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Gang Activity in English Prisons: The Staff Perspective

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Running Head: English Prison Gangs

GANG ACTIVITY IN ENGLISH PRISONS: THE STAFF PERSPECTIVE

Gang behaviour has been associated with serious problems in American prisons (e.g. Fong & Buentello 1991). This study explored the possible existence of indicators of gang activity in English prisons. Surveys of problems consistent with gang activity were completed by 374 prison staff in 16 prisons that were representative of the English Prison Estate. Results showed significant differences between categories of institution. The most gang related activity was reported in male Medium security prisons and Young Offender Institutions. The lowest reported incidence was in both male Low and High Security prisons. Female establishments demonstrated levels lower only than Medium security male prisons. Discussion focuses concern on the levels of gang activity apparently present in the Medium security English Prisons and suggests directions for further research.

Key words: Prison Gangs, Prison Violence, Prison Culture, Prisonization

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INTRODUCTION

Some preliminary comments

American research indicates that since 1950, male prisoner gangs (female prison gangs have not been researched) have become an increasingly prevalent and formidable feature of many Federal and State prisons (e.g. Buentello, Fong & Vogel, 1991; Camp & Camp, 1985; Jacobs, 1977). In contrast, there has been no research into English prison gangs to date. The present study was a preliminary investigation into the possible existence of problems consistent with gang activity in English prisons.

Prison gangs have been defined as a cohesive group of prisoners (with a leader), whose criminal activities have a negative impact on the prisons that hold them (Fong & Buentello, 1991; Huff, 1991). However, in terms of gang structure, other prison gang researchers note that prison gangs have a flexible configuration, where organisation may be loosely or tightly structured (Camp & Camp 1985). In addition, no prison gang researchers have delineated the minimum number of members for an operational definition of a “prison gang”. In view of such gaps in the literature, the researchers used Brown’s (1988) definition of a group to elucidate upon Fong and Buentello’s (1991) outline of a prison gang. Brown (1988) defines a group as existing when ... “two or more people define themselves as members of it and when its existence is recognised by at least one other.” (p.2-3). A prison gang was therefore defined as *a group of two or more prisoners whose behaviour has an adverse impact on the prison that holds them.*

Furthermore, previous neglect of female and adolescent members in the prison gang research also seems to be unwarranted. Street gang researchers have noted that members

are usually adolescent or in their early twenties (Lasley, 1997; Thompson, 1995) and that more females are becoming gang members (e.g. Campbell, 1984; Sikes 1997). It is therefore reasonable to consider that the same trends may be perceived in prison gangs and to adjust research accordingly.

Finally, it is worth mentioning here that there has been a debate about the origins of prison gangs. Some authors argue that prison gangs develop within the prison (e.g. Fong & Buentello, 1991) and other authors conclude that importation of street gang members has resulted in re-formation of gangs following incarceration (Jacobs, 1977). The aetiology of gangs is not directly considered within this preliminary study as its focus is the possible existence of prison gangs per se.

The methodology of prison gang research

The American based information available about Prison Gangs is somewhat scarce and beset by methodological problems. Due to the secretive nature of prison gangs, direct observation is prevented and prisoner reports are thought to be unduly influenced by fears of reprisal (Fong & Buentello 1991). In light of this, previous research has largely been based on prison staff reports or prison records (e.g. Camp & Camp 1985; Fong & Buentello 1991; Huff 1991). As such, prison gang research must be considered with caution until more methodologically diverse research becomes viable.

The Growth and Impact of Prison Gangs in America

The first prison gang to be acknowledged as such, was reported in Washington State, USA in 1950 (Camp & Camp, 1985). Since then, the number of prison gangs increased steadily. By 1985, prison gangs were identified in 60% of Federal and State prisons

(Camp & Camp, 1985). Prison gangs represented 2% (12,634 prisoners) of the prison population and were considered to be responsible for more than 50% of prison management problems (Camp & Camp, 1985). In Texas alone, disruption attributed to the escalation of prison gang activity was so severe that during the mid-1980s, officials almost lost control of the prisons, forcing the Director of the Department of Corrections to declare a state of emergency (Beaird, 1986; Fong, 1990).

Some have attributed the sharp increase in prison gang activity to the transfer of known gang members around prison systems (Camp & Camp, 1985). Others cited an increase in prisoners' constitutional rights¹ that eventuated from Court rulings such as *Ruiz v. Estelle* (1980) (Marquart & Couch 1985). This increase in rights led to many prisoners taking legal action against a number of prison authorities for unconstitutional conditions e.g. overcrowding and poor medical care (National Prison Project, 1988; cited in Fong et al., 1991). It has been asserted that such Court actions led to the reduction of the power of prison officials to discipline prisoners (Marquart & Crouch, 1985).

Correctional staff became less willing to punish misdemeanours, which led to a reduction in institutional safety and correctional goals (Jacobs, 1977; Marquart & Crouch, 1985; Stevens, 1997).

It has been argued that in the less controlled environment, prisoners began to form groups, more quickly organising themselves in order to maximise self-protection and

¹ Prisoners in England and Wales do not have leave to appeal directly to a Court of Law, as do prisoners in America. However, prisoners in English and Welsh prisons may direct their complaint initially to the prison's Board of Visitors and subsequently to the Prison Ombudsman, an independent office created in 1994 to investigate prisoner grievances.

power (Eckland-Olson, 1986; cited in Fong et al., 1991). As well as being self-protective, many such groups were also predatory, instigating disruption and violence on a scale unparalleled in the history of American prisons (Fong & Buentello, 1991).

Prison gangs have subsequently evolved into large organisations whose power bases extend into the community (Fong & Buentello, 1991; Sullivan, 1991). The primary aims of prison gangs have been identified as the acquisition of finance and power (Camp & Camp, 1985; Fong, 1990). Gang members are generally uninterested in incentive or treatment schemes which offer prisoners the opportunity to earn privileges or to address their offending behaviour (Huff, 1990). However, they usually appear to co-operate with prison staff requests and institutional rules (Camp & Camp 1985). This is probably because they manipulate rather than challenge the prison routine in order to conduct gang business such as drug trafficking. Yet, if correctional staff impede gang business, the results are often violent (Camp & Camp, 1985).

In addition, American research indicates that prison gangs exploit weaknesses in staff organisation, in order to gain and maintain institutional control (Stevens, 1997) employing threats and assault to repress staff and other prisoners (Huff, 1990; Irwin, 1980; Stevens, 1997). The most usual activities of prison gangs reported by prison staff are, [in descending order]: intimidation; drugs; assault; abuse of weaker prisoners; extortion; protection; contraband weapons; theft; “strong-arm robbery”; rackets; robbery; prostitution; rape; “sodomy for sale”; murder; bribery; arson; slavery and explosives (Camp & Camp, 1985). The growth and impact of prison gangs through the use of such activities has led to prison gangs being considered a formidable presence.

Some criminal justice agencies have insisted that prison gangs are the most dangerous crime syndicate in America (Buentello, 1986; Fong, 1990).

Nevertheless, there remains a paucity of research into prison gangs. This is thought to be for three reasons: the absence of official intelligence relating to gangs; the reluctance of prison officials to allow gang-related research; and the lack of accessibility to gang members due to their codes of secrecy (Fong et al., 1991). Unlike some street gangs, prison gangs adhere to a strict code of secrecy in order to avoid official detection and possible transfer (Camp & Camp, 1985). Furthermore, systematic minimisation by correctional officials of the influence of gangs has not only been futile, but has intensified research difficulties (Fong et al., 1991).

Consequently, U.S. State and Federal prison authorities have found themselves taking reactive postures to the major correctional problem of prison gangs (Fong et al., 1991). For example, alleged/known gang leaders are segregated and housed in solitary confinement within maximum-security units (Porter, 1988). The hope is that this will limit gang power inside prisons and within the outside community (Porter, 1988).

The perceived results of prison gang activity and growth led to calls for a more proactive approach to the problem (Fong & Buentello, 1991). As these researchers note: “In most instances, the existence of prison gangs is realised only after it has reached crisis proportions. What normally follows is a costly combating process” (p.67). A more proactive approach would involve investigating the existence of prison gangs before their activities render them high profile, powerful entities.

Background to the present study

Although no direct research into prison gang activity in English and Welsh prisons has been conducted to date, research into bullying has documented the existence of related behaviours, for example intimidation and assault (e.g. Ireland, 1999; O'Donnell & Edgar 1989 and Power, Dyson & Wozniak, 1997) (e.g. Fong & Buentello 1991).

However, the primary focus in both bullying literature and intervention programmes, is the individual. What remains largely unexplored is the role of prisoner groups in such behaviour. This may be an important omission due to the influence group membership may have on individual responses to intervention programmes designed to reduce bullying behaviour.

King and McDermott (1995) have mentioned the possibility that prison gangs exist in English prisons. They reveal that, of the five English prisons in their study, one reported the continuing rivalry of incarcerated community gangs and others reported intimidation and violence from groups of prisoners involved in narcotics trade. Nevertheless, one might conclude that English prisons do not have a substantial prison gang problem because if prison gangs were as active in English prisons as in America, their presence would be more apparent.

One explanation why prison gangs are not conspicuous in English and Welsh prisons could be the comparatively high staffing levels. For instance, in English and Welsh prisons, the official ratio of officers to prisoners ranges from 1:1.1 in Category A establishments (high security) to 1:5.5 in Category D (low security) (Function Report of

HM Prison Service, April 1998 - June 1998). However, in America, in high security prisons, the ratio of officers to prisoners may be as low as 1:190 and even in blocks where prison gangs are known to be active, the ratio can be 1:16 (Porter, 1988). In England, there is currently less reliance on technological observation of prisoners and it seems likely there will be more personal supervision which may impede the development of prison gangs and/or their activities. However, staff numbers have been cut in England, prisoner numbers have risen and there is increasing reliance on sophisticated technology. The American experience of prison gangs clearly indicates that in England, we cannot afford to be complacent.

It should also be noted that in America, a proportion of prison gang related activity is attributable to prisoners with community based gang roots (Jacobs 1974). This observation could be pertinent to Britain as contemporary gangs like the “Yardies,” “Triads” and the “Asian Mafia” are now visible on British streets and are often involved in the drug trade (Thompson, 1995). The advent of drugs such as “Crack” and the reduction in street prices of “Heroin” and “Cocaine” have apparently increased the number of gangs and the levels of violence used by them (Thompson, 1995).

It therefore seems that, as street gang membership increases, so too will the number of gang members incarcerated in English prisons. If so, it is conceivable that members from the same street gang will, at some point, be held in the same prison. Paradoxically, this is even more likely post Woolf's (1991) recommendation that prisoners be held in prisons close to their homes. If incarcerated together, it is likely that gang members will regroup.

Further, it is argued (e.g. Knox, 1993) that when one group threat arises (e.g. the importation of a community gang) its natural counterpart also arises. Thus, if street gangs are imported into prisons, it is possible that opposing prisoner gangs will also be present. If so, then as Fong et al. (1991) advocate, it seems judicious to take a proactive approach and not hesitate until English prison gangs have evolved to a level where the authorities are reduced to reactive posturing.

Thus, the present study was based on two premises. The first is that street gangs may be imported into English prisons and continue their illicit activities once incarcerated. The second premise is that prison gangs may form in prisons.

The dynamics of prison gang membership

Buentello, Fong and Vogel (1991) proffer a five-stage model of male prison gang development derived from previous research and their own observations. In stage one, the new prisoner must adapt to the prison environment. This process of “Prisonization” (Clemmer, 1940) includes observing the prisoner “code of conduct” (Sykes, 1958), illicit trades and any racial conflict (Gleason, 1978).

To overcome feelings of isolation and to cope with the everyday threat of violence (Duffee, 1980), the prisoner begins to associate with like-minded prisoners and moves to stage two of the model (Clemmer, 1940; Toch, 1978)—the formation of loose associations with other prisoners. The commonalties underlying such associations may include religious beliefs, political orientation or motorcycle culture (Camp & Camp,

1985). Further, it is argued that the effects of “Juvenilization” (Stevens, 1997) may be seen. Specifically, the knowledge that other prisoners served a sentence in the same Juvenile centre forms the basis of an alliance. Stevens (1997) notes that many adult prisoners trust only the prisoners that shared their formative penal experiences. In a similar vein, Goldstein (1991) argues that American juvenile training centres represent intense place attachments that mediate affiliations formed in adult establishments.

Some of the cliques in stage two of Buentello et al.’s (1991) model may disband, but others will move to stage three and become self-protection groups, able to withstand hostility from other prisoners. At this stage, the group is not necessarily involved in illicit activities, but may be identified as a group by other prisoners and personnel.

In time, the individual influence of some members is acknowledged and they emerge as leaders. Concomitantly, the group may move to stage four: the predatory group. Rules of conduct are devised and wavering members expelled. The clique is able to instil fear into other prisoners and begins to accumulate power within the prison. Members gain access to illicit goods such as narcotics, sexual favours, clothes and food (Huff, 1990), they may experience a sense of brotherhood, a “familial” sense of social support that endures throughout the sentence and post-release (Huff, 1990). As the group maximises its power and illicit trades, it becomes a powerful entity within the prison and moves to the final, fifth stage of Buentello et al.’s model – a prison gang.

It seems likely that the prison gang effectively alleviates some of the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958) for members. Gang membership not only offsets

deprivation of goods and services; it may also offer sexual relations and heightened personal security (Camp & Camp, 1985). McDermott and King (1995) found that one of the worst “pains of imprisonment” is being with other prisoners. Selective group membership may provide a buffer against the institutional mass.

Buentello et al.'s model remains untested as far as the current authors are able to determine, however it is founded on long-standing (if somewhat debated) processes such as Prisonization (Clemmer 1940). It offers a process of gang development that seems as applicable to female and young offender prisoners as it is to adult males. The feelings of isolation and the adaptation process noted by Buentello et al. make intuitive sense as it seems likely that the new prisoner will look for like-minded individuals with whom to associate.

A further merit of the model is that it also shows that prisoner cohesion does not necessarily indicate gang existence. For example, it is well established that American female prisoners often form “families” that incorporate several prisoners into an “extended family” group (Giallombardo, 1966). Similarly, in England, “houses” designed to establish a pattern of “home” and “the neighbours” (Kelley, 1970) characterise many female prisons and are thought to provide female prisoners with the support necessary to endure a prison sentence (Mandaraka-Sheppard, 1986). However, it is important to note that these “families” are not necessarily benign. For example, female “family members” are more anti-authority and more group-orientated than are other prisoners (Hefferman, 1972) and there are obvious opportunities for victimisation within any such “family”.

The identification of prison gang presence

In light of the difficulties associated with the direct observation of prison gangs, in America, prison guard perceptions of gang behaviour have been considered to be a meaningful alternative area of study (Fong & Buentello, 1991). Based on the Buentello et al.'s. (1991) model, Fong and Buentello (1991) devised 23 questions they posed to 181 officers, with at least five years experience of prison gangs. The officers rated 11 items as key indicators of prison gang presence. These included: the emergence of prisoner cliques and secret racial groupings of prisoners; prisoners assaulting other prisoners; requests for protective custody and transfers; assaults of and verbal threats to staff; intimidation of prisoners' families; prisoner disciplinary violations regarding contraband goods; prisoners with gang-related tattoos and finally police reports of gang activity on the streets. Other American research notes similar indicators of prison gang presence. For example, Rush, Stone and Wycoff (1996; cited in Stevens, 1997) found that high levels of drugs; extreme political thought; Satanism; assaults on prisoners and staff; intimidation of prisoner families and frequent requests for transfer and protective custody marked prison gang presence. Also, Stevens (1997) found that 73% of non-gang prisoners wanted a transfer and 87% would like to ask for protective custody but feared the ramifications.

However, Fong et al. (1991) note that the mere existence of these indicators does not necessarily imply prison-gang presence. For instance, prisoners request transfers for many reasons unrelated to prison gang activity. It is the range of activity and frequency with which the behaviours occur, that strongly suggests the presence of prison gangs. If,

for example, a number of events occur “frequently” or “very frequently”, or there is a sudden rise in incidence, then there should be concern that a prison gang may be operating.

The present study

In consideration of the methodological problems associated with prison gang research, it seemed that Fong et al.'s (1991) prison staff based model was a pragmatic way to begin exploring prison gang activity in England. This is due to the limitations of alternative sources of information. For instance, prison records may be erratic due to contradictory sources of information such as logbooks, landing books, observation books and adjudication data. In addition, if prison gangs are operating in English and Welsh prisons, then it is conceivable that prisoners may not offer meaningful information, due to fears of reprisal.

It was felt that as prison gangs are not an obvious entity in English prisons, prison staff might have different and/or less extensive experience of prison gangs than their American counterparts. Accordingly, variables based on knowledge of the English prison system and from American research subsequent to Fong et al. (e.g. Stevens, 1997) were added to Fong et al.'s (1991) model. For example, an item was created to assess whether staff felt that “groups of prisoners have more control over events in the prison”. This arose out of Stevens' (1997) findings that prison gangs flourish where they can control staff and other prisoners.

Also included, were items to assess the dominance of some prisoners by prisoner groups and the frequency of opposing groups' disputes. These help to indicate staff awareness of group membership (stage 3 of Buentello et al.'s, 1991 theory). If such groups exist, it would be helpful to know if they are based on racial, regional, ideological or other criteria (Camp & Camp, 1985 and Rush, Stone & Wycoff, 1996). Given that concerns for personal safety have been found to proliferate in English prisons (Adler, 1998), additional items were added in an attempt to assess the frequency of violence that leads to staff concerns for their own, or prisoners' safety.

To avoid experimental demand, where choice of words may bias participant response, the phrase "prison gang" was not used. This allowed the researchers to determine the parameters of the operational definition of a prison gang. In other words, although "groups" were referred to in the questionnaires, there was no reference made to the phrase "prison gang". Finally, for clarity, Fong et al.'s (1991) variable "prisoner possession of contraband" was split into 4 specific variables concerning possession of alcohol, drugs, phone cards and tobacco as these were considered to be the most common forms of contraband in English and Welsh prisons.

Design of the study

Prison gangs function on their power (Stevens, 1997) and can lead to a breakdown in order (Camp & Camp, 1985). Consequently, the general aim of this research was to assess prison staff's perceptions of prisoner power and control and to see if predictors of prison gang activity and effects could be found.

In order to be as representative as possible, a comparison was made between the reported levels of gang related activity in six classes of English prison:

1. Highest security (Category A) housing male prisoners whose escape would constitute a danger to the public, police, or the State.
2. Medium/high security (Category B) holding male prisoners not in need of highest security, but whose escape should be made as difficult as possible.
3. Medium/low security (Category C) for male prisoners considered to lack the will and/or the resources to escape, but who would abscond from open prisons.
4. Low security (Category D) generally housing male prisoners nearing the end of a long sentence or serving a very short sentence. Prisoners in this category are considered to be unlikely to attempt escape.
5. Young Offender Institutions (male offenders aged 15-21 years). This was based on research indicating that street gang members are frequently in their teens or early twenties (Thompson, 1995).
6. Female prisons (which are not classified for security and hold females from 15 years old). These were included due to the increased female involvement in gang activity on the streets (Campbell, 1984) and the observation that female prisoners are often group oriented (Giallombardo, 1966).

The hypotheses under investigation

- H1) When activities associated with prison gangs are reported as frequent events, staff will report that prisoner groups have more control over events in the prison than do the staff.
- H2) When activities associated with prison gangs are reported as frequent events, staff will report high levels of concern over the maintenance of order within the prison.
- H3) Higher levels of gang-like activities will be found in English male prisons where the officer/prisoner ratio is lowest. (That is, there will be an increase in reports of incidents that may be gang-related as the security level of the prison decreases.)
- H4) There will be fewer gang-related incidents reported in Female prisons than in male prisons.
- H5) Of all prisons, the highest frequencies of gang-related events will occur in Young Offender Institutions due to their double vulnerability to the importation of street gangs *and* the development of prison gangs.

METHODOLOGY

This was a quasi-experimental design using category of prison and age, gender, grade, and length of service as independent variables. The dependent variable was the frequency of gang related events reported by prison staff.

Participants

In total, 374 correctional personnel from 16 prisons responded. Of these, 283 were male and 83 were female with an age range of 21 - 60 years (there are approximately 21,500

male and 3,300 female prison staff in England and Wales). Two-hundred and sixty-two of the respondents were basic grade officers; 59 were senior officers; 16 were principal officers; 2 were Governor grades and 18 were non-officer prison personnel who had extensive and regular contact with prisoners. Participants were randomly selected from members of staff who had worked at each prison for at least 6 months. Length of service ranged from 6 months to 30 years.

Materials

The questionnaire used is available from the authors and was an extension of that used by Fong et al., (1991). Items included perceived levels of: physical assault by prisoners on staff and prisoners; verbal threats to staff; verbal and physical domination of prisoners by prisoner groups; the formation of prisoner cliques and groups formed along racial or regional lines; illicit possession of drugs, tobacco, phone cards and alcohol; prisoner membership of extreme political organisations (e.g. The British National Party) and attempts by such members to dominate prisoner groups; staff concerns for prisoner and staff safety; staff concerns over maintaining order and groups of prisoners exerting control within the prison; prisoner requests for transfers or protective custody; prisoners with gang-related tattoos; reports of extortion by prisoners' families; police reports of gang activities on the streets; and opposing groups of prisoners arguing over material possessions.

Procedure

The sixteen prisons were randomly selected to be representative of the entire English Prison estate and included: one Category A (highest security): five Category B (medium

to high security): four Category C (medium to low security): two Category D (open prisons - low security): two Young Offender Institutions (male offenders aged 15- 21): and two closed Female Prisons (female offenders 15 years and over). Where possible, the questionnaires were delivered by the first author. Where it was not possible for the researcher to directly approach staff, questionnaires were handed out on behalf of the researcher by Prison Service Employees. Because of this, all questionnaires distributed included a full briefing of the study's aims and explicit information about confidentiality, consent and participants' rights.

Fifty questionnaires were distributed at each participating prison. Having chosen to complete the questionnaires, each participant was asked to rate, on a Likert scale of, (1) Never, (2) Seldom, (3) Frequently, (4) Very frequently, how often each gang-related event occurred in the prison in which they were currently deployed. Reports of gang-related incidents in other prisons were not required, as these could impair the analysis of differences between categories. Participants were asked to return the questionnaires in postage paid envelopes supplied by the University of Kent. There were no features on the questionnaires or envelopes that would enable individual participant identification although a numeric system enabled identification of the prison in which they worked. In total, 800 questionnaires were given out and 374 completed questionnaires were returned in time for analysis, a response rate of 46.75%. Normally, one would predict that a design of this nature would have a response rate of anywhere between 10 and 40%. If broken down by class of prison, we can see that the response rate was marginally higher than would be expected: Forty-two percent of staff from of the category A, 47% from the category B, 57% from the category C, 30% from the category

D, 53% from the YOI and 39% from the women's' prisons responded. Only one member of staff refused to participate in this study. Analysis of variance indicated that no significant differences in response rate occurred between any categories of prison. It was thought that staff response rates might differ depending on whether the prison's staff or the researcher approached potential respondents. Analysis of variance indicated no difference between response rates of staff approached by the researcher and staff approached by the prison's staff.

RESULTS

The central concern of this study was prison staff perceptions of events that are possibly gang related. The incidents that occur most frequently in English prisons were assessed from the percentage of staff who rated an event as "frequent" or "very frequent." Table 1 shows the ten most frequent events where the highest ranking event was rated as "frequent" or "very frequent" by a minimum of 76% of staff in each category; the second highest $\geq 67\%$; the third highest $\geq 62\%$; the fourth highest $\geq 53\%$; the fifth $\geq 52\%$; the sixth $\geq 43\%$; the seventh $\geq 37\%$; the eighth $\geq 30\%$; the ninth $\geq 30\%$; and the lowest rank was $\geq 29\%$.

 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

We predicted that perceptions of high levels of gang related events would also indicate two key features of prison gang existence, namely a reduction of legitimate order and control within the prison (Stevens 1997). Therefore, if the variables used in this study are satisfactory measures of prison gang existence, they should be able to predict staff

perceptions that prisoner groups have more control than staff and of staff concerns over a loss of order. However, the variables devised by Fong et al. (1991) to indicate prison gang presence remain untested. Therefore, an hierarchical regression was selected to test the predictive power of these variables alone. Next, the variables devised for this study were added to the regression model to see if they raised the power of prediction or were surplus to requirement. As the number of participants in this study numbered 374 and the variables to be included in the analysis were 23, the use of a hierarchical regression was felt to be justified.

In the first regression, Fong et al.'s variables were assessed as predictors of staff perceptions that prisoner groups have more control in the prison than do staff (prisoners in control). Results showed that 9.56% of the variance in the levels of prisoners' control was predicted by Fong et al.'s (1991) variables (see Table 2).

 INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

In the second stage of the regression, all variables used in this study were entered, improving predictive power of "prisoners in control" and accounting for a further 4% of the variance (see Table 3). One significant predictor variable, "prisoners belonging to outside organisations" (e.g. The British National Party) was removed from the analysis as it was acting as a suppresser. However, its removal did not alter the significance level of the analysis. One variable, "concerns for staff safety" was a significant predictor of "prisoners in control" ($p < 0.01$) but its part correlation of 0.184 indicates removal of this variable would not make a difference to the analysis.

INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

The second hierarchical regression tested first Fong et al.'s (1991) variables as predictors of staff concerns over maintenance of order in the prison (officer order).

Results showed that Fong et al.'s model accounted for 25.6% of the variance (see Table 4). Of the four significant predictors, the part correlations of: prisoner/prisoner assaults, 0.138; emergence of cliques, 0.145; requests for protective custody, 0.109 and verbal threats to staff, 0.105 indicated that removal of the variables would not make a difference to the analysis.

INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

In the second stage of this hierarchical regression, the additional variables added to the model's power and increased the variance, accounting for a further 10%. (See Table 5).

Two variables - "opposing groups of prisoners arguing over material possessions" and "prisoners belonging to outside organisations" (e.g. The British National Party) were removed from the model, as they were suppressers. This did not alter the level of significance of the analysis. The part correlations of the significant variables were: prisoner/prisoner assaults, 0.091; staff concerns for prisoner safety, 0.117; staff concerns for staff safety, 0.211. Therefore, "staff concerns for staff safety" is the most important predictor of whether staff express concerns about order although it is only a modest relationship.

INSERT TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE

Differences between class of prison

An one-way Analysis of Variance compared the levels of gang-related events reported by staff in each category of prison, where the minimum score possible was 25 and the maximum score possible was 200. The ANOVA revealed differences between the categories of prison, $F(5, 370) = 9.145, P < 0.01$. Table 6 demonstrates the descriptive statistics used in this analysis and the officer/prisoner ratio for each category.

INSERT TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE

A post-hoc analysis using Tukey's H.S.D. elucidated differences between each category:

- Category A (High Security)

Respondents from the prison in this category perceived the lowest total number of prison-gang related incidents. This category differed from categories B, C and YOIs, but not from Category D prisons.

- Category B (Medium/High Security)

Staff in this category perceived more gang-related activity than did the Category A prison staff, but less than Category C staff. The total number of gang-related events reported did not significantly differ from Category D, YOI or Female prison staff reports.

- Category C (Medium/Low Security)

Participants in this category perceived the highest levels of gang-related events. With the exception of Young Offender Institutions, this difference was statistically significant.

- Category D (Male Open/Low Security)

Respondents perceived less gang-related activity than Category C, YOI and Female establishments. The amount of gang-related activity in this category did not differ from the Category A prison or from the number of gang-related events reported by Category B staff.

- Female Prisons (15 years of age and over)

Staff perceived less gang-related activity than in (male) Category C prisons only.

- Young Offender Institutions (Males between 15 and 21 years of age)

Staff in this category, perceived more gang-related incidents than did staff in the Category A and D prisons. However, the number of events in this category did not differ significantly from gang-related events reported in Categories B, C and Female prisons.

Participant characteristics

To examine the effects of personal characteristics on staff responses, a series of one-way Analyses of Variance were conducted to see if staff perceptions differed according to their gender, age, length of service or grade. These variables were each used as the independent variable and the number of gang-related events was used as the dependent variable for each analysis. No main or interaction effects were found in any analysis, indicating that personal characteristics did not influence staff responses to the questions.

DISCUSSION

Of the five hypotheses, two were supported, two were not and one was partially supported.

Hypothesis 1

“When activities associated with prison gangs are reported as frequent events, staff will report that prisoner groups have more control over events in the prison than do the staff.”

This prediction was supported. As expected, variables devised by Fong and Buentello (1991) predicted staff reports that groups of prisoners have more control over events than officers and the additional variables added to the predictive power. This supports American findings that activities associated with prison gangs leads to control over officers and other prisoners (Camp & Camp, 1985; Fong & Buentello, 1991; Stevens, 1997).

Hypothesis 2

“When activities associated with prison gangs are reported as frequent events, staff will report high levels of concern over the maintenance of order within the prison.”

This prediction was also supported. The variables devised by Fong et al. (1991) and those developed for this study were useful predictors of staff concerns that order may not be maintained within the prison.

Hypothesis 3

“Higher levels of activities that are possibly gang-related will be found in English male prisons where the officer/prisoner ratio is lowest. (That is, there will be an increase in reports of gang-related incidents as the security level of the prison decreases.)”

Only partial support was found for this prediction. The lowest levels of such events reported were in the Category A prison (High security) which has the highest officer: prisoner ratio. More gang-like events were reported by staff in Category B (High/medium security) institutions than Category A, but fewer than Category C (Medium/low security). These results were in line with the prediction and may indicate that higher staffing levels impede gang formation and/or activities. However, not consistent with the prediction, was the finding that Category D (male open prisons - Low security) reported fewer gang-like events than Category C prisons.

Despite the lower staff levels in Category D prisons, this is an unsurprising finding as it demonstrates that the prisoners classified as the lowest risk, are those perceived to be least involved in gang like activity. As noted earlier, Category D prisoners are usually serving short sentences, or nearing the end of long-term imprisonment. It is doubtful that any long-term prisoner, who had been a problematic prisoner, would be considered suitable for an open prison. This notion is supported by claims of over-secure classification (King & McDermott, 1995). If prisoners are over-classified by officials mindful of public disapproval following an escape, it is conceivable that only the most trustworthy will be incarcerated in open prisons.

In addition, the length of time prisoners are incarcerated in the Category D prison should be considered. Prisoners in open prisons may simply not have time to form cohesive and purposeful groups such as prison gangs within that particular institution. However, the time it takes to become part of a close-knit group may be mediated by a number of factors such as previous associations in prison(s) or in street gangs. It therefore seems more likely that the lower number of incidents reported by staff in category D institutions results from the selection of prisoners thought suitable for an open prison rather than the length of time spent in such prisons. This point indicates problems with Buentello and Fong's (1991) theoretical model. The model not only fails to indicate a period of time from the individual prisoner's initial imprisonment, to the emergence of the prison gang, it also fails to consider mediating factors such as previous associations which may accelerate the gang membership process.

It may be worth noting that a further explanation exists for the low levels of gang related events reported by category D staff. The exceptionally low number of officers in an open prison, the relatively short terms of incarceration within them and the high numbers of prisoners who participate in pre-release work schemes and so on, may mean that staff are simply less aware of prisoner activity than in the other prisons. In other words, there may be more gang-like activity and indicators of such activity than staff realise. This observation may mean that due to the differences in regime between open and closed prisons, comparisons are not really possible. However, this is intuitively less likely than the earlier explanation proffered.

Hypothesis 4

“There will be fewer gang-like incidents reported in Female prisons than in Male prisons.”

Here, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. There were fewer gang-like events reported by staff in Female prisons than in Category C prisons, but these levels did not significantly differ from those in any other category. This seems to add to the picture of increasing female involvement in street gang activity argued by Campbell (1984).

Whether the events reported by staff in this category are associated with the female prisoner “families” described by Giallombardo (1966), or whether there are other groups in female prisons involved in events that are possibly gang-related is unclear.

The previous neglect of female prisons within prison gang research could therefore be characterised as complacent if not misguided.

Hypothesis 5

“Of all prisons, the highest frequencies of gang-like events will occur in Young Offender Institutions.”

The fifth prediction was based on the notion that Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) were doubly vulnerable to prison gangs due to the likelihood of adolescent street gang members being incarcerated together and concomitant counterpart institutional gangs developing (Knox, 1993). This prediction was not upheld. Although there were more gang-like events in YOIs than in the Category A prison or open prisons, levels of prison gang events did not significantly differ from categories B, C or Female prisons.

There could be many reasons for this result. For instance, albeit adolescent members predominate in street gangs (e.g. Thompson, 1995), they may not be imprisoned during their adolescence. Teenager street gang members may avoid imprisonment at all or at least until they are over 21. Therefore, they may be imprisoned at an age higher than indicated by our prediction. Alternatively, despite rulings to the contrary, in England there are still youths incarcerated in adult male prisons. It is possible that sentences associated with the worst street gang activity are of a sufficient severity to result in the young people concerned being held in adult institutions (with obvious potential knock-on effects within those prisons).

Furthermore, the time issue that impairs Buentello et al.'s (1991) theory of prison gang development may also come into play here. It is possible that young offenders, disposed to prison gang membership, may take some time to organise themselves into powerful groups, during which time members either reach 21 or are released. This may also explain the peak of gang-like events in Category C prisons. For instance, research indicates that self reported persistent offenders at age 25 were usually convicted during adolescence (Farrington & West, 1990). In other words, it is feasible that Category C prisoners may have a number of past institutional associates with whom they later form prisoner groups. This would conform to the process of “Juvenilization” (Stevens, 1997). In this way, the combination of past associations and Medium/low security may facilitate prison gang development.

Extent of gang-related activity

It is clear that high levels of drug possession; groups formed by race; requests for transfers; prisoner/prisoner assaults; and groups formed from regional origins occur across all prisons in this study, all events argued by American researchers to be gang-related (e.g. Fong & Buentello 1991). However, interpretations of these frequencies can only be tentative. For instance, high levels of racial or regional prisoner groups may be consistent with American findings that racial or regional criteria delineate prison gangs (e.g. Camp & Camp, 1985). In turn this may indicate that, in English prisons, many prisoner groups conform to at least stage 3 of Buentello et al.'s (1991) theory, as prisoners and staff note their presence. However, these groups could also reflect innocuous forms of social support. In short, it does not follow that the high levels of negative activities are related to groups simply because they are visible.

Similarly, the high levels of requests for transfer do not necessarily imply prisoners want to leave the prison due to intimidation or physical assaults from other prisoners. There are many reasons why prisoners want transfers. The most obvious being that they want to be closer to home. The highest number of transfer requests being found in female prisons supports this contention. As there are few female prisons in England, many women will be incarcerated a long distance from their families. Also, female prisoners are more likely than male prisoners to be the main caregivers for dependants. Hence proximity to home may be that much more important to them. Similarly, the high levels of prisoner/prisoner assaults do not necessarily indicate gang activity. In the confined atmosphere of a prison, there are going to be altercations leading to assaults. Therefore, the high levels of assaults may result from individual prisoners' disputes and not systematic prison gang activity.

However, if we consider the events identified in terms of possible gang behaviour, it is possible to characterise the categories of prison not only by the overall levels of gang-like activity but also in terms of the specific frequencies of each type of gang-related event. For example, the highest levels of covert prison gang activities (e.g. extortion and secret racial groupings) were reported in Category C prisons. Whereas the highest levels of overt gang-related behaviours, such as verbal and physical domination of groups by other groups, verbal threats to staff and opposing groups arguing over possessions, were found in YOI's.

These observations may indicate that prisoners in Category C establishments are more “sophisticated” in their gang-related activities than prisoners in YOIs. This could be due to prisoner groups in Category C being better organised in their criminal behaviour. This category also demonstrated the highest levels of drugs (shared with Category B); requests for protective custody; membership of outside organisations; domination of prisoner groups by members of such outside organisations and the second highest levels of prisoner/prisoner assaults and requests for transfers. These observations replicate Rush, Stone and Wycoff's (1996) findings that American prison gangs are defined by drugs, extreme political thought, assaults on prisoners and staff, intimidation of prisoners' families, requests for transfers and protective custody. These gang-like events seem to indicate that Category C prisoner groups may be predatory, conforming to at least stage 4 of Buentello and Fong's (1991) theory of prison gang development. We would therefore conclude that Category C, Medium to low security institutions give the greatest cause for concern regarding prison gang presence.

As expected, staff from the High security, Category A prison did not report the highest levels of any gang-related event. Similarly, male open prisons were delineated solely by the highest levels of alcohol. Given the open conditions and relatively unrestricted movements between an open prison and the surrounding community, this is hardly surprising and probably not indicative of gang related activity. The most reports of drug possession and the highest level of assaults on staff were shared between Category B and Category C prisons. Finally, the most requests for transfer and the highest levels of prisoner groups controlling more events than officers were reported by staff from female prisons. However, the latter may be due as much to the physical structure of female prisons as to gang-related activities. As noted by Kelley (1970), female prisoners are housed in units designed to act as “family homes” in a “neighbourhood”, which may make supervision by prison staff more difficult, giving prisoners more autonomy and control over events.

The results of this study cannot be considered as conclusive evidence that prison gangs do or do not exist in English prisons. In the absence of prior research into prison gangs in English prisons, we cannot set our findings within an appropriately dynamic context. Also, the theory of prison gangs, (Buentello et al., 1991) needs further expansion. It does not currently address the time-span of prison gang aetiology nor does it offer any explanation of why such a low percentage of prisoners are gang members (2% -Camp & Camp, 1985). Given the advantages of gang membership indicated by many American researchers (e.g. Fong & Buentello 1991; Huff 1990; Buentello et al., 1991), it is surprising that more prisoners are not gang members. Perhaps prison gang membership

is not only founded on commonalties such as race or political persuasion, but also on commonality of inclination. For example, those prisoners who wish to continue drug dealing may ally themselves with like-minded individuals who also happen to share other commonalties. In this way the emphasis placed on race, politics and religious inclination may be secondary to shared involvement in criminal activity. Accordingly, Fong et al.'s, (1991) model offers only a peripheral explanation of what draws prisoners to one another in order to form alliances. Finally, the model also fails to consider the role that previous incarceration may play in the development of prisoner groups.

In terms of the present study, the measures used depict the type of events that are likely to be salient (e.g. assaults on staff) but not necessarily the “norm”. Perceptions of frequency may be influenced by the magnitude of the event to the individual respondent.

Also, the methodology was wholly dependent on prison staff having knowledge of events. It is feasible that a sizeable number of events were not reported due to staff ignorance of many incidents. Furthermore, although staff characteristics did not influence the responses, it is possible that structural, cultural or environmental differences between prisons did have effects. For example, what is considered to be an offence in one prison may be seen as negligible in another. This is particularly relevant in terms of the classification of incidents such as physical assault.

In addition, low staff morale and issues with management may have influenced respondents' reports of prisoner behaviours. For instance, if officers believe that levels

of staff are inadequate, they may report prisoners as having more control within the prison in order to retaliate against a perceived shortcoming in management strategies. However, it could equally be the case that staff shortages facilitate the control prisoner groups exert within the prison. Similarly, staff morale may diminish as prisoners become more challenging due to the levels of power and control they have achieved within the prison. Further research is needed in order to clarify these complex relationships. As it stands, the measures used in this preliminary study assess only the extent of events that *may* be related to prison gangs. We cannot as yet, make the assumption that English prisons have a gang problem.

Nevertheless, results from the bullying literature show that many prisoners are victimised and experience threatening behaviour from other prisoners (e.g. O'Donnell & Edgar 1989). As the theory of prison gang development (Buentello et al. 1991) notes, prisoners who feel threatened may band together in order to be protected from more predatory prisoners. It cannot be assumed that groups formed for self-protection remain innocuous entities looking only to prevent victimisation. It is quite feasible that at least some such groups will evolve into more predatory entities as described by Buentello et al. (1991). As mentioned earlier, this may have implications for the success of bullying interventions. In order to successfully treat bullying behaviours, we need to know the influences on the behaviour of individuals involved in such activity. The impact of group membership on the individual may be a facilitator for bullying behaviour and will need to be taken into account if programmes are to be successful in addressing bullying activity. We also cannot be certain whether the behaviours reported in this study, or indeed in the wider bullying literature, result from individual or group activity.

In light of this, future research should survey prisoner populations to see if their reports support staff perceptions. This may clarify whether the levels of events reported by prison staff in this study result from an objective assessment of prisoner behaviour or from more subjective considerations such as staff morale. In addition, the function of prisoner groups needs to be explored in order to understand more of the role such groups play in the behaviours associated with prison gangs. We also need to know the role of group affiliation in prisoners' subsequent behaviour. Does becoming a group member result in an adjustment of a prisoner's behaviour in favour of or against criminal activity within the prison? It is possible that prisoners who admit to bullying behaviour may behave in such a way due to conformity to some form of group norm and that prisoners perceive 'going along with the group' as preferable to being vulnerable and alone in what can be a dangerous environment. Furthermore, the issue of "Juvenilization" and its relationship to prison gangs (Stevens, 1997) could be an avenue for future study. This might help to clarify whether attachment processes lead to prisoner group formation in subsequent prisons. Similarly, female prison gang-related events need further clarification, as the reportedly high level of prisoners in control in female prisons may well be indicative of intimidation by prisoner cliques.

Nevertheless, the evidence thus far does seem to indicate that prison gangs may exist or be in developmental process in English prisons. The evidence from America clearly indicated an attraction that such groups hold for prisoners. When this is considered not only in terms of bullying behaviour, but also in terms of the drug levels in English prisons noted in this study and elsewhere (Edgar & O'Donnell, 1998), it makes the

prospect of prison gang development more likely. Where there are drugs, there will be financial profit. For the prisoner who uses drugs, the group supplying them will offset what may be a modern day “pain of imprisonment” -drug deprivation. Seen in these terms, it seems clear that as long as English prisons have high levels of drugs, they will be vulnerable to negative activities related to the drug trade such as violence and intimidation. In particular, they will be vulnerable to prison gangs.

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