wrapped in blankets. The 'blanket protest' soon transmogrified into the 'dirty protest' in which IRA members refused to wash and used their own excrement to sully their cells and hallways. By 1980, a

Brazil's powerful prison gangs incorporated techniques gleaned from militant groups.

full-scale hunger strike was under way, and the prison campaign had become a central front of the IRA's overall struggle. Indeed, a second, larger strike in 1981 led to a surprising political victory, when a snap election was held to replace a Westminster Member of Parliament from Northern Ireland, who had died unexpectedly. One of the imprisoned strikers ran for the seat and, due to the popular support the strike had generated for the prisoners' cause, won.

Astoundingly, the British government did not cede, the strike continued, and a month later the newly minted parliamentarian died in prison, along with nine others. But the so-called 'Prison War' was ultimately very positive for the IRA. In the short run, the attention of the media and the public shifted from the IRA's controversial military campaigns and terrorist tactics to the struggle—widely seen as legitimate and courageous—for fair treatment of Republican prisoners against intransigent and inhumane British captors. In the long run, the episodes taught the IRA that they could drive an agenda and win political battles through organization and internal cohesion, precisely at the same time that it created bonds of camaraderie and mutual heroism among the protesters. Many IRA leaders attribute the groups' revitalization and the Republican movement's later political achievements to the reinvigorating effects of the Prison War (English, 2005, p. 205).

While the IRA as organization bears little resemblance to criminal prison gangs, the episode captures some of the paradoxes of incarceration.¹⁵ Jailing IRA members certainly hurt the organization in a tactical sense by removing soldiers from circulation and raising the stakes for those in active duty. But it also provided the organization with resources and incentives for collective action, and it transformed the prison system into an arena of confrontation with the British state. The case also makes clear how state capacity has ambiguous effects on prison organizations' strength. The problem was hardly the UK's ability to build and staff prisons, nor the effectiveness of its criminal justice institutions, but rather the way that mass imprisonment of IRA operatives as common criminals shaped and, ultimately, aligned their incentives. In fact, given the political/judicial nature of the imprisoned IRA members' actions, a healthy, democratic criminal justice system was probably a tactical liability for the British state in this case.

El Frontón prison effectively became an SL stronghold and training facility.

Peru: the Shining Path's 'Liberated Zone'

In 1982, soldiers of the Maoist Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso, SL) insurgency attacked a prison in Ayacucho, Peru, freeing 300 of their jailed comrades (Smith, 1983). Fearing further escape and rescue attempts, the Peruvian government reopened the island prison of El Frontón and moved the bulk of its SL prisoners there (Gorriti, 1999, p. 243). According to the Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the substandard prison conditions of the early 1980s were 'taken advantage of by the SL, which considered prisons as centers of political action' (CVR, 2003, p. 738). Where guards were both indifferent and brutal, the imprisoned SL cadres maintained an efficient, militarized internal discipline and an unyielding ideological fervour that included marches, songs, and communal indoctrination sessions. Dissidents, reactionaries, and members of opposing factions were forced to seek refuge in a dilapidated cellblock, while those who stayed were coerced and cajoled into adopting the SL ideology; soon a de facto segregation was in place (Gorriti, 1999, p. 248). Through threats and negotiations with officials, the SL won a series of concessions and consolidated its control over day-to-day prison life (Christian, 1986). Prison officials were not permitted to enter the SL cellblock, which SL inmates decorated with Maoist icons, physically remodelled using their own construction materials, and declared a 'liberated zone'. El Frontón effectively became an SL stronghold and training facility; indeed, it was in some ways the proud public face of an otherwise secret organization (Rénique, 2003).

Throughout 1985, the Shining Path orchestrated synchronized prison rebellions at El Frontón and other prisons, usually taking guards as hostages and negotiating improvements to prison conditions and recognition as political

prisoners. Finally, in 1986, after a wave of SL attacks in and around Lima, authorities responded to a riot at El Frontón with an onslaught of military force that levelled the SL cellblock and left 118 dead. Simultaneous rioting at two other prisons was also met with military repression. At Lurigancho prison, all 124 inmates were killed. The total death toll at all three prisons was at least 248, of which 244 were prisoners (Weschler and Neier, 1993). The Commission later found that some prisoners had been summarily executed, and that the Peruvian military destroyed evidence of the massacre (CVR, 2003).

The massacre hardly marked the end of SL's strategy of, in its own words, 'transforming the black dungeons of reactionism into shining trenches of combat' (CVR, 2003, p. 740). Indeed, the SL leadership may have intended to provoke an overreaction that would confirm in the public eye its claim that the state had adopted a policy of 'genocide' (CVR, 2003, p. 742). In any case, SL had soon established a new prison 'school' at the Castro Castro prison in Canto Grande, which would be the site of a drawn-out battle for control with state forces in 1992 (Weschler and Neier, 1993, p. 207).

CONSOLIDATION, PROPAGATION, AND PROJECTION OF POWER: BRAZIL'S PRISON-BASED CRIMINAL SYNDICATES

As the previous section demonstrates, prison gangs and other incarcerated groups vary in the strategies they pursue and the degrees of success they experience. US prison gangs, for example, rarely consolidate; alliances across racial lines are tenuous and within-race schisms are common, leading to a proliferation of gangs and a constantly shifting pecking order. The South African Numbers, on the other hand, built a cooperative system of multiracial gangs that has brooked no serious rival for nearly a century. Gangs that actively recruit and expand are also likely to propagate if conditions permit, while imprisoned members of pre-existing outside groups (such as the IRA) may prefer to hunker down in a single unit to preserve morale and unity of purpose. Finally, not all gangs project power: some try but meet with limited success, as with the Mexican Mafia's forays into cocaine distribution in Southern California; others never pursue the strategy at all, such as South Africa's Numbers.

Rio de Janeiro's CV and São Paulo's PCC provide good cases for study precisely because they have been very successful in all three strategies. In particular, both entities have projected power and expanded their operations beyond the prison walls to such a degree, and with such dire consequences, that they seem to have outgrown the term 'prison gangs'. Yet as 'native' groups, they retain a culture informed by the prison experience, and continue to rely in important ways on the prison system as a locus of power.

Rio's CV and São Paulo's PCC have expanded their operations well beyond the prison walls.

The Comando Vermelho¹⁶

In the early 1970s, Brazil's military dictatorship, responding to a small but growing armed resistance movement, began incarcerating both leftist militants and common criminals at the Cândido Mendes prison under the newly passed National Security Law (Lei de Segurança Nacional, LSN). By mixing militants with common criminals, as the British later would with the IRA, the Brazilian junta sought to obscure the former's political status and, it was hoped, delegitimize their cause. Like the IRA, the jailed militants engaged in a disciplined, collective campaign to distinguish themselves from the common criminals in the so-called LSN wing. Eventually, the campaign worked and the militants were granted amnesty, though whereas the IRA came away from their prison war strengthened, the Brazilian armed left largely petered out in the mid-1970s.

Rioting CV members demand segregation by gang affiliation at Benfica prison, Rio de Janeiro, 31 May 2004. © Vanderlei Almeida/AFP



The real beneficiaries of the government's ill-conceived policy may have been the common criminals of the LSN wing. In a spectacular example of unintended consequences, these inmates learned and adopted many of the leftists' organizational and collectivist tactics, forging a strong group identity.¹⁷ Refining and adapting these tactics over time, the group known initially as the Falange LSN (LSN Gang) would, within a decade, not only dominate Rio de Janeiro's prison system, but wield armed control over the majority of the city's *favelas* and a near-monopoly on the city's booming retail drug market.

The Comando Vermelho (Red Command), as the LSN Gang was eventually dubbed by authorities, established and consolidated control at Cândido Mendes through a combination of brute force and a novel political strategy that grew out of their contact with the leftists. At the time of their founding, the prison, on the remote side of a rugged island far from the capital, was notorious for its chaotic and violent conditions. Prisoners were subject to beatings, torture, robbery, rape, enslavement, and murder by both fellow inmates and guards. The existing prison gangs were small, predatory, and violent.

By contrast, the CV prisoners lived according to a collectivist ethos which, upon their reintegration with the prison masses, they promulgated as a universal code of conduct: no theft, no rape, and no prisoner-on-prisoner violence (except when decreed by the collective as punishment for transgressions) (Lima, 1991, p. 49). They also carried on the militants' collectivist practices, pooling resources into a central kitty and doling out 'welfare' to the poorest prisoners. Finally, their rhetoric urged putting aside differences in favour of a collective struggle for improvements in living conditions, respect for prisoners' rights, and an end to abuse by authorities.

After a bloody confrontation eliminated its remaining rivals, the CV was more than just the strongest gang left standing. By using its hegemony to enforce a cooperative social order, providing public goods like security and welfare, the gang had generated political support and loyalty among the inmates (Lima, 1991, p. 75), which in turn gave its leaders a powerful bargaining chip with prison administrators.¹⁸ The CV could credibly offer to keep order and minimize violence on the one hand, and threaten collective disruptions such as riots and hunger strikes on the other. It was thus able to extract further concessions, such as the right to conjugal visits, and an increasing degree of control over day-to-day life within the prison. The key to the CV's unprecedented consolidation of power was its strategy of establishing a universal and rule-based social order that was less violent, arbitrary, and predatory than the *status quo ante*, simultaneously making both prisoners and administrators better off (Lessing, 2009). Moreover, there is a self-reinforcing, path-dependent quality to this type of consolidation, since the stronger the CV grew, the greater its ability to enforce 'law and order', extract concessions, and provide public goods, vindicating its rhetoric and increasing its political support.

The CV's propagation through the prison system was initially spurred by what was probably an error. State officials, threatened by the CV's consolidation of power at Cândido Mendes, transferred its leaders to other prison units throughout Rio de Janeiro state in the early 1980s. Even though some of them were placed in solitary confinement, they were able to spread their 'message' and quickly established control over additional prisons. As one Director of the Rio State Department of the Penitentiary System put it—in official testimony—"the Comando Vermelho controls four prisons and the administration has difficulty taking any new measures without their consent".¹⁹

The CV also used its power to facilitate prison breaks and escapes. Freed members were obliged to contribute money and resources to the prison collective, and to participate in rescue attempts, under penalty of death. At this early stage of expansion beyond the prison walls, the challenge from an organizational perspective was how to induce the loyalty and sacrifice of freed members at a time when the CV's capacity for action on the outside was still weak and its members were not joined by familial or ethnic ties. Member accounts emphasize how their shared prison experience left them committed to the CV's code of cooperative behaviour. But such behaviour was sustainable precisely because of the CV's consolidated control over the prison system, and hence its ability to make credible promises to reward or punish freed members upon recapture. Paradoxically, this implies that improvements in law enforcement, especially policies of mass incarceration, can increase prison gangs' leverage over outside members and affiliates (Lessing, 2009).

The original members of the CV were almost all bank robbers and thieves, and so continued to practice armed assaults to raise money to fund jailbreaks. But armed robbery was a risky and unpredictable trade, and after the recapture and death of many founding members, the CV shifted to a new strategy: cornering the retail drug market, especially the booming domestic cocaine trade. By lending one another man- and firepower, freed CV bosses were able to systematically take over drug points of sale and the *favelas* in which they were located. By the mid-1980s, CV bosses controlled 70 per cent of Rio's *favelas* (Amorim, 2003). This hegemony ended with the advent of several schism-born rival syndicates, but the CV remains the most powerful. By the early 1990s, both Rio's *favelas* and its prison units had been divvied up among the CV and its rivals, a surprisingly stable status quo that persists today.

This new *modus operandi* fundamentally altered the structure and meaning of the CV. Outside prison, it is essentially a loose affiliation of autonomous drug firms whose bosses engage in mutual aid and occasional coordinated actions (Misse, 2003). There is no central treasury or clear hierarchy, and the politically tinged rhetoric of the early days has mostly given way to a concern for drug profits. To many residents and even specialists, the CV is most strongly associated with its massive armed presence within the *favelas*.

The CV consolidated power by establishing a universal, rule-based social order.

However, the CV's 'prison side' continues to play a crucial, if hidden, role. First, when arrestees enter the prison system, they are assigned to jails based on the affiliation of the community they are from. Thus incoming prisoners from a CV-dominated *favela* will be sent to a CV-dominated prison, regardless of whether they have any link whatsoever to CV traffickers in their community. There they will adopt the rituals, internal discipline, and codes of behaviour that are, to those who have gone through the prison system, the true mark of the CV. Even those who enter prison as autonomous criminal actors may well leave as a respected member of the organization, with the right to a lucrative position within the drug trade.²⁰

Second, imprisoned leaders continue to wield important influence over outside members. The clearest cases are imprisoned CV drug bosses, who usually continue to run their drug operations directly from prison, delegating only the necessary amount of authority to their right-hand men. Orders are almost always followed, since those on the outside know that sooner, or later, either the boss will be released or they will go to prison.

But a more subtle form of influence is also at work. The prison system provides a forum for CV leaders to coordinate their strategies, share information, agree on mutual aid policies, plan invasions, and come to agreements. The greatly respected older CV leaders, especially those with links to the founding members, are particularly important (Barbosa, 1998). Their praise or disdain can alter the fortunes of an up-and-coming CV member, or decide the fate of a proposed course of action. They are frequently called upon to settle disputes, appoint successors, broker deals between bosses, and evaluate alternative strategies.²¹ As is known from game theory, cooperation can be greatly facilitated when the suggestions of a given actor are taken by all players to be focal (Myerson, 2004; Schelling, 1960). Precisely because the CV as a whole does not have a rigid hierarchy, outside bosses rely crucially on the signals that the imprisoned leadership sends to coordinate on mutually beneficial courses of action.

The CV's resilience may largely be due to its control over the prison system.

As such, the CV's 'prison face' helps the organization as a whole to survive setbacks and neutralize the centrifugal forces that, in other major Brazilian cities, tend to bring down large retail trafficking outfits, leading to far more fractured (and less violent) drug markets (Lessing, 2008b). In this sense, the CV's longevity and resilience may ultimately be due less to massive drug profits and immense military-grade arsenals than to its continued control over the prison system (Lessing, 2008a).

The Primeiro Comando da Capital

In October 1992, a fight among inmates at São Paulo's Carandiru prison escalated into general unrest. In response, military police shock troops entered the facility with assault rifles blazing and killed at least 111 prisoners. Witnesses reported that many of the victims were summarily executed in their cells after having surrendered (Varella, 1999, p. 288). The director of Carandiru at the time of the massacre was transferred to the Taubaté maximum security facility, where he presided over a highly repressive prison regime in which inmates were kept in isolation for all but a few hours a week, and where torture and beatings by officials were common (Jozino, 2004, p. 28). There, less than a year after the Carandiru massacre, a group of prisoners founded the Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Command of the Capital) around the idea of prisoner solidarity in the face of abuse and neglect by prison authorities.²²

The PCC produced a written statute that, drawing heavily on the CV's example (and copying their motto, 'Liberty, Justice, and Peace'), forbade murder, theft, and rape, and also required freed members to contribute to a collective fund.²³ The PCC had an explicitly proselytizing mission: its founding members explained the statute's principles to other prisoners, identified promising disciples, and baptized them into the organization. The ranks of the PCC grew quickly as members were transferred out of Taubaté to less repressive units, where they could freely associate with a large inmate population (Jozino, 2004; Souza, 2007).

Like the CV before it, the PCC used a combination of brutal violence to eliminate rivals and public goods provision—including day-to-day security—to win the support of prison masses and consolidate control. Crucially, both gangs' political strategies had a kind of universal appeal: membership was not on the basis of race or other cleavages, and the regimes they put in place were based on inclusive, universal, and to some extent egalitarian principles that promised benefits to all inmates (Biondi, 2009). As one prisoner put it:

Thanks to the PCC, the number of deaths [inside the prisons] fell, the [PCC] controls the inmates. Nobody kills anybody without authorization. There's a steady supply of cell phones and drugs, nobody has to get them from the outside. [. . .] And the PCC helps the guys who are hard up (Barros, 2006).

PCC leaders strategically negotiated the transfer of key members to extend and maintain control over a growing share of the state's prisons and jails (Christino, 2003). Though the PCC deliberately copied many of the CV's tactics, it also innovated: it instituted a tax system in the form of a monthly raffle in which members and associates were obliged to participate (prizes have included new cars); it organized a private transportation and lodging system for inmates' family members to make visits to prisons in the state's interior; it created scholarships for freed members to obtain law degrees (Souza, 2007, p. 278); when crack addiction threatened to destabilize prison life, it successfully banned the drug (Marques, 2010).

Above all, the PCC constructed, apparently with the help of an imprisoned member of a Chilean guerrilla organization, a complex communications network built around 'switchboards' operated by wives and sisters of PCC members (Souza, 2007). Prisoners, using smuggled mobile phones, could call a switchboard and be quickly connected to inmates in distant prison units, or patched into conference calls. This capacity for coordinating the actions of its members was brilliantly exploited in 2001, when the PCC launched synchronized rebellions in 29 detention units throughout the state. The so-called 'mega-rebellion' brought international attention to the PCC, and won it thousands of new members and immense prestige throughout the prison system.

A period of relatively quiet consolidation followed, but in 2006 the PCC struck again. In May of that year, it launched an even larger mega-rebellion, involving more than 80 penitentiaries and jails in São Paulo state (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 2006a) and another ten correctional facilities in neighbouring Paraná and Mato Grosso do Sul (*Agência Folha*, 2006). More importantly, the PCC went on the offensive, attacking the state on its own turf. Once police units had been called off the streets to quell the rebellions in the prisons, hundreds of PCC affiliates, organized into discrete operational cells (Christino et al., 2006), attacked police stations, public buildings, banks, and the public transport infrastructure. On the third, and worst, day of the attacks, most of the city's bus fleet was recalled, schools were closed, businesses shuttered, and the city practically abandoned.

On the third day of the May 2006 PC attacks, most of the city was practically abandoned.

On the fourth day, subsequent to a secret meeting between government officials and the PCC's leadership, the attacks abruptly stopped (Penteado, Caramante, and Machado, 2006). Police went on to kill as many as 170 people in the following days in what they claimed were armed confrontations with resisting PCC members (*Folha Online*, 2009). However, researchers²⁴ and journalists²⁵ have shown that many if not most of these cases were summary executions of individuals whose participation in the PCC attacks was never established. The PCC launched two additional attacks of similar proportions later that year (Carvalho, 2006), and also kidnapped a reporter from Brazil's largest television network, negotiating the nationwide airing of a videotaped manifesto in exchange for his release (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 2006b).

The 2006 attacks are thought to have been, in a general sense, a response to the creation of a highly repressive 'disciplinary' prison regime that deprived prisoners of almost any human contact. There have been no major attacks

since, which some see as a kind of stalemate in which the state and the PCC can hurt but not destroy or impede one another (Dias, 2008). Others argue that politicians' fear of setting off another mega-rebellion has given the PCC a virtual veto over public security policy.²⁶ In any case, the PCC now controls 90 per cent of São Paulo's prisons (Dias, 2008).

Unlike the CV, the PCC has not established overt territorial control over the urban periphery, cornered the retail drug market, or engaged in further armed confrontations with state forces. Rather, researchers believe, the PCC has monopolized the wholesale distribution of illicit drugs and imposed on the retail markets a conflict-minimizing, profit-maximizing code of behaviour (Feltran, 2008). Local drug dealers are not only obliged to buy their supplies from the PCC, but must consult with the PCC leadership before committing reprisals, attacking rival gangs, or taking any other action that might generate further violence or attract police attention. In some cases, multiple PCC leaders in different prisons will sit in jury, via mobile phone conference calls, and hand down decisions over disputes (Caramante, 2008). The goal, it seems, is to increase the profits from the drug trade by avoiding unnecessary spirals of conflict and the resulting crackdowns by police.

As gangs concentrate the means of violence, incidents tend to be more destructive.

Some researchers and government investigators believe that the strong downward trend in violent crime in São Paulo over the last decade is at least partly attributable to the intervention of the PCC.²⁷ This parallels an episode from the United States: the Mexican Mafia imposed rules on its outside members and affiliates against the killing of bystanders, resulting in a drop in East Los Angeles's homicide rate between 1993 and 1994 (Parenti, 2000, p. 198). These are powerful examples of the complex relationship between prison gangs and armed violence, which are explored in the next section.

PRISON GANGS, SMALL ARMS, AND ARMED VIOLENCE

The connection between prison gangs and armed violence is far less straightforward than is the case with other types of armed groups. Within prisons, firearm trafficking and violence is not a first-order problem, nor does armed prison violence represent a significant fraction of worldwide small arms violence.²⁸ Moreover, prison gangs' strength within prison often reflects their ability to *reduce* violence and establish a stable social order, while projection of power beyond the prison walls can have a similar organizing effect on outside criminal actors. The threat of violence is crucial to such coordination, but effective threats are precisely those on which it is not necessary to act. Thus there is no direct relationship between the size or strength of prison gangs and armed violence, either inside or outside prison. Unfortunately, this may lead officials to believe that mass incarceration and anti-gang policies are reducing levels of armed violence. In fact, such policies strengthen prison gangs and extend their reach. As gangs accumulate and concentrate the means of violence, incidents, when they do occur, tend to be more extensive, strategic, and destructive.

In general, firearms are rarely found within prisons; most inmate violence is committed with home-made cutting, stabbing, and bludgeoning weapons.²⁹ The reasons for this include the fact that guns are hard to smuggle in and even harder to keep secret; they make excellent targets for cell searches, as well as prisoner-on-prisoner theft. Smuggling in a gun almost always requires the help of corrupt guards, who are likely to charge expensive bribes. Above all, firearms have a destabilizing effect: exactly because they are rare, their mere presence can upset the delicate equilibrium of prison life—in particular the unspoken pact between inmates and guards³⁰—and lead to lockdowns, cell sweeps, and eruptions of lethal prison violence. All of this shapes the incentives of prisoners: a firearm is likely to be desirable only as a desperate defensive measure, or when a group or individual deliberately wants to create a chaotic or violent situation.

Box 6.2 Examples of firearms possession and use in prison

Among US specialists and officials, the strong consensus is that firearms are extremely rare and not primary drivers of prison disturbances or violence.³¹ This view is supported by the limited number of news stories involving firearms in prison found in keyword searches of periodical databases. Still, guns are not entirely absent from US prisons:

Rikers Island prison, New York: In January 1993, a prison guard was shot by an inmate; investigation revealed that the gun was smuggled in by a guard. Between 1987 and 1993 there were 16 additional cases of firearms smuggled into New York City jails (*NYT*, 1993).

Allendale Correctional Facility, Alabama: In April 2004, two inmates were shot and wounded in their cells. Investigation revealed that one of the inmates, with the help of a corrections official, had smuggled in the firearm (*AP*, 2004).

Solano State prison, California: Between March 2008 and July 2009 the institution was put on 'lockdown' status three times in response to notes alleging that a gang of inmates possessed a 'zip gun'.³² After meticulous searches, no weapon was ever found (*SFBG*, 2009; Woodward, 2009).

In Latin America, by contrast, there were more frequent reports of firearm possession and use in prison, particularly during prison riots, synchronized rebellions, and targeted assassinations. Some prominent cases:

Colombia: Repeated episodes of open armed conflict involving grenades and semi-automatic weapon use by inmates took place at Modelo prison, Bogotá, on 9 December 1999 (*AP*, 1999); 27 April 2000 (*AP*, 2000); and 3 July 2001 (*NYT*, 2001).

Venezuela: Recent prison riots involving gunfire and grenade use by inmates took place at Uribana prison, 2 January 2007 (*AP*, 2007); San Fernando de Apure prison, 22 March 2008 (*AP*, 2008); and Maracaibo prison, 31 August 2008 (*World News Australia*, 2008). The latter was the site of a prison riot involving inmate gunfire that claimed 100 lives in 1994 (*NYT*, 1994).

Peru: Armed inmates rioted at Lurigancho prison on 8 February 2005. The national prison director admitted that, 'Firearms enter the prison from various sources' (*AP*, 2005).

Brazil: Imprisoned members of Rio de Janeiro's CV used firearms and explosives to incite riots and assassinate members of rival syndicates at Bangu I prison on 11 September 2002 (*Folha de S. Paulo*, 2002) and Benfica prison on 29 May 2004 (Monken, Figueiredo, and Torres, 2004). In 2008, São Paulo's prison officials found six firearms and 13 simulacra during searches (Borges and Daniel, 2009). Firearms were used in a prison brawl that left 25 dead in Minas Gerais (*G1*, 2007).

Guatemala: On 16 August 2005, simultaneous attacks by Mara Salvatrucha against Mara Dieciocho in El Hoyón, Pavón, and four other prisons involved explosions and gunfire. Some of the 31 dead appeared to have been killed by bullet wounds and gang members reportedly used AK-47s and Uzi sub-machine guns (*AFP*, 2005).

Mexico: Gunfire from inmates was reported in at least five recent prison riots: Reynosa, 20 October 2008 (*Bravo*, 2008); Mazatlán, 7 November 2008 (*Reuters*, 2008); Matamoros, 22 January 2009 (*Brownsville Herald*, 2009); Durango, 14 August 2009 (*Lacey*, 2009). In November 2004, officials denounced the presence of multiple smuggled firearms within La Palma prison. On 31 December, a major drug trafficker inmate was shot dead within the facility (*El Siglo de Torreón*, 2005).

Nonetheless, firearms do make their way into prison, even in the United States (see Box 6.2). The relatively large number of prison riots and murders in Latin America involving firearms suggests that guns in prison are more common, and more consequential, in this region. Since the press rarely reports on firearms in prison except when they are used during major violent events, the examples cited cannot reveal whether firearm possession causes unrest and fighting or vice versa, nor do they shed light on the prevalence of firearms that remain hidden and unused. But they are consistent with the idea that firearms in prisons have a destabilizing effect and can be used to help initiate a prison riot or carry out an assassination or massacre.



The body of a Mara Dieciocho member, killed during a prison riot, is carried from El Hoyón prison, Escuintla, Guatemala, 15 August 2005. © Victor James Blue/WPN

This suggests that, on the margin, prison gangs' access to and use of firearms is likely to grow with their size and strength. On the supply side, a stronger, larger, richer gang is likely to have more extensive contacts—and standing bribery relations—among corrupt guards; more economic resources to pay bribes; and more associates on the outside who can obtain weapons. On the demand side, while both gangs and individuals may seek out guns for defensive purposes, gangs are far more likely to find advantageous the kind of prison-wide disturbances that firearms can help provoke. Riots offer opportunities for escape and score-settling; instigating lockdowns can provide protection or buy time; hostage-taking can lead to negotiations and improved prison conditions. As a gang's resources grow, it is more likely to be able to employ violence and disorder in strategic ways.

On the outside, prison gangs rely on firearms and armed violence in ways similar to other gangs and criminal organizations: to settle scores, establish turf, and intimidate potential challengers. They may also use armed force and the promise of 'prison insurance' to induce cooperation among outside gang members and sympathizers. By coordinating the actions of dozens or even hundreds of outside gang members, such as when CV drug lords pool their soldiers and weapons to carry out an invasion of a rival's territory, the destructive power of a given arsenal is magnified dramatically. In terms of procurement, prison gangs able to project power beyond the prison walls are likely to have developed strong links to networks of corrupt officials and other suppliers of illicit small arms.

As is the case with much gun violence, though, the issue is often not the absolute number of weapons available, but the ways in which those weapons are used. Prison gangs illustrate how the potential impact of a given stock of small arms depends crucially on the way in which the actors who control that stock are organized. Consider the power of a firearm that has been smuggled into prison. An armed individual might be capable of inflicting lethal

violence or defending himself from it, but he is also vulnerable to being ratted out, overpowered by a group, or simply caught sleeping. A gang could use that same firearm to quickly dominate and even massacre members of a rival gang that possesses only bladed weapons, or make strategic use of a prison-wide disturbance that even a single firearm may be sufficient to set off.

Box 6.3 Policy implications of prison gangs: dilemmas and double-edged swords

This chapter emphasizes the role of the state and its policies in structuring the incentives of inmates and, at times, fomenting the growth and spread of prison gangs. Unfortunately, there are probably no easy policy fixes. The fact is that most strategies that states can pursue are double-edged swords, weakening prison gangs along one dimension or in the short run but strengthening them in other ways.

Outside prison walls, for example, increased incarceration rates may do little to deter gang violence and other activity. To newer gang members, imprisonment brings with it the chance to meet gang leaders and become truly initiated, an additional 'reward' (Montgomery, 2009). This can shift potential criminals' incentives, making the prospect of a long sentence more tolerable. Considering that most violence-reduction and anti-crime interventions are targeted at precisely those individuals who are 'on the fence'—tempted to join criminal groups, obtain firearms, or engage in armed violence—these marginal reductions in the expected costs of imprisonment can have an enormous negative impact. When at-risk youths come to view imprisonment as a normal life event (Pettit and Western, 2004) and a chance at membership in a prison gang as a 'crowning achievement' (Cummins, 1995, p. 3), prison has little or no value as a deterrent.

Table 6.1 provides a summary of the predicted positive and negative effects of selected strategies and policies. The top half of the table groups together factors associated with the concept of 'state capacity'; the fact that increases in these dimensions can both weaken and strengthen gangs helps explain why prison gangs continue to thrive in high-capacity countries such as the United States. The main implication of the table, and this chapter as a whole, is that officials need to take into account the way state actions can inadvertently strengthen gangs, both inside *and* outside the prison system.

Segregation of prisons by gang affiliation is a prime example of a policy dilemma whose implications go far beyond penitentiary administration. Once violent rival gangs have emerged, there are strong incentives on the part of officials to physically separate them. But once a gang is assigned its own area, it essentially rules the roost, even if other non-affiliated inmates are present. Guards become, in some ways, redundant:

the prison finally reaches a point where the inmates have established their own unofficial version of control. The custodians, in effect, have withdrawn to the walls to concentrate on their most obvious task, the prevention of escapes. [...] Prisoners administer their own stern justice to inmates who have broken the inmate code and officials seek the advice of their captives in regard to cell and job assignments (Sykes, 1958, pp. 127-28).

Segregation also necessarily implies sorting incoming prisoners by gang affiliation, which can have the perverse effect of putting first-time offenders with only tenuous gang links under the custody of gang leaders, to be schooled, socialized, and inducted.

The alternative—re-integration—is a risky proposition. When the Rio de Janeiro state government attempted it, CV leaders in the newly desegregated Benfica prison instigated a riot and brutally massacred some 30 members of rival gangs (Borges, 2004). California has been ordered to desegregate its prison wings in the wake of a US Supreme Court discrimination ruling, but even in the low-security prisons where the new policy is being tested, prisoners have refused to comply, preferring extended sentences to the risk of violence (Thompson, 2009).

Under some conditions, segregation may be the lesser of two evils. But government officials should be attuned to the risks involved, and make efforts to mitigate strengthening effects. Designating separate (and preferably superior) facilities for non-affiliated inmates is key to preventing forced or 'default' gang induction, and can help make gang membership less attractive. Within segregated facilities, maintaining the authority of prison administrators over inmates (even if guards are not necessary to keep order) is equally important.

Table 6.1 Predicted impacts of selected policies on prison gang strength

		Policy	Weakens prison gangs and other benefits	Strengthens prison gangs and other costs
Elements of state capacity	Economic resources	Higher pay/more guards per prisoner	Reduces corruption and inmate illicit activity. Can crowd out gang as provider of order.	Opportunity costs: less funding for food, activities, non-prison spending, etc. Political costs: in the United States, led to strong prison guard unions that distort public policy (Davis, 1995).
		Prison infrastructure (size of system, high security units, technology)	Prevents escapes and entrance of contraband (including firearms). Better control over inmate activity.	Larger systems breed larger, networked gangs (propagation). High-security units can be targets of mobilization and violence. Does not prevent communication. 'No human contact' surveillance ineffective, may drive mental health problems (Knox, 2005).
		Improved prison conditions (food, overcrowding, etc.)	Reduces friction and competition between inmates. Reduces ability of gangs to mobilize inmates.	Reduces deterrent effect of threat of incarceration. Politically unviable in face of widespread poverty.
	Criminal justice institutions	Improvements in legal systems and prisoners' rights	Faster movement through prison system. Reduces ability of gangs to exploit injustices.	More difficult to punish gang members; easier for prisoners to obtain transfers (propagation) and communicate with outside affiliates (projection).
		Policing, investigation, and prosecution	Deterrent effect on potential criminals. May take prison gang members off the street.	Increases coercive power of gangs over outside members via threat of re-incarceration (projection).
Other policy initiatives	Mass incarceration, <i>mano dura</i> , and mandatory sentencing	Deterrent effect on potential criminals. Can reduce or restrict gang activity outside prison. Political benefits: look 'tough on crime'.	Overcrowding helps gangs recruit and mobilize prisoners. In the long term, 'normalizes' prison experience and can transform prison gang membership into important life goal.	
	Anti-gang laws	Facilitates disruption of gang activity in the short run. May deter some from joining gangs.	Reifies or 'officializes' gangs. Gang culture becomes basis for legal discrimination, increasing antagonism. Induces individual members and <i>clikas</i> to 'see things collectively' (Cruz, 2010).	
	Segregation by gang affiliation	Reduces inter-gang violence and prison riots. Makes day-to-day management easier and safer.	Grants gangs de facto consolidation; aids recruiting. Can turn prison into gang stronghold. Increases coercive power over outside members (projection).	
	Protection and privileges for non-gang and ex-gang inmates	Reduces incentives to join gangs; makes non-affiliation viable. Prevents forced or default gang induction when prisons are segregated. Can induce defection, providing valuable information.	Difficult to administer, subject to contamination by gang members. Political costs: may require amnesty or rewards to gang members.	

However, there is no direct relationship between the size or strength of prison gangs and the level of armed violence observed. When multiple gangs compete for control or hegemony, conflict is usually the order of the day, but prison can foment truces: in the 1970s, leaders from Chicago's Latino gangs came to Stateville prison to sign a peace treaty whose terms had been worked out by inmate members (Jacobs, 1974, p. 407). When one gang is dominant, it may rule in a predatory and violent way, but it may also use its power to minimize conflict (see Box 6.3). The ascension of the CV and the PCC in their respective prison systems brought a reduction in prison violence; CV takeover of *favelas* reduced within-community crime (Penglase, 2005, p. 4), just as the PCC's expansion seems to be doing in the periphery of São Paulo, and Nuestra Familia's did in Los Angeles. Conflict, after all, can be thought of as a breakdown of bargaining and coordination (Powell, 2004), and prison gangs—powerful, centralized, and well-informed—can have an organizing, conflict-minimizing effect on the criminal world.

When conflict does occur, though, prison gangs' ability to organize and concentrate the means of violence can contribute to extreme outcomes. The CV's resilience over time and in the face of militarized police repression, and the rise of similarly configured rival syndicates, has supported the escalation of armed conflict in Rio's *favelas* to levels that match or surpass civil wars. Perhaps even more startling is the PCC's use of strategically coordinated armed attacks against state forces and civilian targets. It demonstrates that prison gangs can use armed violence inside and outside prison *strategically and to political ends*, taking advantage of a state's weaknesses to force concessions that leave the state even weaker and the group stronger. The resulting violence can be severe—nearly 500 were killed with firearms during the May 2006 attacks and their immediate aftermath (*Folha Online*, 2009)—but of equal or greater importance is the fact that São Paulo's elected leaders are now essentially paralysed: they cannot take action against the PCC without risking another politically fatal wave of attacks.

CONCLUSION

Prison gangs are an adaptive response by inmates to perceived threats from other prisoners and guards, as well as a means to cope with unliveable prison conditions, or simply establish a positive group identity. They are ubiquitous and not amenable to eradication. They play a role in aggravating violence and crime within prisons, and may contribute to the 'anti-social' effects of incarceration on prisoners in general (Lerman, 2009); as such they constitute a key issue for prison management. Prison gangs can also, in ways that are only beginning to be understood, consolidate and project power beyond the prison walls, becoming a potential threat to society as a whole. As such, the problem of prison gangs needs to be better understood and integrated into the larger public security debate. They are not just an administrative, 'corrections' question.

The prison gang problem appears especially relevant to anti-crime policy. Hard-line, *mano dura* approaches, especially those that swell the prison population, feed prison gang recruitment and are almost certain to fuel their growth. Calls to 'lock up more criminals' should be understood to imply more serious prison gang problems down the road. Moreover, mass incarceration policies usually outpace the construction of new facilities, leading to overcrowding and inadequate supervision, conditions which also favour prison gang emergence and growth. Brazil's prison gangs achieved an astounding degree of political power among inmates by making their organizing principle the fight for better conditions and an end to mistreatment by officials. Allowing prisons to become overcrowded, inhumane dungeons is not just a problem from a human rights perspective; in the long run, it can be a threat to public, and even national, security.

At a deeper level, the role of incarceration in dealing with social ills requires rethinking. Putting criminals, gang members, rebels, paramilitaries, and other armed actors in jail does not neutralize them. On the contrary, for incarcerated groups, prisons can become tactical headquarters, organizational assets that expand their range of action and make them more resilient. In this context, crackdowns and mass arrests can become counter-productive. Of course, dangerous elements will always need to be physically detained and isolated from the rest of society. But governments facing organized armed violence should be aware that increased incarceration rates cannot substitute for addressing the root causes of civil strife and rampant crime.

For civil society, it is important to continue to shine the light of public scrutiny on the inner workings of prison systems. Governments, particularly elected ones, have short time horizons. Because the negative consequences of prison gang growth may remain (for a time) contained within the prison system, far from the public eye, it is all too easy for politicians to ignore them when formulating policy. ■

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Aryan Brotherhood
BGF	Black Guerilla Family
CV	Comando Vermelho
IRA	Irish Republican Army
LSN	Lei de Segurança Nacional
MM	Mexican Mafia
MS	Mara Salvatrucha
NF	Nuestra Familia
PCC	Primeiro Comando da Capital
RICO	Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act
SL	Sendero Luminoso

ENDNOTES

- 1 See Fleisher and Decker (2001); Knox (2005).
- 2 See Hunt et al. (1993); Jacobs (1978).
- 3 This chapter presents results from the author's fieldwork on Brazilian prison gangs between 2005 and 2009. This fieldwork was generously supported by the Small Arms Survey; the University of California–Berkeley Graduate Division Summer Research Grant; the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship; and the National Center for Risk and Economic Analysis of Terrorism Events under grant number 2007-ST-061-000001. All opinions, findings, recommendations, and/or errors are entirely the author's own.
- 4 RICO was originally designed as an anti-mafia measure; from a law-enforcement perspective, its use indicates that prison gangs have become significant examples of organized crime.
- 5 Data from ICPS (n.d.).
- 6 Chicanos are US-born Latinos, usually of Mexican descent.

- 7 Parenti (2000) notes that when fighting breaks out, even non-gang members are expected to 'put in time' on the prison yard fighting for their racial group.
- 8 Data from ICPS (n.d.).
- 9 For example, of the seven major prison gangs listed in 'Appendix C: Prison Gangs' of the 2009 *National Gang Threat Assessment* (USDOJ, 2009), all but one originated and are most active in California and Texas.
- 10 Data from the USBJS (n.d.). As of 28 January 2010, the last year for which data was available was 2006.
- 11 Where not otherwise noted, this section is based on Steinberg (2004).
- 12 In particular, the 27s, characterized by their propensity to employ violence, have the role of defenders of the Numbers system, its shared oral tradition, and rules.
- 13 Author communication with Dennis Rodgers, 11 August 2009.
- 14 This section is based on an interview with IRA scholar Richard English, 26 June 2009, and on English (2005).
- 15 In the early 1990s, faced with the difficult task of jailing drug kingpins who had recently turned themselves in to avoid extradition, Colombia's then justice minister Rafael Pardo visited Northern Ireland's prisons and met with UK officials to learn from the IRA case (Balcázar Salamanca and Gómez Garzón, 2003).
- 16 This section draws on Amorim (2003) and Lima (1991).
- 17 It remains controversial how complicit leftist militants were in passing on such volatile human capital to the other LSN inmates. When the CV first attracted public attention, the media and the military government assumed that its members had been deliberately indoctrinated and trained by the leftists as part of a long-term strategy to re-ignite armed resistance to the regime (Amorim, 2003). But both leftists and CV members concur that the former minimized contact with the common criminals, and successfully mobilized to have their wing physically divided (Lima, 1991, p. 45).
- 18 This support was neither universal nor always freely given: those who disagreed openly with the CV's rule faced reprisals or banishment to solitary confinement. Interview with Julita Lemgruber, former Director of the Rio State Department of the Penitentiary System, 8 July 2009.
- 19 Testimony before the Rio state government's Council of Justice, Security and Human Rights, quoted in Amorim (2003, p. 188).
- 20 Author interview with non-trafficking ex-CV member and prison capo, 14 August 2009.
- 21 Author interview with ex-CV drug boss and inmate, 14 August 2009.
- 22 Biondi (2009) notes that for years multiple, contradictory versions of the PCC's origin were heard from prisoners and officials. After Jozino's (2004) history of the PCC was published and widely circulated within the prison system; its version became universally accepted (as it is in this chapter), and even the memory of the controversy seems to have been lost.
- 23 The PCC's statute has appeared repeatedly in the Brazilian press since 2001. The Portuguese version is available at *Folha Online* (2001); an English version can be found at Wikisource (n.d.).
- 24 See, for example, Cano and Alvardia (2008).
- 25 See, for example, Penteado and Leite (2006).
- 26 Interview with Marcio Christino, São Paulo State Attorney, 4 September 2009.
- 27 Interview with Marcio Christino, São Paulo State Attorney, 4 September 2009.
- 28 This section does not address firearm possession and use by guards and police, which cause many prison deaths, particularly during riots. In California's prisons, between 1989 and 1994, guards shot 175 prisoners, killing 27 (Parenti, 2000).
- 29 Author communication with US federal penitentiary official, 23 November 2009, and corrections specialist at the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, 19 November 2009. Author interviews with research specialist, US National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 23 November 2009, and research specialist, American Corrections Association, 23 November 2009. Official data from the US, UK, and Canadian prison systems does not specifically report injuries and mortalities from firearms. The fact that it does mention other types of weapons strongly suggests that firearms are not a primary means of prison violence.
- 30 Author communication with John Hagedorn, 9 October 2009.
- 31 Author communication with John Hagedorn, 9 October 2009; US federal penitentiary official, 23 November 2009; corrections specialist at the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, 19 November 2009. Author interviews with research specialist, US National Criminal Justice Reference Service, 23 November 2009, and research specialist, American Corrections Association, 23 November 2009.
- 32 'Zip gun' is a common term among inmates for a craft (home-made) gun.

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