

The Danger of Dungeons

PRISON GANGS AND INCARCERATED MILITANT GROUPS

Although prison gangs have long been recognized as a central factor structuring life behind bars and as a challenge for penitentiary administration, they have rarely been analysed as a threat to overall public security. Yet as worldwide inmate populations have grown, prison gangs have expanded in size and reach; in some places they now constitute major criminal organizations, capable of instigating significant episodes of armed violence outside, as well as inside, prisons.

Prisons as tactical headquarters. Between 2002 and 2004, prison riots sparked by clashes between jailed members of rival Central American *maras* (street gangs) led governments throughout the region to segregate 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. In Texas, the Barrio Azteca prison gang has used the prison system as an effective base for criminal operations, establishing 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 via control over smaller street gangs.

Segregation by gang affiliation transformed prisons into an organizational resource.

More than 20 years ago, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, a group of inmates that came to be known as the Comando Vermelho (CV) rose to a position of absolute dominance within many of the state's prisons, leading authorities to segregate the system by gang affiliation. 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; prison control has also been crucial in maintaining that dominion despite two decades of militarized police repression. 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, 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 and forced the government to grant important concessions.



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

Incarcerated members of militant groups such as Peru's Shining Path or the Irish Republican Army, though their ends are ideological and not criminal, have used similar strategies to transform the prison system into an organizational asset. Prisons can quickly become centres for political mobilization, resistance, indoctrination, training, or simply showcasing a group's organizational capacity.

Rethinking the logic of incarceration. 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, 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 prison 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.

Prison gangs in comparative perspective. This chapter examines a variety of cases from around the world, with a focus on Brazil's powerful prison gangs. It proposes a comparative framework that focuses on how gangs (1) *consolidate* control within prison units, *propagate* throughout prison systems, and *project* power beyond the prison walls; and (2) the 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. Prison gangs 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. ■