

The Gang Influence on New Zealand Prisons

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The findings and views of this research are not those of Corrections or the Borrin Foundation.

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Introduction

Gangs have been a significant presence in New Zealand prisons since the 1970s, and this paper seeks to outline the fundamental impact they have had on prison culture and the challenges they create for prison administration. It also examines how gangs operate in prisons, as well as entry into, and exit from, these groups. Finally, it looks at measures that may be useful to consider around gang management.

In reading this report, it is important to acknowledge that different New Zealand prisons maintain different cultures and operations. This is due to a number of factors including their security classifications, their management structure, and even their architecture. Even within the same prison these factors and others, will mean different units such as high security units, low security units and voluntary segregation units, will be fundamentally different to one another. Furthermore, as will be shown, the culture of any one unit can change quickly with the addition or removal of a single influential prisoner or a change in the balance of gang numbers. The findings of this research are, therefore, necessarily general, and only refer to these differences when they are fundamental to a specific finding or point.

Executive summary

Gang rules and the hierarchies of prison society

- There is an informal hierarchy among prisoners that generally places gang members at its apex.
- The prison hierarchy consists of:
 - › Tier one – Gang members
 - › Tier two – Civilians in Good standing
 - › Tier three – Civilian underclass
 - › Tier four – Pariahs
- There are three primary rules in prisoner culture: no narking, no covert stealing (tea-leaving), and a total repudiation of child sex offenders.
- As the strongest groups in prison, gangs take the role of enforcers of informal rules and codes, which are often constructed with their own interests in mind.

Gangs and the prison economy

- There is an active trade of many goods in prison within an informal market, both legitimate and illicit.
- Gangs control this trade by either being the principals in it or by offering protection around it. Prisoners who bring in drugs and other contraband are usually expected to give a large portion of their goods to the gangs in their unit.
- Many gang members extort commodities from other prisoners for either on-selling or personal use.
- Key commodities are nicotine lozenges and high-protein food items such as chicken meals, in part because the supply of these items is limited.

Gang violence

- Participants reported that fights and assaults are common in prison, and that most go unreported to staff. Gangs are a disproportionate driver of this violence.
- While fights are not unusual, gangs generally seek to minimise larger gang-on-gang conflicts in prison, and groups that are in conflict outside of prison maintain a state of largely peaceful but often tense co-existence within prison walls.
- External gang conflicts can make their way into the prison if they are particularly serious or if people close to gang prisoners are hurt.
- Gang conflicts can arise from seemingly trivial breaches of etiquette between gang members due to gangs' unwritten codes of behaviour, which mean that members are unable to back down from conflict and must support each other regardless of the circumstances.
- One-on-one fights are a key tool for dispute resolution among prisoners, particularly between gang members, and may be used to defuse gang tensions before they escalate. The fights are said to follow a set of unwritten rules, although these rules are often overlooked.

Gang recruitment in prison

- The most commonly reported reasons for joining gangs in prison are protection, access to goods, status, and brotherhood.
- Arrival in the prison, and to a lesser extent in a new unit, are key junctures for gang recruitment. This is when fear of violence and extortion is at its greatest, and gangs exploit this fear to draw new recruits in.
- While some of the benefits of gang membership are real, often they do not match the realities. Many gang members regarded membership as more stressful than remaining neutral, due to the importance of maintaining the gang's status and protecting their own status within that gang.
- New membership is often solidified by gang tattooing, which is a significant issue.

Gang exit

- Gang exit is very difficult in prison due to the difficulty of avoiding gang members in mainstream prison units.
- Entering voluntary segregation is a practical option for those seeking to exit gangs, but carries significant social stigma.
- Direct support for gang exit from prison staff is limited.

Addressing the problem of gangs in prison

- Staff acknowledge the serious issues that gang cause in New Zealand prisons, and have a realistic outlook on their approaches.
- Balancing gang numbers in a unit appears to be the best meaning of controlling gangs, as is quickly isolating disrupters.
- Greater staff training around gangs and their control is important, but perhaps the most significant issue is creating greater consistency in staff treatment of gang and non-gang prisoners.
- The creation and sharing of intelligence between different agencies is important for gang control, and appears to be a strength of Corrections.
- Efforts at reducing gang entry and encouraging gang exit should be a priority of prison management.

Contents

Acknowledgements	1
Introduction	2
Executive summary	3
Background and current understandings	7
A brief history of gangs in New Zealand	7
Gangs in prisons in New Zealand	10
Recent events	13
Existing research	17
The problems of gangs in prison	17
Gang recruitment in prison	18
Controlling gangs in prison	19
Gangs and rehabilitation programmes	21
Research methods, ethics and limitations	24
Ethical considerations	25
Categorising gangs	25
Participant demographics	27
Limitations	29
Results	30
Gangs and the rules and hierarchies of prison society	30
Prison hierarchy	31
Evaluating and prescribing status	32
The rules of prison society	33
Narking	33
Tea-leafing	34
Child sex offenders	35
Enforcement of the prison code	35
Gang organisation	36
Gangs and the prison economy	36

Legitimately accessed goods	37
Drugs and other contraband	38
Bringing contraband into the prison	39
Gangs' involvement in the prison economy	40
Debts	43
Gang violence	44
The use of violence in gangs	44
Gangs and violence in prison	45
Gangs and assaults on prison staff	50
Inter-gang violence and gang influence on violence in prison	52
The influence of gang conflicts outside prison	53
Resolving disputes in prison	54
Gang recruitment in prison	56
The process of joining a gang	57
Gang recruitment in prison	57
Reasons for joining gangs in prison	58
Resistance to recruitment	61
Entry to prison as a key time for gang recruitment	62
Tattooing: the mark of social control	62
The disadvantages of gang membership.....	64
Gang exit	65
Leaving gangs in prison	65
Prison support for gang exit	66
Addressing the problems of gangs in prison	69
Controlling gangs in prison	70
Reducing gang numbers in prison	74
Discussion	78
References	81

Background and current understandings

A brief history of gangs in New Zealand

Gangs in New Zealand prisons are generally not ‘prison gangs’ as such. Barring a few exceptions (e.g. the Fourth Reich, which appeared in Christchurch Prison in the early 1990s), the vast majority of gangs in this country have formed outside of prison, and their structures and behaviours as a whole are not designed around imprisonment. The gangs that exist in prisons are groupings of membership of larger groups that have adapted their activities to the exigencies of life behind bars. For this reason, it is important to understand the nature of New Zealand’s gangs in general before discussing them in a prison context.

The first suggestions of a ‘gang problem’ emerged in New Zealand in the late 1950s with incipient gangs forming out of the flashily dressed ‘bodgies’ and leather-clad, motorcycle riding ‘milkbar cowboys’. These groups, which formed in the swiftly growing cities, were overwhelmingly Pakeha and often indistinguishable from the wider teenage trends of the day. Gangs such as these tended to rise up and fade away quickly.

The fleeting existence of New Zealand gangs changed when a young American came to New Zealand and formed a chapter of the Hells Angels in 1960. It was just the fourth chapter of the group anywhere in the world and the first outside of California. This early development was pivotal to the development of gangs in New Zealand as we know them today.

The Hells Angels provided a template for New Zealand gangs and that included a distinctive common identifier, by way of the back patch, as well as a hierarchical management structure including a president, a vice president, a sergeant at arms and a secretary/treasurer.

This form and structure was adopted by other motorcycle groups (identifying as ‘outlaw’ motorcycle clubs) and, in a situation seemingly unique to New Zealand, by the youthful street gangs (such as Black Power and the Mongrel Mob) as well. The patches ensured that gang members could be readily identified, and the management structure allowed the gangs in New Zealand to become, to varying degrees, well organised.

Given this, whereas gangs in the 1950s had but a fleeting existence, gangs that formed in the 1960s and 1970s had a better chance of longevity. Indeed, the majority of patched gangs that dominated – and in many cases continue to dominate – the New Zealand gang landscape, formed during this time.

Despite the gangs’ durability, high membership turnover kept the groups youthful. This changed in the late 1970s and accelerated in the 1980s when the New Zealand economy began to sour and unemployment became a significant issue. Work opportunities, which appear to have been a way by which gang members could reconnect with the mainstream, disappeared. Consequently, gang membership became more permanent.

During this time patched gangs became, to use Hagedorn’s (2005: p.162) term, ‘institutionalised’. These gangs became deeply embedded within communities, providing social/psychological benefits for their members as well as more palpable functions such as a clubhouse (with recreational facilities including a bar) and social activities for members and associates.

During the 1990s and 2000s, new gangs became particularly evident. Firstly, skinhead groups and then LA-style street gangs, appeared on the scene.

Skinhead gangs became most apparent in the mid-1990s, when the New Zealand economy was inching out of its lowest ebb. The skins flourished for a short time, largely in the more Pakeha South Island, and were bolstered by certain international trends and media. One of these gangs, the Fourth Reich – which as noted was started in Christchurch Prison – was the first gang known to have formed entirely within a prison in New Zealand and then existed on the outside as well. As the economy strengthened, these white power groups tended to fade away, robbed of a supply of young, disenfranchised Pakeha youth, and finding that the wider community was generally intolerant of overt racism. Far-right groups outside of prison have seen some growth in recent years in New Zealand, but these are generally middle-class oriented groups that have little in common with the working-class skinheads of the 1990s, and do not generally fall into the category of what would normally be considered gangs (Gilbert & Elley, 2019).

In the 2000s, the gang scene changed once again with the advent of LA-style street gangs. Although evident in the 1990s, the issue of LA-style street gangs – such as those styling themselves after LA's Crips and Bloods – became a significant social concern in the 2000s. These young gangs were similar to the groups of the 1950s, inasmuch as they were often indistinguishable from wider teen fashion trends and they tended to have a fleeting existence. Early on, some members of these young gangs graduated to the traditional patched street gangs like the Mongrel Mob and Black Power, with whom they often had familial ties (Ministry of Social Development, 2008). These new gangs now have a significant presence in New Zealand prisons and some – most notably the Killer Beez – have shown significant evolutionary traits of the more sophisticated gangs¹, and have since gone on to adopt back patches.

LA-style gangs appear also to have driven the formation of new gangs in prison, with one notable example being the Neighbourhood Crips (known more commonly by their acronym NHC), which formed in Christchurch Men's Prison in the 2000s and has since established a presence in the community as well. LA-style gangs' more flexible membership processes and informal organisational structures appear likely to be a significant factor in this regard.

These groups, largely unstudied in New Zealand,² now represent a significant part of the gang scene. Whereas traditional gangs, in their formative years, sought to 'drop out' of society, LA-style street gangs are driven by a hyper-materialism that has led to a greater degree of profit-driven crime. Furthermore, without the guidance of older members they are potentially less restrained and predictable than those youths joining patched gangs. This has posed problems for prison authorities, particularly with regard to violence.

In the 1990s and 2000s, membership in the traditional patched gangs began to calcify and decline, as their aging membership formed something of a 'generational barrier' to rebellious youth who in the past had rejuvenated them (Gilbert, 2013). The older gangs had lost touch with the fashions and attitudes of the current generation of youths, and this was made worse by a culture of long and punitive prospecting periods, which kept those that did express an interest from joining the gangs. This in part resulted in the proliferation of LA-style street gangs during the same period.

¹ This is almost certainly due to the influence of the Tribesmen MC to which the Killer Beez are something of a 'feeder' group.

² We note the early work of Eggleston (2000) "New Zealand Youth Gangs: Key Findings and Recommendations from an Urban Ethnography." *Social Policy Journal of New Zealand*(No.14): 148-163.

This tide began to turn around in 2011, however, with the arrival of the Australian Rebels MC. The Rebels gained a foothold initially by patching over many members of the Tribesmen, and quickly established new chapters around the country. In an effort to build strength quickly, they offered much reduced prospecting periods, in some cases none at all, and found that there were in fact many younger men who were interested in joining patched gangs if the conditions were right.

The Rebels quickly gained a conspicuous presence within the New Zealand gang scene, which in turn forced many of the older gangs to begin similar patterns of heavy recruiting in order to maintain their position. The resulting influx of younger members into the scene had a snowballing effect, quickly reversing much of the aging and loss of momentum that had taken place in the previous two decades, and driving an increase in gang numbers that has continued to the present day.

More recently, the gang scene in New Zealand has been further added to, and modified by, Australia's deportation policy, which began in 2014. Section 501 of Australia's Migration Act allows for permanent residents of Australia to have their visas cancelled if they fail a "character test", the criteria for which include having been sentenced to 12 months or more of prison, and membership in a criminal group. Almost 3000 '501s' have been deported from Australia to New Zealand since then, many of whom are members of Australian gangs.

Gangs often entrench themselves in members' lives by providing practical support and a sense of brotherhood during times of struggle (Gilbert, 2013), and the same has occurred for many 501s, who have found themselves with little support when sent to New Zealand. This has added to some of the rise in gang numbers New Zealand has experienced in recent times.

The most obvious example of the 501 influence, though, is the establishment of two new gangs - the Mongols and the Comancheros - by 501 deportees. This has created a significant "internationalisation" of the New Zealand gang scene (Bradley, 2020), and a part of this is a more sophisticated drive toward organised crime, evidenced by significant drug busts and gang conflicts involving these groups. Significant numbers of the leadership of these groups have entered New Zealand prisons.

Because they represent a relatively recent change, the influence of which is yet to be seen in full, the impact of the 501 deportees on New Zealand's gang scene is still largely unstudied.

Overall, the gang scene in New Zealand is as strong now as it has been since the mid-1990s. While no older comparative data exist, gang membership statistics maintained by the NZ Police's Gang Harm Insights Centre show a significant rise in gang membership since 2016, which is when recording of those data began. Total membership increased from 4361 in February 2016 to 8607 in February 2023. It must be noted, however, that because the list of gang members is maintained by Police without the support of gang members, there are a number of reasons why numbers may be inflated, such as the difficulty of knowing when an individual has left their gang and needs to be removed from the list. The National Gang List (NGL) is considered by Police to be an intelligence tool rather than an accurate measure of gang membership, and Police Commissioner Andrew Coster noted in 2021 that "it's easy to get on the list [but] it's very hard to get off" (*Newshub* 18-05-2021).

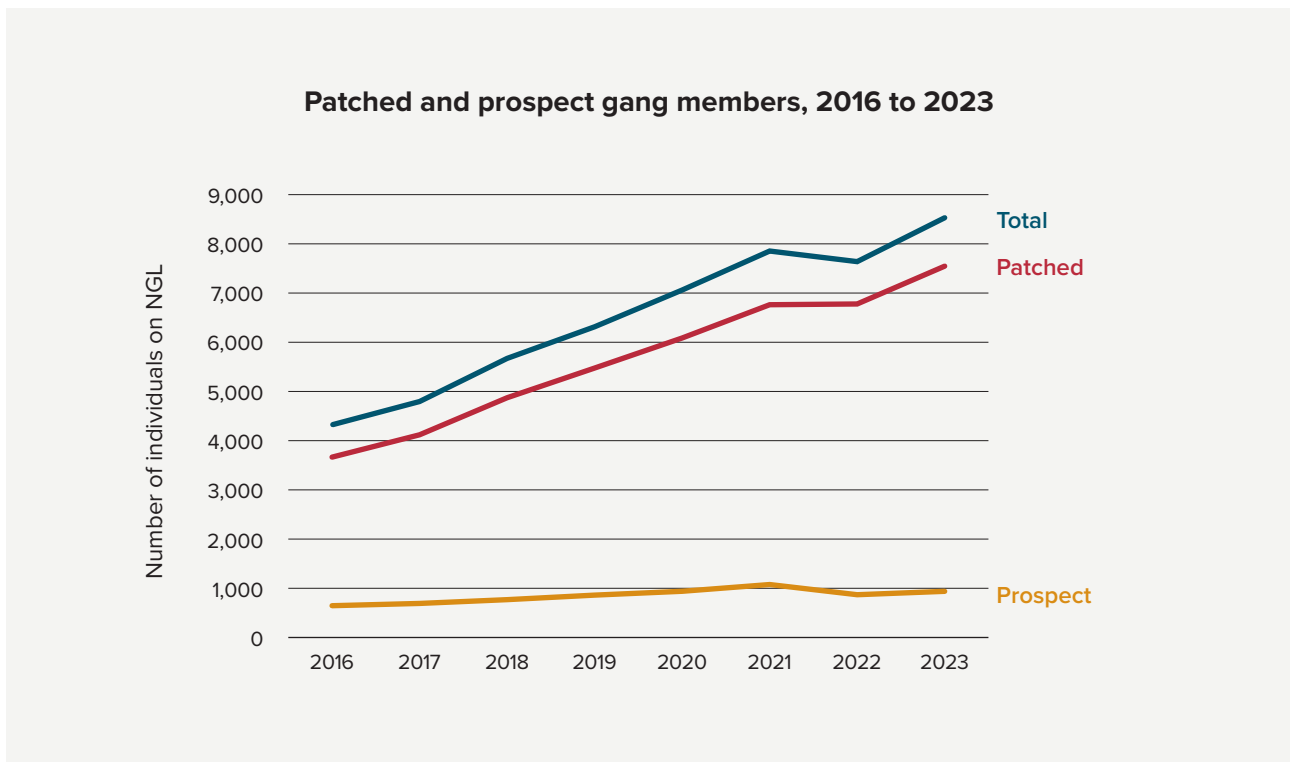


Figure 1: National Gang List (NGL) membership numbers, February 2016 – February 2023.

Gangs in prisons in New Zealand

Gangs were first mentioned in prison management reports in the second half of 1978 as an emerging source of problems for prison staff (Meek, 1992: p.263). One year later, paedophile and murderer Keith Ross Hall was killed in what is thought to be New Zealand's first jail homicide, a murder believed to have been committed by Head Hunter gang member Cedric James, although he was acquitted by a jury (Newbold, 2007: p.80). The following year, *The Truth* (4-11-1980) newspaper ran a story with the headline, "Gangs Running Jail, Says Angry Warder". It was the beginning of many such media reports as the growing number of incarcerated gang members fundamentally changed the nature of New Zealand's prisons.

As noted, most gangs in New Zealand's prisons did not form there, but migrated from the streets. This is in stark contrast to the US experience (Irwin, 1980: pp.190-191; Crouch and Marquart, 1989: pp.203-205). Prison census data recorded in 1989 reported 339 gang members in New Zealand prisons from a total muster of 2594 prisoners, or just less than 12 percent (Braybrook, 1990: p.64). This is substantially higher than the three percent said to be incarcerated in US prisons in the mid-1980s (Ralph, Hunter et al., 1996: p.124), but significantly lower – as we will see – than the percentage in New Zealand prisons today.

Although in the 1980s gang members made up a minority of prisoners, their effect on prison culture was dramatic and lasting. Previously, some New Zealand prisons had leaders, often known as 'kingpins', who, among other things, maintained a code of prisoner solidarity (Newbold, 1989: p.288; Newbold, 2007: p.184). Newbold (2013, p.114) described the prisoner culture like this:

There was no prisoner hierarchy to speak of; in fact, prisoners actively rejected it, denouncing inmates who attempted to dominate others as "policemen" or "screws." Thus, bullying ("standover") was scorned...'

The inmate code banned gang identification and new prisoners were told, “In here you’re not a gang member. You’re an inmate.” (*ibid* p.115). This part of the code worked against internal tensions: “The atmosphere within the cell blocks was, for the most part, relaxed, cooperative, and benign, with the adage ‘do your own lag’ frequently repeated” (*ibid*).

With the surge in gang members being incarcerated in the 1980s, however, prisoners began to organise around gang allegiances. New Zealand prison expert Greg Newbold has noted that from the 1980s, many prisoners had two sets of loyalties: those to the prisoner group and those to a gang. But when the expectations of these groups came into conflict, general prisoner interests became subordinated: “The imperative of gang dominance supersedes all others” (Newbold, 1989: p.289). Nari Felix, a leader of the country’s oldest surviving street gang, the King Cobras, has described the transformation from prisoner to a gang culture thus:

In jail we made friends from all over the country and although they weren’t in our group they were still ‘the boys’. But now a lot of these old friends are with other prominent groups – like Black Power or the Mob – and for me it’s sad to see because in the old days, even though they weren’t KCs, we were all one (Payne and Quinn, 1997: pp.102-103).

This shift in prison culture mirrored events in the US, where gangs had a similar influence in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Irwin, 1980: pp.192-206; Crouch and Marquart, 1989: p.203), when ‘doing your own time’ became ‘doing gang time’ (Jacobs, 1977: p.157).

The consequences of this transformation in New Zealand were both numerous and enduring and not only affected life inside prison but also the gangs generally. The violence and animosity between the gangs that existed in outside communities began to be replicated within prisons. During the 1980s there were just 15 major gang disturbances in New Zealand prisons, with the majority involving the Mongrel Mob (Meek, 1992: p.261), but the relatively small number belies the constant tensions and frictions that existed inside some of New Zealand’s jails.

Within Auckland Prison (Paremoremo), New Zealand’s only maximum-security facility, where the percentage of gang prisoners was significantly higher than average in the mid-1980s (Newbold, 1989: p.289), there was a “massive” increase in suicides and self-mutilation (Meek, 1992: p.274). Between 1978 and 1984 numbers in protective custody doubled (Newbold, 2013, p.115). It is likely that these increases were a consequence of the breakdown of prisoner culture and the rise of gang related intimidation and stress.

With its high proportion of gang prisoners, these were not the only concerns at Paremoremo. As was the case in certain US jails (Blomberg and Lucken, 2000: p.131), the ascendance of gang culture in Paremoremo upset the reciprocity of power between staff and prisoners as gangs sought to control not just prisoner culture but the institution itself. The problems began in maximum-security toward the middle of the 1980s when the number of Mongrel Mob prisoners grew substantially and created a gang imbalance. On Christmas Eve 1984, a group of Head Hunters went on the offensive and attacked the Mongrel Mob. One prisoner was stabbed in the chest, puncturing his lung, while another was stabbed in the chest and stomach. A third gang member was knocked to the ground, repeatedly kicked and stomped on the head and struck with a “wooden object” (*NZ Herald*, 26.12.1984). All three hospitalised men were Mongrel Mob members (Newbold, 1989: p.290). Police called the conflict a “power struggle” (*NZ Herald*, 26.12.1984). Meek believed the incident had “a greater impact than any other in the 20 year history of this prison” (Meek, 1992: p.264) and Newbold described it as a “turning point for prison administration” (Newbold, 2007: p.186).

As a direct consequence of the violence, prison management separated the main gangs into different cellblocks. Before that, the blocks had been integrated during work and recreation, but subsequently such contact was banned. The Head Hunters were placed in A block, the Mongrel Mob in B block, and the Black Power in C block. This solution, however, appears to have created as many problems as it solved. Because of the high number of Mob members in the prison, their dominance in B block was considerable, and 30 of the 43 prisoners belonged to the gang (Meek, 1992: p.264). The Mob seized the opportunity presented to them, and began charging non-Mob prisoners rent for their cells and helping themselves to personal items like televisions and radios. They forced prisoners to run Mob errands, collect their meals and clean the gang's cells. One Paremoremo prison officer said,

We would see a guy collect his canteen [weekly allowance of cigarettes and other items] and take them straight to the Mob leader, but you can't do anything if he denies he is under threat (NZ Herald, 19.8.1988).

The Mob had virtually complete control of the block. In an attempt to remedy the situation, in early 1987 Mob numbers were restricted to twelve in B block while problem members were placed in disciplinary segregation - D block. The Mob resented not having their own block like the other gangs and took up a hunger strike before embarking on a campaign of attacking guards. The attacks led to prison officers taking the unprecedented action of putting a vote of no confidence in the prison's superintendent (Meek, 1992: p265). Even with the lifting of the B block restrictions, the Mob continued to agitate as they sought the establishment of a committee to look at their grievances. It became known to prison staff that the gang planned to take hostages in order to achieve their goals. The response from prison management was to transfer some Mob members out of the prison while the rest were placed in disciplinary segregation in D block. This situation caused the Mob members in the segregation block to disrupt the prison in any way they could; refusing to take part in work details and physical recreation, and throwing about litter and excrement (Meek, 1992: p265). Outside the prison, Mob members set up a protest camp for three months until the Minister of Justice, Geoffrey Palmer, pending a report into the whole issue, appointed a temporary complaints conciliator – something prison staff threatened to quit over (NZ Herald, 27.8.1988). Palmer's actions were enough to quell the protest, and under a new superintendent, Max Hindmarsh, the separation of prisoners based on gang affiliation ceased (Newbold, 2007: p.187). Nevertheless, the treatment of gangs in prisons was less do with reforming gang prisoners and more about the pressing issue of maintaining control.

As evidenced by the case in Paremoremo in the 1980s, when one gang becomes too big or powerful, negative consequences ensue for the running of the institution as well as for the welfare of other prisoners. This is something that is recognised by prison staff today (Gilbert & Newbold, 2019).

But it is not just in crisis situations that gang influences create problems in prison. Another issue is the recruitment of previously unaffiliated prisoners, into gangs. This destabilises prison equilibrium and makes it difficult for management to predict where future tensions might occur.

Historically, problems in prison can also influence incidents on the outside, and vice versa. For example, when a member of the 45s, an outlaw motorcycle club based in Auckland, was assaulted by Black Power members in Mt Eden Prison in 1988, his efforts to 'back up' (seek redress or revenge) were difficult due to the fact the jail was largely controlled by the large street gang. Instead, outside jail walls, members of the 45s abducted a Black Power member and beat him unconscious in retaliation (NZ Herald, 20.9.1988). More common, however, is the reverse situation, whereby tensions that have occurred between gangs on the street spill over into the jails. This remains a significant issue today.

Having learned from these experiences, prisons shifted to being run as neutral environments, with gang numbers dispersed throughout the prison wherever possible. This remains largely the case in the present, although some high-security units use a single-gang approach.

A further policy adopted by prisons in the late 1980s to ameliorate gang violence was the banning of gang-related insignia or identifying symbols (Meek, 1992: p.270). Although a sound policy, it nevertheless had unintended outcomes. Although prison guards could confiscate gang drawings and the like, tattoos were harder to control. It was within the confines of prison that gang facial tattooing first became popular in New Zealand, a practice now common among numerous gangs.

RECENT EVENTS

Two relatively recent events underline the continued importance of gangs as an important administrative issue in New Zealand's prisons today: the Spring Hill riot and the Mt Eden 'fight clubs'. Both were major cases of prison disorder in which gangs were a significant factor, and give glimpses into the problems that gangs present to prison managers and staff (Gilbert & Newbold, 2019).

The Spring Hill Riot

In June 2013, a group of prisoners in the Spring Hill Corrections Facility in the Waikato took control of unit 16B, forcing staff out and causing significant damage. The disruption began when a group of prisoners became intoxicated after drinking 'home brew' made from fruit, sugar and alcohol-based hand sanitizer. The drunken prisoners began to fight but when guards tried to intervene, they were attacked and forced to retreat to the staff base. They then abandoned the unit entirely when prisoners laid siege to the base. For most of the day up to 27 prisoners ran amok within the unit and by the time the Advanced Control and Restraint (ACR) teams had managed to rally and recapture it, substantial damage and fires had necessitated the whole unit's evacuation. In the course of regaining control a number of prisoners and staff were injured (Department of Corrections, 2014).

According to the report released a year after the incident, gang members played an important part in events at Spring Hill. Of the 89 prisoners housed in unit 16B, 50 were identified as gang members, from six different gangs including the highly active Killer Beez, and many of these took leading roles in the rioting. At the time, Spring Hill had the second highest proportion of active gang members in the country and this was acknowledged as a significant risk factor. A Corrections report on the subsequent inquiry said that "gang members are much more likely than non-gang members to involve themselves in incidents of prison violence and disorder, and once a serious incident commences, gang members are more likely to feel obliged to join in, rather than distance themselves from the fray" (Department of Corrections, 2014, p. 29). While an individual prisoner may be unwilling to risk further jail time by rioting, the gangs' code of 'all for one, one for all' is a powerful driver of group action, irrespective of consequences.

The Mt Eden Fight Clubs

In July 2015 a series of videos filmed inside the Mount Eden Corrections Facility appeared on YouTube, showing bare-knuckle fights between prisoners while groups of other prisoners looked on. The videos were filmed on a contraband cell phone, and showed prisoners in areas with no visible supervision,

engaging in serious organised violence. Tattoos of the Black Power gang were visible on some of the fighters. Mount Eden is the largest remand prison in New Zealand, with a capacity of 976 male prisoners, and was one of two facilities run by the multinational private contractor Serco.

A subsequent inquiry found that, as the videos suggested, prisoners were running organised 'fight clubs' in multiple units of the prison, with at least some staff aware of what was happening. The inquiry also found that the prison was dangerously understaffed and that staff were often absent from parts of the prison for hours at a time, leaving prisoners to their own device. It concluded that "the lack of an effective control environment at residential unit level including in particular insufficient 'staff on the floor' provided prisoners with opportunities to participate in organised fighting and other illicit activities" (Fitzharris, 2016, p.6). The report also highlighted a range of issues including contraband being supplied by staff and an unsanitary prison kitchen. As a result of the findings, the Department of Corrections took over control of Mt Eden and has not renewed the contract with Serco, changing prison management and adding 50 new staff. In the year following Serco's removal, serious assaults requiring outside medical assistance in the prison decreased by 55 percent (RNZ 31-3-2017).

One of the report's most important findings was that the fight clubs were being run by gang members, including 'senior members' of the Black Power, the Killer Beez and the Head Hunter gangs. Although only 30 percent of the prison's muster was reported to be gang affiliated, because staff were unable or unwilling to fully control the prison, the gangs' prominence had increased. While many fights appeared to involve willing adversaries, reluctant prisoners had also been pressed into participating by threats and violence. It was reported, although not confirmed, that some prison officers had colluded with the gangs and would inform gang leaders if complaints were made by other prisoners.

As attested by these examples, gangs are not just a chronic issue, but one that can become acute and serious very quickly under the wrong conditions (Gilbert & Newbold, 2019). The Chief Inspector's report into the troubles at Mt Eden recommended a national gangs strategy based on sound knowledge and verifiable fact was needed but was lacking, in part due to the difficulty of accurately researching prison gang activity (Fitzharris, 2016: p.91).

Corrections' gang strategy was established a year later in 2017. This strategy, set over five years (2017-2021), acknowledges the complex nature of gangs and the harms they cause, and sets out goals around building staff capability and intelligence capacity in the area, supporting targeted initiatives, and opening pathways for those who want to exit gangs while they are in prison.

The outcomes of this strategy remain to be measured. At time of writing there is no formal strategy that has replaced it.

These efforts notwithstanding, gang management has grown in importance more generally in recent years as the proportion of gang affiliated prisoners has increased. As shown in Figure 2 below, Corrections gang statistics show a rise in the number of gang-affiliated prisoners over the decade from 2010 to 2023, more than doubling from 1262 to 3,346, growing at a much greater pace than the overall prison muster.³ Gang-affiliates declined in the two years subsequently, however, parallel with more dramatic falls in overall prisoner numbers.

³ It should be noted that some of this may be a result of a greater focus on recording prisoners as gang affiliates as well.

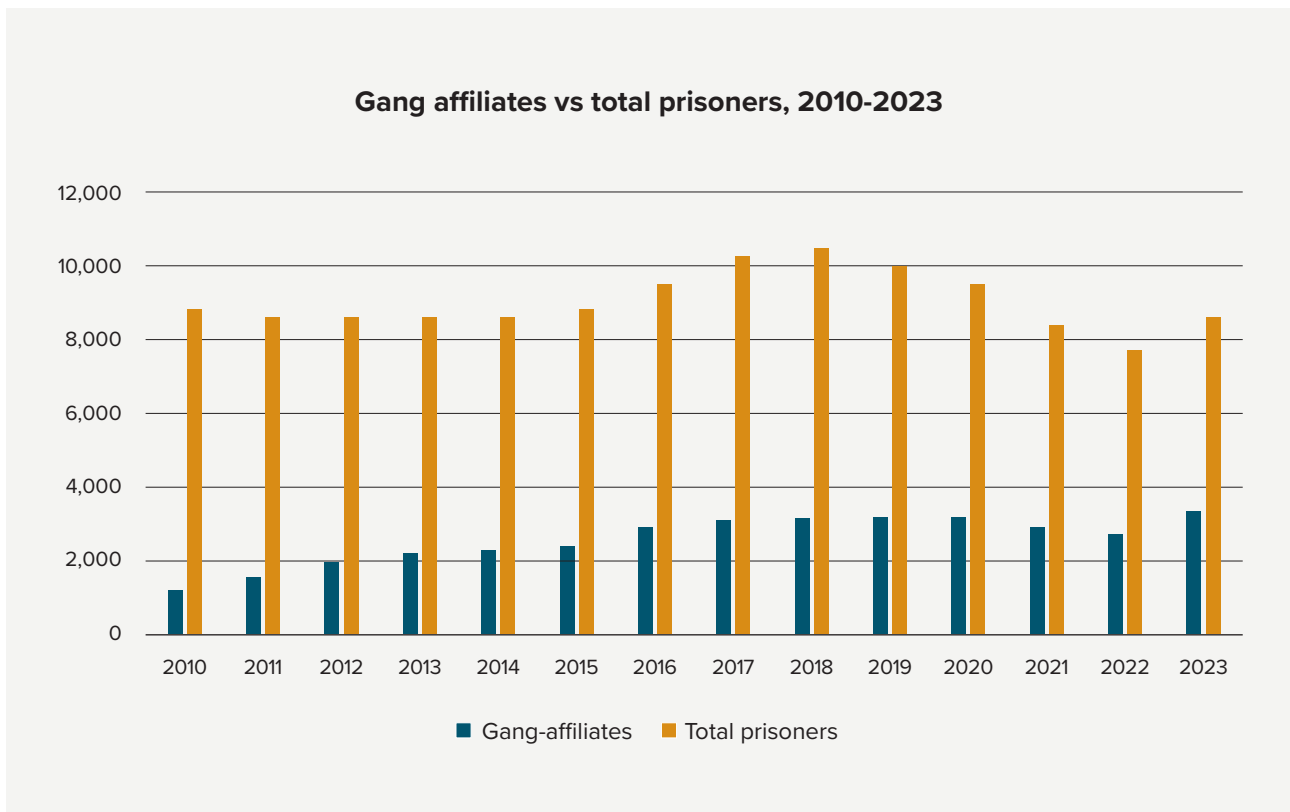


Figure 2: prison population data drawn from Ara Poutama Prison Facts and Statistics reports for years 2010-2022, compared with prisoner gang affiliation data (New Zealand Parliamentary Service, 2022; Ara Poutama data, 2023).

It is important to note that Corrections uses a wide definition of gang ‘affiliation’ in preference to a more precise definition of ‘membership’. While this makes it difficult to compare data against those held by the police, for example, this wider definition is a considered approach by Corrections as it assists in the placement and management of prisoners.

The causes of these rises in gang-affiliated prisoners are complex and too numerous to detail here, although the recent resurgence in the patched gang scene described earlier, which began in 2011, is likely an important contributor, as is the rise (relatively) of violent offenders in prison - a category likely to include a disproportionate number of gang members.

As a result of policy changes in bail, sentencing and sentence administration, prisoner numbers overall have declined since reaching a peak in 2017. Gang affiliate numbers in prison did not drop in proportion to the overall population, however, due to them being concentrated in more serious offending. Consequently, as a percentage of the overall prison population, gangs have increased.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the proportion of prisoners with gang affiliation has increased significantly in recent years, growing from less than 15% in 2010 to a high of 36% in 2021, but declined between 2021 and 2022. As of 2023, 38.8 percent of current prisoners are believed to have a gang affiliation of some sort (Ara Poutama Aotearoa, 2023).

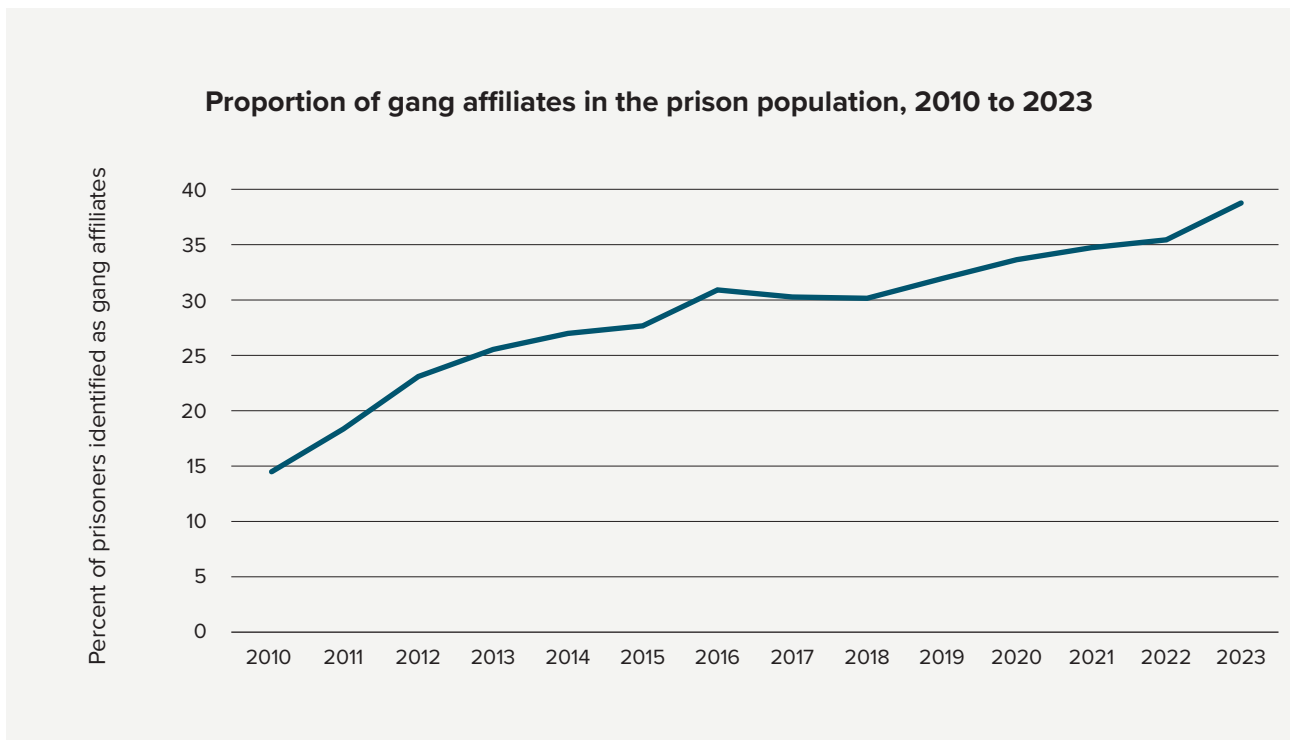


Figure 3: prison population data drawn from Ara Poutama Prison Facts and Statistics reports for years 2010-2023, compared with prisoner gang affiliation data (New Zealand Parliamentary Service, 2022; Ara Poutama, 2023).

While the Corrections Gang Strategy determines the overall direction, the actual management of gangs in New Zealand’s prisons is handled locally, with each prison determining control systems according to its individual needs. A key reason for this, which is supported by the findings of the current research, is that the gang makeup of each prison varies considerably, and issues that concern prison management at one end of the country, for example, may have little relevance at the other.

Despite the significance that gangs have within the current prison environment, there are no specific programmes targeting gangs in prison, nor to be best of our knowledge, have there ever been. Numerous gang members go through the drug, violence and high-risk behaviour Special Treatment Units (STUs) and consideration is given steering members away from gangs, but programmes are not specifically targeted at such groups.

Corrections has made efforts to enable better gang management by improving knowledge regarding gangs, however, an approach that (in the abstract) is well-supported by research, both in New Zealand (Tamatea, 2015) and internationally (Knox, 2005; Bumgarner, 2006; Hanser, 2018). A key element of this is the establishment of a gang information hub, made available in March 2023, which contains key details on each gang, as well as relevant research, news articles, and bimonthly updates on gang activities. This hub is available to all Corrections staff.

Reflecting trends among gangs outside of prison as well, prisoners who are affiliated with gangs are disproportionately likely to be Māori and Pasifika compared with the prison population as a whole, and less likely to be European or other ethnicities. As shown in Figure 4 below, prison gang affiliates in New Zealand are 70% Māori overall, and only 14.3% European (Pākehā).

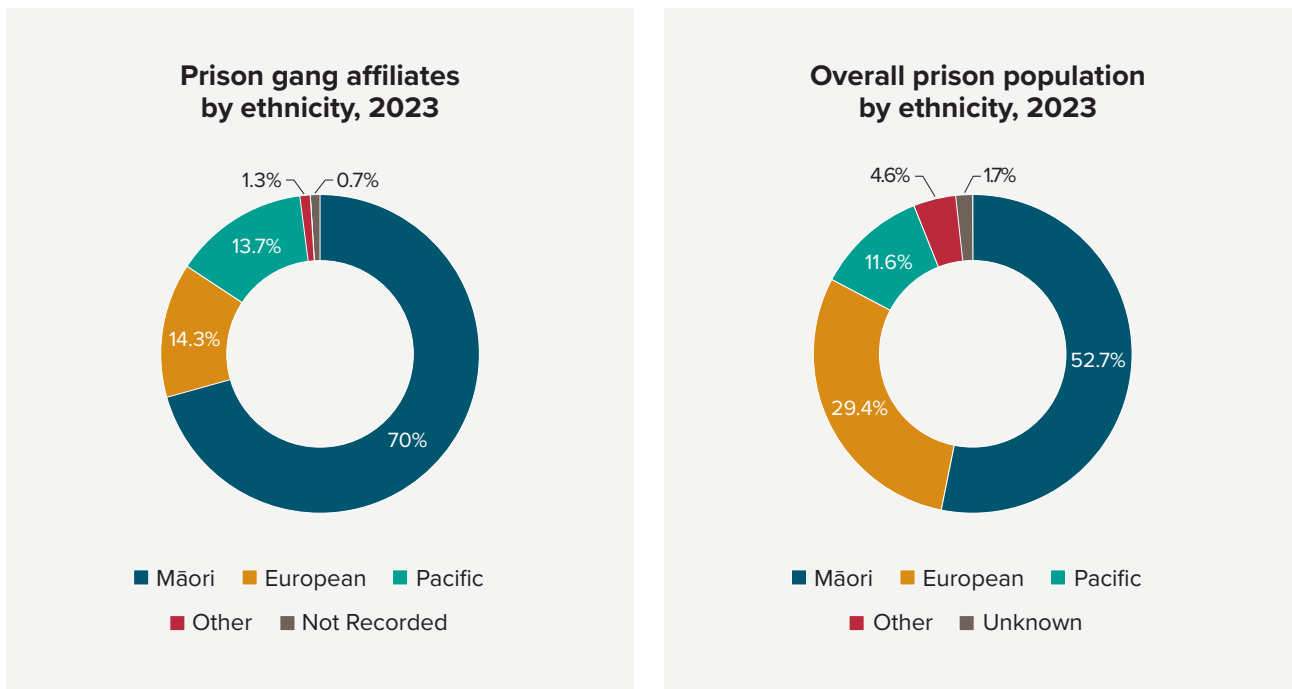


Figure 4: Prison gang membership by ethnicity, and overall prison population by ethnicity sourced from Ara Poutama (2023).

Existing research

Existing literature on gangs in prison, both in New Zealand and internationally, is very limited. Where it does exist, international research it has a tendency to focus on areas tangential to this research, such as gangs in youth facilities, or in overcrowded and under resourced prisons in international jurisdictions where gangs are shaped by significantly different pressures to those in New Zealand.

Nevertheless, research does exist in some key areas that can be of interest, although some of it is somewhat out-of-date.

As is the case with gangs in general, the literature on gangs in prison is dominated by American research, so the majority of international sources cited here are American. Where possible, this is supplemented by research from New Zealand.

THE PROBLEMS OF GANGS IN PRISON

One fact that is made clear by the literature is that gangs, while making up a minority of most prison populations, cause significant problems with respect to violence, drugs and other forms of rule infractions. The fact that gangs are more likely to engage in violent and criminal behaviour in prison than non-gang prisoners, is well established in America (Sheldon, 1991; Gaes, Wallace et al., 2001; Knox, 2005; Petersilia, 2008). The same conclusion can be, albeit rather more tentatively, drawn from the limited English research as well (Wood and Adler, 2001; Wood, 2006; Worrall & Morris, 2012).

Studies also show that core members are more likely to commit a larger number rule infractions or crimes in prison, than non-core members (Gaes, Wallace et al., 2001).

Interestingly, one comprehensive multivariate study in the US found that longer-term gang members were less likely to be involved in prison misconduct than those who had become members more recently. (Gaes, Wallace et al. 2001). Surprised by the finding, the authors of the report suggested that this may be because older members are in a position to give instructions to younger members (and thus *order* rather than *commit* gang crimes) or because older members are more readily identifiable by prison authorities, who may suppress their nefarious activities (Gaes, Wallace et al., 2001: p.24). In my view, however, a more likely explanation of the lower profile of longer-term members is that the long termers were likely older and more circumspect than the more impetuous and often hot-headed youngsters.

Nevertheless, prison is generally seen to have a ‘hardening effect’ on gang members whereby incarceration increases rather than decreases their commitment to gang life (Knox, 2005). Gang recruitment in prisons is also acknowledged to be a serious problem (Ruddell, Decker et al. 2006; Pyrooz, 2022), but something that remains understudied (Pyrooz & Decker, 2019).

Several writers have identified prison gangs as important features within prison society, describing them in terms of the informal self-government and self-regulation of those communities (Decker & Pyrooz, 2019). This is noted to be particularly important in large, overcrowded, and high-turnover prison systems, where more traditional norms governing prisoner behaviour have eroded (Skarbek, 2012). This self-regulation is not necessarily in line with the goals of the institutions imprisoning them, however, and a key part of this is the regulation of contraband markets, where gangs’ power, organisation, and ties to supply networks outside of prison place them at a considerable advantage (Boyd 2010; Roth & Skarbek 2014; Decker & Pyrooz, 2019).

GANG RECRUITMENT IN PRISON

While acknowledged as important, gang recruitment in prison is an area that remains largely understudied. While some research exists concerning gang recruitment in juvenile institutions, it has rarely been the focus of work with adult prisoners (Decker & Pyrooz, 2019).

Nevertheless, there is a significant body of research internationally regarding the elements that lead to the formation of gangs, and that push individuals toward gang membership, much of which applies in prison. Regardless of the setting, the factors that drive membership are largely universal. In short, those who join gangs are also likely to have faced considerable pre-existing social disadvantage, and will often come to see gang membership as a rational response to the problems and deficiencies otherwise present in their lives.

Carlie (2002) has described the allure of the gang in terms of needs fulfilment. Gangs, he says, fulfil “lower level” needs, such as the need for food, shelter, and physical safety, and “higher level” needs such as belongingness, esteem, and self-actualisation. Thus, gangs serve a purpose and are therefore functional. Their members “derive psychological benefits of recognition and respect” and gain in “self-esteem and in social status” as a consequence of acceptance within a gang (Carlie, 2002). Joining a gang, therefore, can often be seen as a rational decision (Jankowski, 1991: p.40; Decker and Van Winkle, 1996: p.17). Similar factors have been observed among gang members in New Zealand, both inside and outside of prison (Tamatea, 2010; Gilbert, 2013; Morrison and Bowman, 2017).

While environmental and background factors remain important in prison, there are also features of the prison environment that make certain drivers of membership more acute. These features may be leveraged by gangs as a way of recruiting new members.

Recruitment into gangs in prison has perhaps existed as long as gangs have been around. In one study undertaken by Currie in Waikeria prison in the late 1980s, 41 percent of prisoners reported gang connections when first entering the jail, but following an unspecified period (during which interviews took place) 61 percent of those same prisoners reported gang affiliations (1989: p.11). Although some prisoners may have been reticent in revealing gang connections when entering prison, the increase almost certainly highlights the influence of incarceration on gang recruitment; something that has been observed in New Zealand prisons since at least 1979 (Meek, 1992: p.263). It was confirmed in 1982 by Marsh (1982: p.40) with his finding that 80 percent of gang prisoners acknowledged prison as a place of recruitment. This study did not encounter a single person, prisoner or staff, who did not recognise prison as a place of recruitment.

One international study conducted in Phoenix, USA found that actual gang recruitment in prison was more limited, but that the bonds of gang membership were intensified by incarceration (Pyrooz, Gartner, and Smith, 2015). There has been some suggestion that this is true in New Zealand as well, something that will be challenged in the gang recruitment section of this paper.

While its extent is not well understood, recruitment into gangs while in prison has been identified as occurring for a number of reasons, with a primary one being fear. As has been highlighted by overseas research (Jacobs, 1974: p.400; Howell 1998: p.13; Ross, and Richards 2002: pp.128 & 133; Decker & Pyrooz, 2019), and in New Zealand (Tamatea, 2010: p.66), non-gang prisoners are often preyed upon by gang members, leading to previously unconnected prisoners joining gangs for protection. Fear is not only generated by intimidation of the weak; even a strong prisoner will come under pressure if he comes into conflict with a gang member, because it is likely the trouble will expand to include the whole gang. This may force him to seek security from another gang. In this way, prisoners can be 'pushed' into seeking gang association or membership.

Prospective membership can also be built around friendships formed on shared backgrounds and associations within prison confines. Certainly, there are benefits to being connected to a gang that do not simply concern issues of safety and security. One New Zealand prisoner told Currie (1989: p.25) of his motivation for seeking to join a gang while in prison:

Mob membership gives support. That's my reason for being a supporter. You get better things than these other fellas.

Replicating the findings of American research (Crouch and Marquart, 1989: p.209; Ralph, Hunter et al., 1996: p.126), Currie observed in 1989 that, "Like any social 'club', gangs in New Zealand's prisons offered prisoners a social support network, security and a sense of solidarity within the group. In addition, there was a visible hierarchy offering prisoners a chance to 'achieve' and accrue status" (Currie, 1989: p.27).

In these ways, then, the motivations for joining a gang on the inside of prison are little different to those on the outside, although fear takes on a much more central role.

CONTROLLING GANGS IN PRISON

In relation to techniques being used to deal with gangs in prison, there is no clear consensus on what works best. Largely this is due to the fact that gang management has been rather ad hoc and that systematic analysis of different approaches is scarce (Winterdyk and Ruddell, 2010; Fleisher, Decker et al., 2011). Moreover, it appears that the dominant US policies of control have been devised from crisis situations (both acute and chronic), primarily around problems of overcrowding and endemic gang violence.

The three dominant strategies for dealing with prison gangs in America have been to isolate members, to place gangs in dedicated units, and to transfer problem gang members to other prisons. These suppressive approaches have been concerned with control, rather than reform, however (Pyrooz, 2022). Isolating gang members, especially leaders, by placing them in segregation cells (for up to 23 hours per day), has also been a popular control method used throughout the US as well as in New Zealand. Its intention is to weaken communication within the gang and erode group solidarity (Fleisher, Decker et al., 2011), but it has become less common in the US in recent years following a number of high-profile controversies (Pyrooz, 2022).

Placing gangs in their own, often purpose-built units, has been used in certain prisons, notably in Arizona, Arkansas, California, and Utah (Bumgarner, 2006: p.28) where separation seeks both to reduce inter-gang violence and to ensure that new recruits are not drawn in to the gang. In Washington State, where this method has been employed, a separation strategy led to a reduction in violent incidents, even as the prison population increased (*Corrections Today*, Feb 2009: p.11).

Many institutions have used transfers to remove key gang members (most often leaders) away from their gang in the belief that this will disrupt gang activities.⁴ Furthermore, the threat of being isolated at another institution is used to persuade gang members to renounce their gang affiliation. In Arizona, for example, such members are given the choice of renouncing gang membership or being shipped off to another institution (Boyd, 2010).

As noted, however, each of these three methods of controlling gangs in prison lack rigorous evaluations as to their overall efficacy. Moreover, while they may solve problems in the immediate term, they may lead to latent negative consequences further down the track.

For example, despite its widespread use, segregation, while removing certain physical threats, was not found to limit illegal gang activities and does not eliminate or reduce the size of prison gangs (Specter, 2006: p.132). Similarly, pitfalls were seen in housing gangs together. Knox (2005: p.74) sums up the concerns expressed by many when he asks: “[I]s there not the possibility that this will strengthen and solidify the internal organization of the gang? Does this policy artificially keep the gang together as a gang?” It might also be noted that there is an increased risk to staff in units monopolised by one gang or another. Concerns in relation to gang member transfer as a means of control are also in ample evidence. As early as 1992 the United States Department of Justice (1992) suggested that transfers may simply export gang activity from one prison to another. This was a concern confirmed by Boyd (2010: pp.997-998) who found evidence that this is exactly what was occurring, thereby actually increasing the overall gang problem.

Some American researchers have suggested that integration rather than separation of gang members, as is done in New Zealand, may be desirable. Integration, or mixing of prisoners in units, it is argued, can help break down the ‘us versus them’ mentality, and an example in Indiana shows how this can work (Boyd 2010). Other institutions have attempted similar approaches and found them unsuccessful, however (Fleisher, Decker et al., 2011: p.19).

While suppressive approaches appear the most widely used, they are complemented by two popular strategies: intelligence gathering and staff training, both of which are useful and uncontroversial.

⁴ This tactic is often referred to as either ‘Diesel’ or ‘Bus’ Therapy.

Training of staff has been identified as a key feature of effective gang control. One researcher concluded it should be the number one objective of any prison, based on the rationale that other policies will fail to work without it (Bumgarner, 2006). Knox (2005) noted that this should include tuition on relevant 'social sciences' to better equip staff in managing human behaviour, but of critical importance is ensuring staff are aware of issues relating to gang and gang member intelligence gathering.

The building of databases from such intelligence is an important tool for tracking gangs and gang members, but it is most effective when it is informed by, and informs, that collected by other agencies such as the police and probation (Fleisher, Decker et al., 2011). Another strategy of intelligence gathering employed by certain institutions is the use of informants. Although this has proven useful, it is seen as particularly risky given the violent retaliation that will be imposed on informants if they are exposed (Boyd, 2010). A significant number of US prisons, around two-thirds, have specialist staff coordinating intelligence on gangs and Security Threat Groups or 'STGs' (Knox, 2005; Zoccole, 2018).

GANGS AND REHABILITATION PROGRAMMES

While most institutions rely solely on suppression to control gangs and gang members, a "small number" of institutions in the US have experimented with additional programs⁵ (Boyd 2010), but many of these are still based on suppression but with a 'carrot and stick-type' approach.

One long-running programme, which appears representative of several others, operates in Texas and is called the Gang Renouncement and Disassociation (GRAD) Process. GRAD uses an approach in which members of designated Security Threat Groups face significantly curtailed privileges, but where members who keep to standards of 'good behaviour' and are willing to renounce their gang membership become eligible for entry to a nine-month course that includes substance abuse classes, counselling and being trained in work details. On successful completion of the course, the graduates are placed in mainstream units.

Assessing the effectiveness of gang rehabilitation programmes is an area that has been acknowledged to be significantly hampered by a dearth of evidence-based evaluations (Decker & Pyrooz 2019), and despite its prominence and more than 20-year history GRAD remains conspicuously understudied. While no full evaluations exist, a preliminary evaluation conducted as part of a larger study found that the programme was producing good results in terms of shepherding members out of gang association, but was showing no evidence of an impact on rates of misconduct or victimisation.

Other approaches are limited in number (Winterdyk and Ruddell, 2010: p.732). In Connecticut, the Close Custody Program is a three-phase rehabilitation course that teaches gang members 'coping skills' to reintegrate into the general prison population and society. In New Jersey, a similar programme, run by the Security Threat Group Management Unit, teaches gang members alternatives to violent behaviour, cognitive development and nonviolent living (Boyd, 2010: pp.1012-1013). There is some evidence that these latter-type approaches can have a positive effect. In a rare case of programme evaluation, it is reported that gang members who completed an intensive programme⁶ were less likely to commit major institutional infractions and were less likely to reoffend on release from prison than

⁵ In 2005 it was reported that just 15 percent of US institutions had programmes encouraging gang members to quit their gangs (Knox 2005).

⁶ The programme reviewed involved 'high intensity cognitive-behavioural treatment' including, among other things, employment and education training, substance abuse programming and occupational therapy.

a control group (Di Placido, Simon et al., 2006). One more recent programme delivered in Racine, Wisconsin, used a wraparound approach that targeted high-risk prisoners for support, including cognitive behavioural therapy, work training, and preparation for reintegration into society, followed by post-release support. An evaluation of its outcomes found that graduates had higher rates of employment and earnings in the year following release, and lower rates of rearrest (Cook et al., 2015). This programme included gang members, but also other non-gang violent offenders. However the results did not distinguish between gang and non-gang participants.

In New Zealand, evaluation of programmes has been somewhat more systematic, although the programmes run in prison have been universally gang-neutral, and not aimed directly at gang dissociation. For the most part their measures of success have been made on the basis of their impact on recidivism.

An evaluation of recidivism data from a range of prison programmes by Johnston (2018) found that on average, gang prisoners participate in rehabilitation programmes in “in numbers only slightly below what would be expected given the proportion of the prisoner population they comprised”, with higher participation rates in Māori cultural programmes, and lower rates in sex offender treatment programmes. This analysis found that in terms of rates of reimprisonment, programmes had a similar degree of impact on gang members as non-members, although gang members’ actual rates of reoffending remained much higher.

Drawing from interviews with practitioners, Tamatea (2018) found that gang members “typically have poor to hostile relationships with authorities”, and as a result are acknowledged by support programme providers to be harder to build rapport with. Young gang members in particular are an issue in this regard. The researcher concluded that New Zealand gang programmes would benefit from being designed in a manner that was “gang informed,” and incorporated gang understandings more directly.

In 2015 the Department of Corrections’ Research and Analysis team produced a report on the effectiveness of prison programmes, based on 12-month follow-up data gathered from 11,220 offenders released from prison in 2012-2013. This research found that gang affiliates participated in prison programmes almost as often as non-affiliates – with about a third of incarcerated gang members having participated in at least one programme compared with 40% of non-gang affiliates. However it found that rates of reconviction and reimprisonment amongst gang members who participated in programmes were almost always higher, and often much higher, than the rates for non-gang participants. Moreover, reimprisonment rates for gang participants were even greater than for non-gang non-participants. When gang participants re-offended, the seriousness of the offence was more than twice that of non-gang participants (Ong, 2015).

This initial research (known as Phase 1) was then followed by a more comprehensive Phase 2 study which examined what kinds of intervention work best on whom. This part of the study was restricted to gang members only and compared those who had participated in programmes with those who had not. Because of the range of interventions available in prison, it was decided to group them into four generic categories: rehabilitation, employment, cultural, and re-integration.

A number of clear outcomes was visible. The first was that the best results were achieved when a range of interventions were applied, although rehabilitation and employment were clearly the most effective. Cultural and re-integration strategies were relatively ineffective on their own, but did produce enhanced effects when combined with employment and rehabilitation. By contrast, positive effects were found for ‘employment only’ and ‘rehabilitation only’ initiatives, although a combination of interventions still produced optimum results. These significant benefits were found in respect of both re-offending and re-imprisonment.

Interesting results appeared when age was controlled for. For those aged 17-20, a single intervention of any type significantly improved post-release outcomes, with no added benefit visible from extra programmes. For those aged 21-45, however, rehabilitation plus employment programmes had clearly the greatest benefits, with smaller benefits if cultural or reintegration strategies were employed. But among the small number of gang affiliates aged over 45, programmes had no statistically significant effect. Apart from this group, the key finding was that participation in programmes almost invariably produces positive outcomes, especially in the case of employment and rehabilitation strategies. The report concluded:

... in general, and for gang-affiliated prisoners, there is significant benefit to be had in encouraging participation in available forms of interventions. In particular, gang members should routinely be encouraged to undertake rehabilitation programmes, and to participate in employment while in prison. Other forms of intervention can add value as supplementary to these approaches (Ong, 2015, p. 9).

This provides significant credence to the value of programmes as a means of reducing gang harm in the longer term.

Research methods, ethics and limitations

This research began prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020, and the subsequent lockdowns, which closed New Zealand's prisons to visitors, caused significant delays.

The research was undertaken with the support of Ara Poutama Aotearoa: Department of Corrections, hereafter referred to as Corrections.

A total of 39 in-depth interviews were conducted with prisoners. Of these, 56.4% (n=22) were with gang members, former members, or prospects, and 43.6% (n=15) were with non-members. As noted above, Corrections uses a wider definition of gang involvement (affiliation), and we have used the same in this report unless stated otherwise.

A further eight interviews were conducted with Corrections staff, including each of the prisons' security managers.

The interviews were spread across three prisons: Christchurch Men's, Rimutaka, and Whanganui. These locations were chosen because they are large prisons that are geographically and demographically diverse, allowing for the greatest possible variety of responses. Some 17 interviews were conducted in Christchurch Men's, 16 in Rimutaka, and six in Whanganui.

All three prisons chosen are male-only prisons, and house prisoners with security classifications running from minimum to high. Whanganui, which is located in Kaitoke, south of Whanganui, and has a capacity of 581, also has maximum security facilities. Christchurch Men's is located outside of Christchurch, and has a capacity of 940. Rimutaka prison is located in Upper Hutt, and has a capacity of 1078 prisoners.

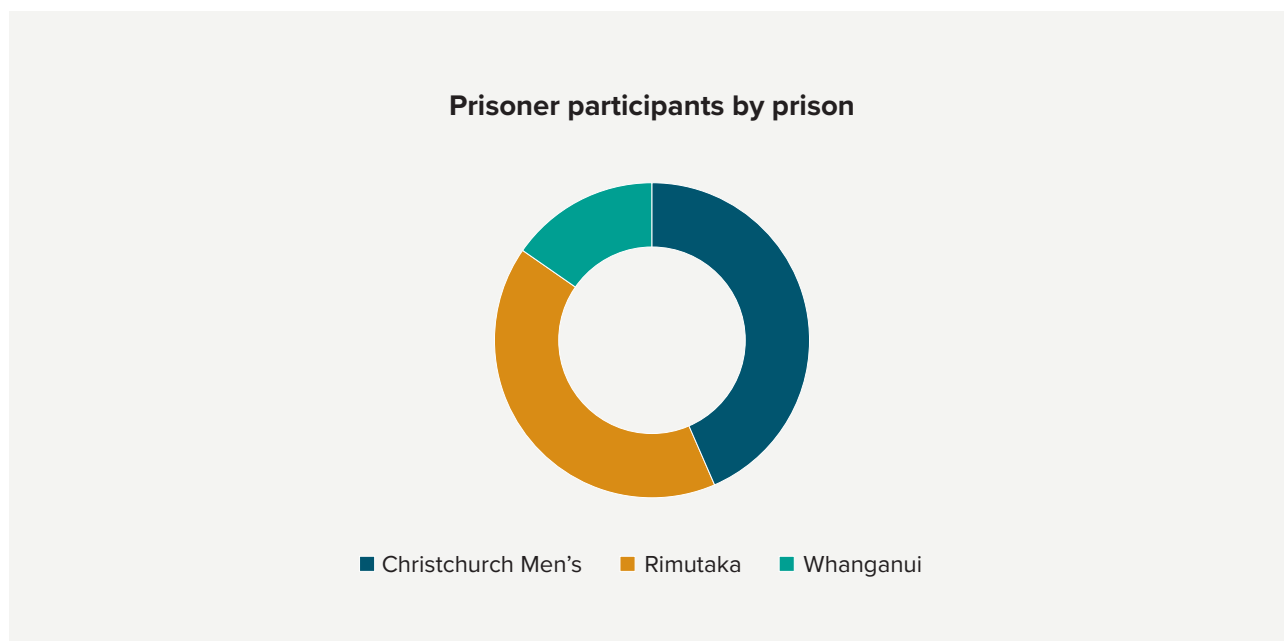


Figure 5

Interviews with prisoners ranged in length from half an hour to around two hours, depending on participants' levels of engagement and relevant experiences. They followed a semi-structured format guided by a set of prompts that were designed to elicit insights that could then be probed and elaborated upon. Different prompts were used depending on the participant's level and history of gang involvement.

Prison participants were drawn from sentenced prisoners who were within three months of expected release.

Interviews were transcribed and coded for thematic analysis using NVivo software. The themes identified were used as the basis for the structure of this report.

The background data used in this research were provided by the Department of Corrections.

Ethical considerations

The methodology for this project was evaluated and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and by Corrections' Research and Evaluation Steering Committee.

All participants were provided with a description of the project and its aims prior to interviewing, and participation was on an opt-in basis. All participants provided written consent to be interviewed and recorded, and the nature of the research was discussed with them and their understanding confirmed verbally as well.

The names and details of participants were kept confidential to the research team. Where any quotes are used in this report they have been screened to ensure that they contain no potentially identifying content.

Categorising gangs

There exists a wide variety of gangs in New Zealand, some of which have little in common with each other in principle, but which share many structural and behavioural elements.

For our purposes here, there are four major types of gangs that currently have a significant presence in New Zealand's prisons. They are:

- **Outlaw motorcycle clubs:** motorcycle-riding gangs defined by their rigid hierarchical internal structures and use of back patches. Outlaw motorcycle clubs were the first modern gangs to form in New Zealand. After a period of stagnation, numbers of outlaw groups have increased sharply in recent years, driven in part by deportees from Australia. Examples include the Hells Angels and the Rebels.
- **Patched street gangs:** gangs that share a version of the outlaw clubs' back patch system and structured internal hierarchy, but do not traditionally ride motorcycles, although in recent times many do. This type of gang is a unique feature of New Zealand's gang scene, and these gangs have a long history. Examples include the Mongrel Mob and the Black Power, the country's two largest gangs.

- **LA-style street gangs:** gangs that formed initially in the 1990s and 2000s following the model of Los Angeles gangs like the Bloods and the Crips. These groups can range in size and scope from small and loosely organised ‘crews’ with teenage members through to sophisticated adult gangs with chapters across the country. Examples include the Killer Beez and the Neighbourhood Crips.
- **White power/skinhead gangs:** gangs focused on white identity and often far-right beliefs. These gangs rose to prominence in the 1990s when recessions threw large numbers of working-class Pākehā into unemployment, but have dwindled in significance since then. Some may join these groups in prison for protection and comradeship without necessarily subscribing to white power beliefs. Examples include Unit 88 and the Fourth Reich (both now defunct).

When the term ‘gang’ is used without further specificity in this report, it refers to any or all of the above types.

As shown in Figure 6 below, these gangs are not evenly distributed in the prison population. Corrections data show that the majority, some 61.9%, of gang affiliated prisoners are linked to patched street gangs, followed by LA-style gangs at 21.5%. Outlaw motorcycle clubs were in the minority at 11.6%, and white power gangs only 1.5%. The ‘other’ category is made up of gangs whose nature could not be definitively identified, although it is likely that many of these groups might be considered to meet the definition of LA-style gangs.

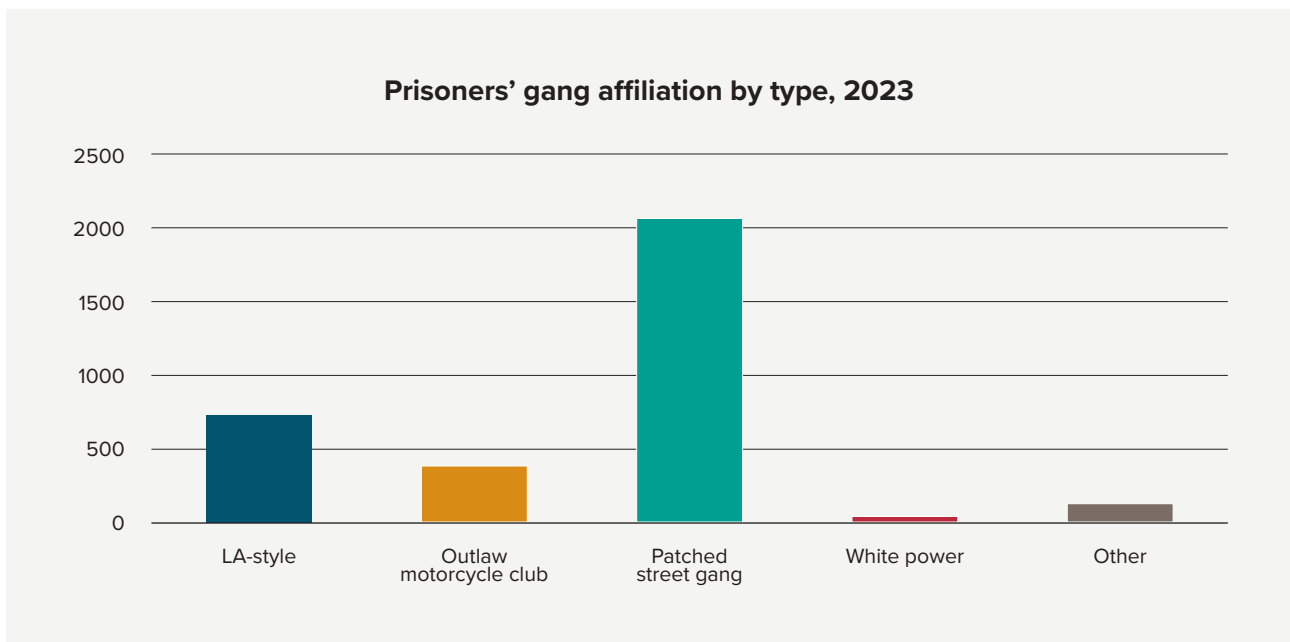


Figure 6

These figures are drawn from Corrections’ gang affiliation data and were coded to match the categories above. It is important to note that these data, and any other Corrections gang affiliation material presented in this report, are not restricted to patched (or fully-fledged) members alone but include all prisoners associated a gang, including prospects and associates. This is in contrast to similar data about gang members held by Police, which endeavour to capture the full detail of individual membership status. While it may somewhat inflate the numbers involved, Corrections’ method is more relevant to the task of prison management because in prison, close associates are likely to be targeted by rival groups, whether or not the person is an actual member. While understandable, the

way Corrections broad count of gang members does distort some analysis, and where this occurs within this report it will be explained.

Corrections categorises prisoners as gang affiliates based on intelligence, including:

- gang tattoos/markings,
- gang documentation/paraphernalia,
- information from other agencies,
- admissions to staff,
- staff observations,
- intelligence information from other sources,
- the number of gang incidents as well as overall incidents within prisons (i.e. violent incidents, misconducts etc) over five years.

Participant demographics

Interviews were conducted with 39 prisoners. These prisoners varied in age, ethnic background, and gang affiliation.

The ethnic distribution of participants generally aligned with that of the country's prison population as a whole, in which Māori are significantly overrepresented, while New Zealand Europeans are underrepresented. Māori comprised some 51.3% of the sample, and New Zealand Europeans 38.5%.

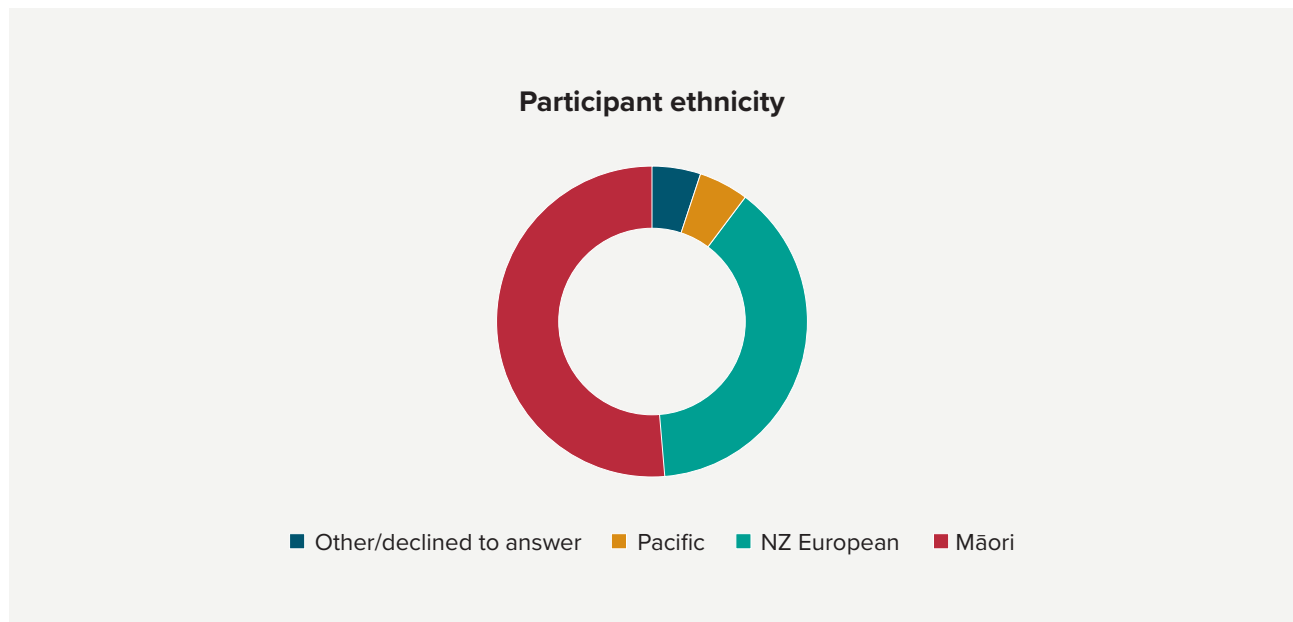


Figure 7

Participants' ages ranged from 20 to 66, with an average age of 35.45.

Participants reported a wide variety of sentences lengths, ranging from two months to eighteen years. The average sentence length was 4.19 years. One prisoner was sentenced to preventative detention, meaning that their sentence length was indeterminate.

Participants described a variety of types of involvement with gangs, ranging from association to full membership. Some 59.5% (n=22) were gang members, former members, or prospects, and 40.5% (n=15) were non-members. Nine participants had no affiliation with any gang.

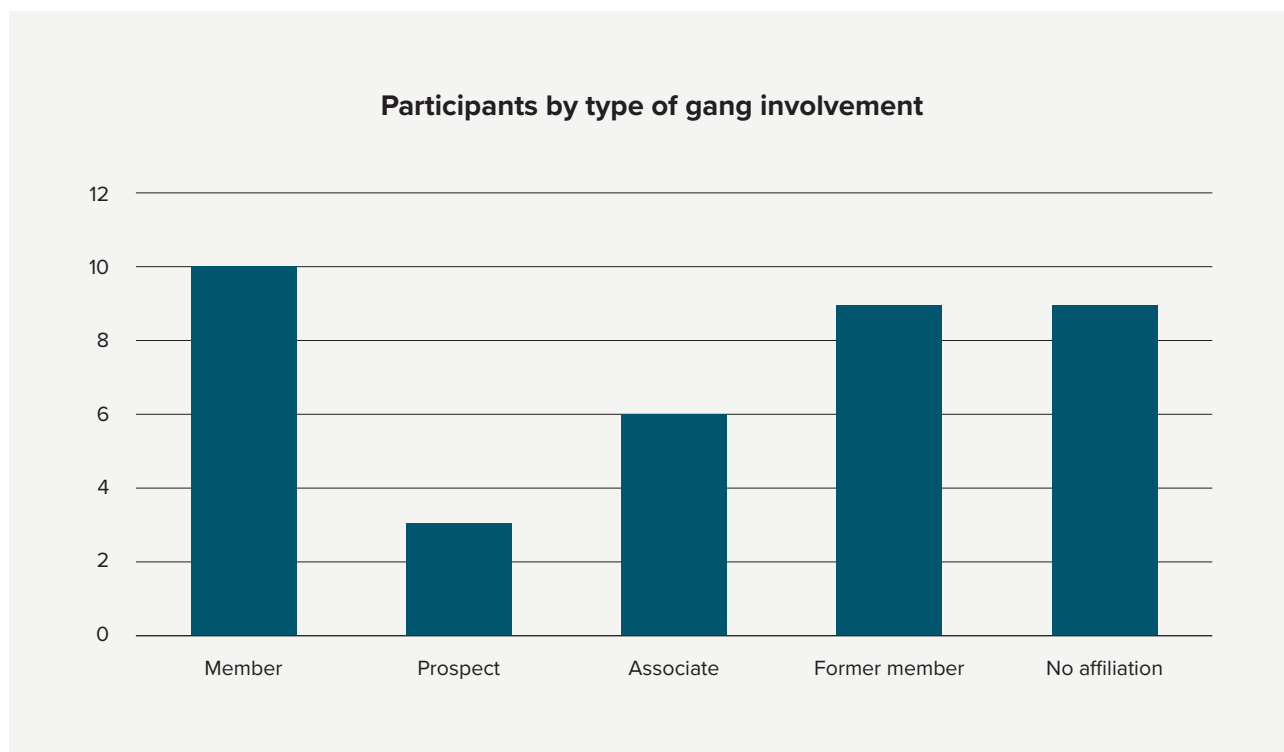


Figure 8

As described previously, gangs in New Zealand generally fall into four main categories. Participants reported affiliations (including current and former membership, prospecting, and association) with all four types.

Mirroring the current makeup of the country's gang scene as a whole, patched street gangs were the most represented, followed by LA-style street gangs and outlaw motorcycle clubs. Only one⁷ participant described having been involved with a white power/skinhead gang, reflecting those groups' decline in significance from the early 2000s onwards. One further participant reported being a former associate of a long-defunct organised crime group that did not align with any of the other categories.

⁷ Notably two participants reported membership in the Road Knights gang, an outlaw motorcycle club that does have significant white supremacist elements. These participants were categorised as outlaw motorcycle club members.

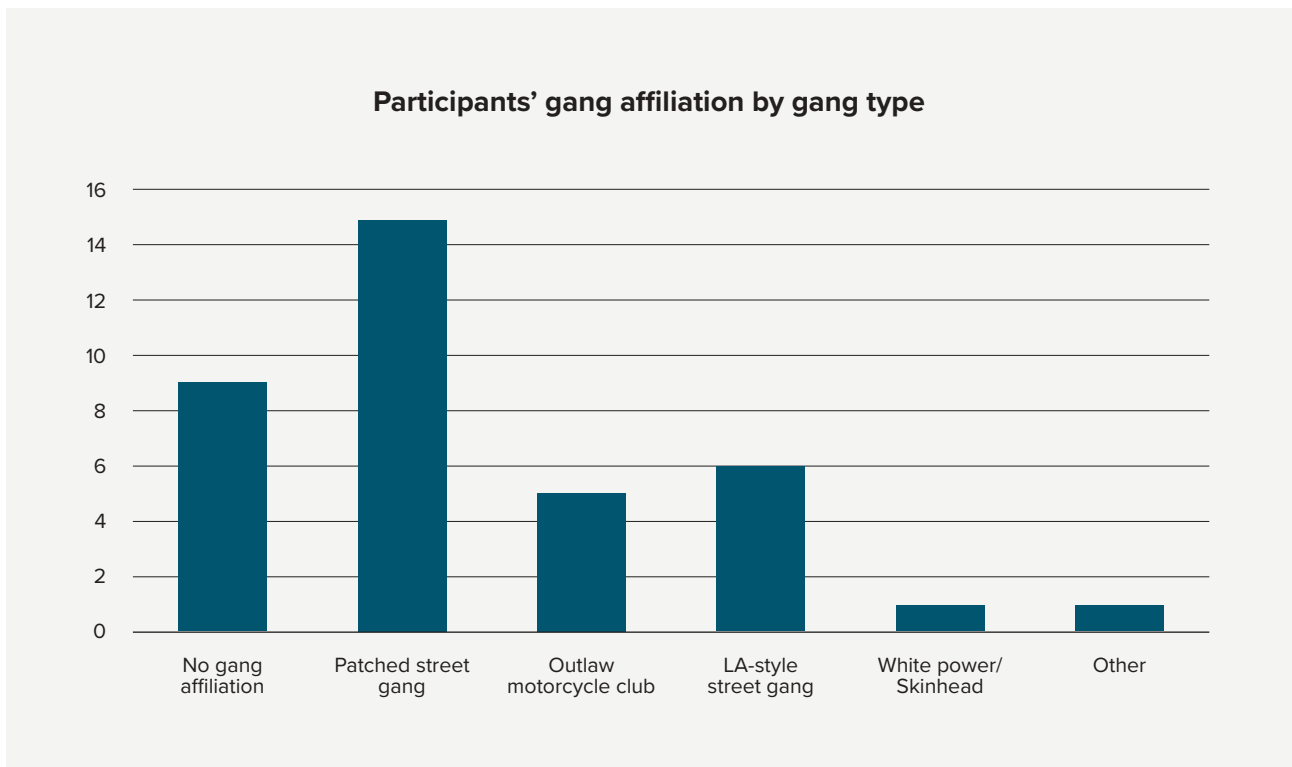


Figure 9

Limitations

The original idea for this research was to start with a survey that broadly canvassed prisoners on the key issues. This proved too challenging within budget and therefore the number of interviews was increased. Nevertheless, as with any purely qualitative study, this has created limitations in the work. Although all endeavours have been made to rely on the most repeated observations and thoughts of prisoner participants, the findings may not be representative.

The same is true of the findings relating to Corrections staff. While participants were chosen specifically because of their experience and position in the prisons and Department's hierarchy – giving them the best possible understandings – without a broader method of data collection, caution is advised with regard to the certainty placed on the generalised findings here.

A further issue again stems from the nature of this type of research, which relies heavily on in-depth interviews. That is the veracity of participants who have an interest in embellishing their activities or reputation. In this study, this primarily concerns the views of gang members. While this was countered by interviewing non-gang members to verify their claims, this study cannot measure the degree to which this may have occurred.

As noted, this research faced significant interruptions primarily due to the response to the Covid pandemic. Given this, the data were collected over an extended period of time. This means any changes in the prisons' practices may not have been observed and documented.

While all efforts have been made to mitigate these limitations, the findings of this research require confirmation. Further research into this area is therefore required.

Results

Oh, well, they do run it [the prison]. That's... I don't know how you say it. They run the jails. [Staff member]

There is a common shorthand that gangs 'run the prisons.' This is not literally true, of course, and Corrections staff remain in full control of New Zealand's prisons, something acknowledged by all participants of this research when the issue is fleshed out.

While gangs do not control the prisons per se, they do have significant informal control, via violence and fear, which secures them a place at the top of the prisoner hierarchy. As will become clear, this is a position that provides the gangs significant advantages in a variety of areas, while often disrupting the intentions of Corrections' goals.

In this way, the shorthand is simply useful in recognising their significant and undesirable influence in certain areas.

The results of this research should be read with that in mind.

Gangs and the rules and hierarchies of prison society

As discussed, prison society in New Zealand has undergone considerable changes since the 1980s when gangs became a significant dynamic within the prison population. While many elements have remained intact, the most notable change has been the erosion of prisoner solidarity as part of the prison 'code' that formerly governed prisoner behaviour, in which loyalty to prisoners as a collective was superseded by gang loyalties (Newbold, 1989: p.288-289).

Participants who were old enough to remember prison culture before the gangs became so dominant confirmed this.

There was a code of ethics too that, I've got to tell you, all that is gone. You're talking about... It's all history. There's no longer a really strict code of ethics. It's all about it's just... You know, it's the biggest monkey in the cage that sort of dictates, the biggest group of monkeys in the cage that dictate what is okay and what is not. [Prisoner]

The rise of gangs as a significant force in prison has meant that for many, loyalty to a gang has supplanted loyalty to other prisoners. This has allowed gangs to become dominant forces within prisons, and to exercise their power in ways that may harm other prisoners and benefit themselves. This is most visible in the nature and enforcement of the subcultural rules that govern prisoner behaviour, and in the prison economy, where gangs have considerable influence. It is seen as a primary driver of the significant increase in the use of voluntary segregation in New Zealand prisons (see page 71).

This is not to say that a prisoner code no longer exists; it has just changed in favour of the gangs and to the detriment of inmate unity.

Key findings:

- There is an informal hierarchy among prisoners that generally places gang members at its apex.
- The prison hierarchy consists of:
 - › Tier one – Gang members
 - › Tier two – Civilians in Good standing

- › Tier three – Civilian underclass
- › Tier four – Pariahs
- There are three primary rules in prisoner culture: no narking, no covert stealing (tea-leaving), and a total repudiation of child sex offenders.
- As the strongest groups in prison, gangs take the role of enforcers of informal rules and codes, which are often constructed with their own interests in mind.

PRISON HIERARCHY

A feature of mainstream prison society that was identified consistently in our interviews, and which is key to understanding the behaviour of gangs within prison, is the existence of an informal social hierarchy. As noted above and detailed below, this hierarchy has four tiers with gang members generally at the top, unaligned prisoners in the two middle groupings, and those who have broken cardinal prisoner rules or codes at the bottom.

This hierarchy or social order within the prison is intensely focused on status, reputation, and pride.

Gangs hold their position through strength brought about by solidarity and superior numbers. In prisons, very often at least, might makes right. The gangs are deeply concerned with ensuring that their members do nothing to jeopardise their reputation and standing. The maintenance of a gang's status requires constant effort, and results them being drawn into fights and conflicts over significant issues but also over seemingly trivial matters.

Outside of intangible elements of respect and social status, a person's place within this hierarchy most significantly affects their personal safety and the likelihood that they will suffer extortion.

Tier one: Gang Members

Gang members enjoy the high status in New Zealand prisons, which is largely gained by their size and strength. Depending on the unit and their gang's size, they may effectively 'control' that unit and what happens within it.

Tier two: Civilian Good Standing

Those prisoners that are able to defend themselves physically or otherwise uphold status or respect in the criminal underworld or longevity in the prison system. These prisoners will generally not be targeted for extortion of goods.

Tier three: Civilian Underclass

Prisoners with no gang affiliation and who are not capable of looking after themselves and/or are vulnerable are generally referred to by derogatory terms like "peasants" and "bundies". The use of these terms varies by prison. These prisoners are subject to extortion by those above them in the prison's hierarchy, in particular gang members.

Tier four: Pariahs

Those prisoners identified as a “nark” – someone who had informed on another offender or prisoner – and child sex offenders occupied the lowest rungs on the social ladder in prison. Having broken one of the rules most central to the criminal community, prisoners in this position are subject to the constant threat of violence and extortion. These prisoners are generally forced to enter voluntary segregation for their own safety.

These categories are ideal types, and therefore there the demarcation between them is sometimes blurred; for example, some gang prisoners may not have the same mana or respect that many civilian good standing prisoners have. Also, some associates of a gang will be so close that they are in the ‘gang member’ tier, while some prisoners may have dealings with a gang (and therefore be associated) but be independent enough to be in tier two. Furthermore, in rare instances, a tier three underclass prisoner who is mentally unhinged may avoid the types of bullying and extortion dealt out to others in that tier. Nevertheless these hierarchal tiers are useful for conceptualising an important feature of prison society, and are used throughout this report.

Gangs gain considerable benefit from their power within the prison hierarchy: they control much of the illicit trade and contraband; they may dominate weak or vulnerable prisoners by taking their possessions or bullying them to do their bidding; they may also gain favours from some staff; and gain disproportionate the highly prized prison jobs by ensuring – through threat and fear – that others do not take them up.

These gains for gang members are zero sum, meaning they come at the detriment of others, and they also create significant issues for prison management. All of these points will become clearer as this report progresses.

EVALUATING AND PRESCRIBING STATUS

Just as there is a formal process undertaken by prison staff to understand and classify new prisoners, there is a process by which prisoners determine a prisoner’s place in the prison hierarchy. This hierarchy is fundamental to the prisons subculture, and prisoners that are new to a unit, or to the prison as a whole, are quickly evaluated and their place within it determined.

The way a person is treated in prison actually depends on a multitude of factors, among being the person’s age, size, and his connections within the criminal community as a whole. Thus, experience have a much easier time than novices.

Participants described a system of induction in which new prisoners arriving in a unit for the first time would be immediately confronted and asked a number of basic, but defining, questions:

- Who are you with (what is your gang affiliation)?
- What’s your name?
- Where are you from?

These three questions, with some minor variations, were identified across all three prisons.

This is what I've done to people that have come into the unit. "Who are you with? Oh, what's your name? Where you from?" Those are the most three questions asked in jail. [Prisoner]

A key reason for these questions is to identify a person's likely place in the prison hierarchy, and what effect their presence might have on the social order of the unit. Those who are well-known, heavily marked with visible gang tattoos, or otherwise readily identifiable as gang members might not be asked these questions because their gang affiliation is clearly established.

These questions, by implication, also assessed a person's vulnerability to extortion. If an inductee had no gang affiliation, other prisoners might begin to size them up for extortion of key commodities (see *Gangs and the Prison Economy* p.38).

Yeah, as soon as you get to your ... holding cell, straight away. They'll ask you at the glass window.

"Who are you with?" And you just tell them who you're with. If you're not with anyone, then they're, "Aye," and they'll go back and tell their boys, "Ah, there's a new fella over there." Blah. Blah. "Go take all his shit." Yeah, and then they'll send the prospects over to go and take all his shit. [Prisoner]

This initial assessment may not hold, however. A prisoner's status in the prison hierarchy can depend, in part, on how they respond to attempts at extortion. If a person is willing to fight in self-defence and shows good form in doing so, they soon gain the respect of others.

One matter that is seldom asked in an initial interrogation is a person's offending. This is generally considered a disrespectful question in the criminal community, on the basis that the offending is a personal matter. This changes, however, if there is suspicion the prisoner is a child sex offender or a nark. If, after the initial questions, nobody knows the prisoner or there are any concerns around him, he will be asked to provide his "paperwork", meaning the documentation regarding their criminal history.

If an incoming prisoner is part of a gang, however, he would likely never be asked this, based on the assumption that gangs do not tolerate narcs or child sex offenders among their membership.

Participants generally agreed that lying in response to these questions is not an option, because the constant turnover of new prisoners means that before long someone who would know the truth would arrive in the unit. The criminal network within New Zealand is relatively small, meaning the degrees of separation between prisoners are few. This means that while moving down the hierarchy can happen quickly, moving up it can be more difficult. Reputations that prisoners have, tend to stick.

The rules of prison society

While the issue of prisoner solidarity has transformed over the years, other elements of the prisoner code remain intact. Participants identified three universal rules in prison: no narking (informing on others), no 'tea-leaving' (covertly stealing from other prisoners), and no tolerance for child sex offenders; and these have been evident for many years in New Zealand (Newbold, 1989).

NARKING

Within the criminal underworld there is a strong and universal prohibition on providing information to authorities about criminal activities. This is, is known as narking or grassing (Newbold, 1989: p.264).

Narking can include speaking to Police, Corrections officers, or anyone in authority. The code of silence is a key structural element of the criminal underworld, without which many of the actors within it would struggle to safely do business (Gilbert, 2013: p.317; Bradley, 2020).

No narking is not just a rule that acts as protective factor for those in the underworld, it is also tied up to self-reliance, toughness and reliability, three other elements of the underworld and prisoner code. Narks are pariahs within the criminal world and lie at the bottom of the hierarchy. Outside of the threat of immediate violence, being labelled a nark is an enduring brand that can result in being ostracised by not only those who have been narked on but by the entire underworld. The label, then, and the consequences of it, endure over place and time (Gilbert, 2017: p.316-329; Looser, 2001: p. 19).

While the no-narking rule is important in the criminal community in the closed world of the prison its significance is even greater. Here is where many unwritten rules of criminal conduct are formalised, concentrated, and enforced. Within gangs, where reputation and pride are central, and where a gang's credibility would be significantly tarnished by being known to accommodate narks, breaking the code of silence is generally grounds for immediate expulsion from the gang, accompanied by a bashing (Gilbert, 2013: p.177; Dennehy, 2006: p.97). While those expelled from gangs for other reasons may be able to join other gangs, a reputation as a nark is likely to mean permanent excommunication from the scene as a whole. This is especially true in prison, where the majority of prisoners being drawn from criminal subcultures means that criminal values are magnified (Newbold, 1989: p.263). Narks often have to enter segregation in order to avoid the constant abuse and threats they receive.

If you nark, everyone's going to beat you up and fucking stand you over. Once you're considered a nark, that's it, you're fucked. [Prisoner]

[As a prospect] I got told to smash this fella over, because he was being a nark... so I went and smashed him over. I didn't even get caught for that. I had to do it out in the yard. [Prisoner]

The prohibition on narking thus has a significant impact on the behaviour of gangs and on prisoners in general. (Gilbert, 2017: p.316).

TEA-LEAFING

The rules of prison also include a prohibition on stealing from other inmates, known as 'tea-leafing'⁸.

The no tea-leafing rule applies to all prisoners including gang members, but is nuanced in its application, in that it only applies to certain types of stealing. Stealing from a person's cell while they are not in it is generally not permissible unless, perhaps, the victim is a nark or a lowlife, but confronting a person face-to-face and extorting – sometimes known as taxing or standing over - is considered acceptable behaviour, particularly among gangs.

We can't tax them if they're not in their room, and because that's... Like, if they're in their room and they're not in there, when we take them that's called... when we take them, that's called tea leafing.

Tea leafing is like... To us it's like touching a kid, you just don't do it. Here, the gangsters don't tea leaf. And so, their stuff's safe as fuck. [Prisoner]

⁸ Tea-leafing is a term derived from rhyming slang – thieving.

...because if you're gangster, you should just be able to go in and take it and just tell them, "Bro, I'm taking this." That's the way you do. You don't go and steal under people's nose or behind their backs... That's creepy shit. That's you being fucking, not even a gangster. You're just being a tea leafing little thieving cunt, you know? It's better if you just go in there, "Bro, fucking hell. I'm going to take this. All right? This is mine, and if you got a problem, let's tussle. We'll go some rounds." [Prisoner]

This tolerance of extortion – an activity condoned and primarily undertaken by gangs and from which gang members are largely immune – reflects the values of gangs within the contemporary prison environment.

CHILD SEX OFFENDERS

The final universal rule described by participants in this study was one of zero tolerance for child sex offenders. Should a child sex offender arrive in a unit and be identified as such, they would be targeted remorselessly with violence and extortion, participants said.

Kiddie fuckers? ... They'd get stabbed. Yeah, straight away. No fucking around. [Prisoner]

They don't last long... the day we find out they're paedophiles, I've seen them get just hell-beats. Three [attackers] go in, come back out, three go in, another three. I've seen it like that...walked in the room and the room was...blood everywhere. Paedophile was just fucked up. [Prisoner]

This was not something that occurred often, however; few participants had first-hand recollections of child sex offenders appearing in their unit, or being targeted this way. This is presumably because such offenders went directly into protective units or minimum-security placements.

It is notable that, in an ironic twist, the condemnation of child sex offenders does not extend to the sexual violation or gang rape of adult or pubescent women. Among gangs, rape has traditionally been considered a perfectly legitimate activity and although reportedly less common now than it once was, it still occurs with some regularity and largely without stigma in gang contexts.

Enforcement of the prison code

As noted, gangs receive benefits from being at the top of the hierarchy, but they also take on certain obligations in maintaining the informal rules and codes of the prison. Where the informal rules of codes are broken or need maintenance these tasks tend to fall to gang members. Maintaining their dominance and mana means the gangs feel obliged to be the enforcers of discipline and the prisoner code. By enforcing the codes, the mana of the gangs is protected and enhanced.

Notwithstanding that, gangs can and will manipulate the rules and codes for their own benefit. One-on-one fights will be discussed below as a means of solving disputes, but gangs will often go all in on a prisoner, and thereby discarding conventions they will at times uphold.

The gangs assume this enforcement role because of their strength - i.e. because they can - and they tend to define right and wrong in terms of their own interests. Inevitably this also means that how these codes are delineated, and indeed how different units are run, are highly dependent on the dominant gang or gangs, and the leadership within them. Different units can be fundamentally different to each other – even within the same security classification – simply because the power holders have different priorities.

Gang organisation

Thus far we have discussed gangs within prison culture, but it is important to recognise that the organisation of gangs is often different on the inside of prisons.

Outside of prison, patched gangs have a hierarchical structure that maintains clear leadership positions with defined roles overseeing the whole gang. Generally, these positions are a president, a vice president, sergeant at arms, and a treasurer and/or secretary. Gangs with multiple chapters (or sub-groups) will have the same positions within their chapters, making them semi-autonomous units within the whole. On paper at least, this gives a high degree of organisational sophistication, control and discipline. In reality, however, the larger gangs in particular are often rife with conflict between chapters and often within them as well.

The less sophisticated LA-style street gangs tend to have less formal organisational structures and often times chapters that rally under the same name have been established entirely separately from one another and therefore have little that connects them other than the banner they fly.

This disorganisation, which occurs to greater or lesser extents, creates issues within the prison both for the gangs and for management.

From the gangs' point of view, it means that the well-known and established hierarchies outside are not evident within the prisons. If a national, or highly respected leader was to enter a unit, who is in charge of the gang's members would be straightforward. But more often than not, this is not the case and, therefore, it falls to the longest serving or the most charismatic or the toughest. There is no set formula. And, with that, the potential for intra-gang conflict is significant.

Furthermore, the fact that often substantial conflicts exist between different chapters of the same gang means that two individuals ostensibly being members of the same gang does not mean that they will necessarily be allies. This complicates the management of units and the desire to balance units with different gangs (see p.70).

Gangs and the prison economy

The unique realities of life in prison, which include constraints on certain resources, inevitably result in the creation of alternative economies among prisoners. This most obvious include the trade of prohibited items such as drugs and cell phones, but also goods that are provided legitimately to prisoners but then traded in the informal prison economy. Such economies have been documented internationally (Copes et al., 2010; Roth & Skarbek, 2014), and in New Zealand (Morrah, 2021).

As groups with dominant power within the prison, gangs have significant control over this economy, and are the key beneficiaries of it, something that is also described in international examples (Roth & Skarbek, 2014). While free trade is highly evident in prison, the strength of gangs means that their protection and acceptance is a requirement for those seeking to trade in contraband items on a regular basis. If a non-gang member has a one-off stash of contraband, or an ongoing means of obtaining contraband, they need to work with the dominant gang – or gangs – to ensure this is maintained. This is largely done by 'paying' for protection; something seen as simply a necessary cost of doing business.

Prisoners' supplies of legitimately accessed goods were also frequently reported to be the target of extortion by gangs, although this varied considerably between units and gangs. Whether a person was subject to this form of extortion depended primarily on their status within the prison hierarchy. It is possible that the practice of restricting supply of certain legitimately available goods – most notably nicotine lozenges – is a significant driver of harmful gang activity in prison.

Key findings:

- There is an active trade of many goods in prison within an informal market, both legitimate and illicit.
- Gangs control this trade by either being the principals in it or by offering protection around it. Prisoners who bring in drugs and other contraband are usually expected to give a large portion of their goods to the gangs in their unit.
- Many gang members extort commodities from other prisoners for either on-selling or personal use.
- Key commodities are nicotine lozenges and high-protein food items such as chicken meals, in part because the supply of these items is limited.

LEGITIMATELY ACCESSED GOODS

New Zealand prisons maintain a lively and largely open trade of goods between inmates in prison. While contraband tends to receive the most attention, the majority of the trading that takes place is in commodities that are provided to prisoners by the prison, or that are otherwise legitimately available.

Prisoners described trading food from the prison canteen, menu items from the provided meals, entertainment devices such as televisions, and medication provided to them by prison staff.

In terms of commodities that were traded in this way, the key resources mentioned regularly by participants across all three prisons were “chickens” – portions of chicken served once or twice a week as part of dinner – and nicotine lozenges.

Chickens were valuable because they were the best source of protein available in the prison – something that was important to prisoners who were training heavily.

I think it's because it's the best... It's like the main meat that we get in prison. We get mince here and there but it's not as good as chicken. Chicken's solid meat. It's the only meat we get. [Prisoner]

Prisoners generally said that chicken portions could be bought from other prisoners for around five dollars each.

Nicotine lozenges – referred to by prisoners simply as lozenges or ‘lozzies’ – were prized because they were generally only given to new prisoners for a period of up to four weeks to help them quit smoking, so were in limited supply. New prisoners were often given their supply all at once, making them a particularly convenient and valuable form of currency. The problem of lozenges as an artificially scarce currency in prison has also been noted in media (Walters, 2018; Morrah, 2021). Nicotine lozenges are a relatively recent addition to New Zealand's prisons. Prisons have been smokefree since 2011, but until recently provided prisoners with nicotine patches, which were problematic because the nicotine they contained could be extracted into tea leaves and rolled into a makeshift cigarette. The commonly reported price for lozenges varied between five and fifteen dollars for a tray of twelve, with prices increasing in units that were less likely to receive a steady flow of new prisoners with full supplies of lozenges to trade.

Other forms of currency, and a notable form of trade, derived from canteen items, the most frequently mentioned of which was the instant noodles available through the prison canteen. These appear to have been preferred for trading over other food items from the canteen, likely because of their small size and seemingly universal appeal.

DRUGS AND OTHER CONTRABAND

Alongside legitimately accessed goods, prisons are also the site of a significant trade in illegal contraband.

The degree to which contraband was reported to be available in prison varied considerably between participants. Some reported that it was all but unheard of in their units, while others said it was very common, which likely reflects more on the timing of the interviews rather than a reflection on the units. Contraband exists in a 'boom and bust' cycle in which products were sometimes widely available and then very rare at other times.

Interestingly, despite its popularity outside of prison, participants reported that methamphetamine was present, but not especially common in prison. The reasons for this were not entirely clear, although one participant noted that the prison environment, where the range of activities was limited, and there were frequent periods with nothing to do – especially at night, when the drug would prevent users from sleeping – simply made for an unpleasant place to use methamphetamine.

I've done it once in jail, and I haven't bothered doing it again, cause it was boring as for me. Me and my cellmate were just awake all night in our cell, it was fucking boring as watching infomercials on the TV.
[Prisoner]

Methamphetamine's high cost also creates a barrier in prison where few potential customers have any significant access to money. Many participants noted that when it was around, it was generally not for sale, and had no common price, but was brought in specifically for use by the individuals or groups that had sourced it.

Cannabis was more popular and was more commonly reported. As a drug that is often used to alleviate boredom, its application in the prison environment is perhaps more evident. Cannabis joints – universally described as being tiny in size – could usually be bought for around ten dollars.

Tobacco was also popular. Interestingly, tobacco was generally reported to be sold for the same price as cannabis or slightly lower, at around five to ten dollars for a cigarette that was often meagre and hand-rolled, reflecting that the primary barrier to access was the difficulty of bringing it into the prison, rather than its legal status or price on the street. One key advantage that tobacco had over cannabis in prison was also that it would not show up on random drug tests.

Alcohol existed within prison, but only for those who were willing to collect the ingredients (generally fruit, sugar, bread, water and yeast) and take the risk of fermenting them over a period of at least a week. The complexity and high failure rate of this procedure meant that home brewing was unusual, however.

Other drugs were available in prison, but only on an irregular basis.

The only other contraband that was mentioned frequently was cell phones, which have a clear utility for prisoners, but which were not reported to be especially common.

The reported prices of goods traded in prison

Methamphetamine: generally not traded on an open market, but is brought in for personal use.

Cannabis: ~\$10 a joint

Tobacco: ~\$5-10 for a hand-rolled cigarette

Chicken: \$5 a portion

Lozenges: \$5-15 for a tray of 12

BRINGING CONTRABAND INTO THE PRISON

The three main methods of bringing contraband into the prison were, in order of reported prevalence, visitors, staff, and over the walls. Two participants reported that they were aware of contraband being delivered over the walls using drones; the latter being a means likely to become more common.

Bringing in contraband is an activity broadly engaged in across the prison population, meaning it isn't necessarily dominated by the gangs. The gangs do, however, control or benefit to some extent from nearly all contraband that enters the prisons. Where gang members were involved directly in bringing contraband in, it was primarily on an individual basis, rather than something coordinated by the gang as a group. Members of different gangs will often, however, work together to circumvent prison security in these ways, staff reported. Furthermore, gangs do pressure others to bring contraband into prisons. If a prisoner has been assisted by a gang, the gang may use that to force the prisoner to repay the favour. As one staff member put it:

Once you accept something from one of the gangs, whether that be protection, or it might be some, you know, contraband, or even might be something that you're entitled to have, but you don't have it, so you need it, and somebody gives it to you, you're now in debt to that gang. And, you know, those debts increase, as the more time that goes past, you know, you the debts increase, and eventually, you're going to be forced to do something that you don't want to do [such as bringing in contraband].

A number of participants commented that arrangements to bring contraband into the prison were often short-lived because prisoners were prone to bragging and gossiping.

There's nothing that's kept secret. Yeah, bro, nothing... because the main thing in prison is the status, right?

Say there's an avenue going on where... a truck comes in every few days and they've got the driver on lock. Instead of just keeping it to themselves, they've got to let someone know because they're bursting to tell someone about the success they've had in corrupting this guy, you know what I mean? [Prisoner]

The primary source of contraband coming into prisons was generally understood to be visitors, and participants reported a significant decline in the availability of these items while visits were suspended during Covid-19.

Many participants believed that staff could be corrupted and either paid or extorted to provide favours, which usually revolved around bringing in contraband items such as phones and drugs. Such staff were said by all participants to be rare, however, and very few participants reported having worked with corrupt staff themselves.

Nah [it isn't common]. It doesn't mean it doesn't happen.

I've only known one. He'd get paid into a bank account... he'd get paid in a bank account to bring stuff in. He wouldn't know what he was bringing in, but he was bringing in all sorts of shit: cell phones, drugs, cigarettes. [Prisoner]

Those who engaged in corrupting staff were more likely to be gang members, because they generally carried the most fear and/or favour. The process of corrupting staff was often a long game, whereby prisoners would seek vulnerabilities by watching and listening to staff. In this way was the general surveillance by staff of prisoners is reversed.

In prison there are way more eyes on you, than there are eyes on prisoners. You know, they are watching you all the time and they will look for vulnerabilities. [Staff]

In the incidences where it was known, the corrupting of staff was most often reported to be achieved by building a relationship with a staff member, convincing them to break the rules in a minor way, and then using their prior rule-breaking to extort them into agreeing to accept money – or by threat – to undertake more serious corruption.

Some of them fall for little old tricks. Giving [nicotine] lozenges and things like that. Once they've done it once, you've got them.

And then you're like, well... you did it yesterday, why aren't you doing it today? Broke your rules yesterday, why aren't you [breaking the rules for me today]? [Prisoner]

Other methods, sometimes employed concurrently, included threatening staff and their families, or through leveraging pre-existing connections, such as family or ethnic connections. The threatening of staff was rarely reported but was an option more available to members of gangs, who could call on members outside the prison to facilitate it.

Just threaten the family. Or threaten them which threatens the family. You do six months in here, you kind of learn every staff member's routine and what time they're leaving the prison, you know what I mean? [Prisoner]

Staff reported the use of threats were, indeed, rare – but potentially an increasing problem.

It's not very common, [but] without having hard data – we only know what staff report. But it I think it would be true to say that it's become more of an issue than it has been in the past. [Staff]

While rare, there have been examples of corruption in New Zealand prisons. For example, a Corrections officer was imprisoned in 2011 for supplying drugs to two inmates, and at time of writing there are ongoing investigations into corruption at Rimutaka prison that have seen nine staff members stood down (*Radio New Zealand* 03.05.23). While any incidents of corruption are concerning, the findings of this research suggest these examples are exceptions rather than the rule.

GANG INVOLVEMENT IN THE PRISON ECONOMY

The informal economy is a normal and important part of the prison culture, and it generally works in all prisoners' benefit for it to run well. The gangs' place in the prison hierarchy means that they enjoy a position of considerable importance in this economy, but they can and do corrupt it. Some gang members report they prefer the economy to run freely and fairly, something confirmed by staff. Notwithstanding that, the strength of the gangs means that they become necessary actors in any illegal trade, and just as in any economy, there are vulnerabilities, and in prison the gangs are the primary culprits in extorting goods from weaker prisoners.

Non-gang prisoners who bring in contraband on their own may be expected to share that contraband, with their unit's dominant gang. Failure to do so can result in losing the lot.

The share taken by the gang varies, but was generally reported to be around 50 percent.

No question. It's 50/50 [you've got to give half to the gang]. Or maybe the gang member will be like, "well who's bringing in your shit?" and if his missus is, then they'll be like, "can your missus bring this in for me?" and then that person is now the donkey for the gang. He brings in his own stuff and the gang's stuff. He goes from bringing in half a 30 gram to half a 30 gram and an ounce of weed. Which is a big difference in the packet size. [Prisoner]

This sharing of contraband often applied between gangs as well, and was understood to be a necessary courtesy that would help to keep peace.

See, if one team brought in a stash of tobacco, weed, crack, you have to give every club [in the unit] a percentage.

... [if you don't share]. It's bad for business. Yeah. Yeah, it's bad for business. [Prisoner]

Those who were perceived to have more resources was often a driver of tensions between gangs and gang members, so each gang had a strong incentive to make sure that other gangs felt they had been properly respected.

Alongside taking a portion of drugs that were brought in, gang members also extort legitimately accessed goods from other prisoners as well. This was most often done on an individual basis, but was also sometimes systematised and done on behalf of the gang as a whole, and varied from unit to unit. Key commodities in this regard were nicotine lozenges and chicken meals. This was usually for members' own personal consumption, but could also be done with the intention of on-selling commodities as a way of making money. Nicotine lozenges in particular were reported to be taken from vulnerable prisoners so that they could be resold to those dependent upon them, sometimes even being sold back to the person who they were taken from.

A key time for the extraction of lozenges and chickens from prisoners was on their arrival into the unit, when they were isolated and vulnerable. This made them easily intimidated, and if they were new to the prison, they were more likely to have been given a supply of lozenges.

I've never seen this person, "Oh, who's that guy? Who are you with, brother?" You know, I'll stand at his door, "Who you with?" "Fuck. Oh, no one." Me: "Oh, yep. Oh, your chickens and all your meat come to me. If you don't like it, fuck off." You know, that's how it is. [Prisoner]

Yeah. Like there's one in our yard, one of the Nomads just tries to bully all the new people coming in... because he's like... To the new people, he's like a big tough cunt. But to us, he's like [not]. But they don't know that. And we're just laughing. [Prisoner]

This was also noted by staff.

Somebody will come in, not necessarily be particularly prison savvy... they will be targeted, because, you know, they will be seen as weak and vulnerable. [Staff member]

For those being extorted this way, their initial response to the intimidation was important. Those who showed fear and gave in to demands were marked for repeated and ongoing extortion.

And then you've got that fear and they know it, and it keeps on going on. [Prisoner]

It's just part of the four walls, my bro. Eh? If you can't stand up to own your chicken or whatever, maybe the chicken isn't the right food for you. [Prisoner]

It was universally reported that those who were prepared to stand up for themselves, may avoid losing their property. Participants were divided on what this might actually mean, however: some felt that simply showing that they were willing to fight would generally be enough to convince would-be extortionists that that they were not worth dealing with, while others said that they would have to actually fight, but not necessarily win, and still others said that winning the fight was required. In this way, it appears often not just one fight that defines a prisoner, but a number of fights may be required.

I've seen a young fella come in, much younger than me. One cunt put it on him ... Now they took his lozzies, and then they did heaps of shit to him. I looked, I could see all this stuff happening to him and I approached him. I told him, "Don't let that happen to you. If they've got a problem, tell them to get in the room and then have a fight with them." Most people, if you do that to them straight away, they'll just freak out because they don't expect that you're going to do that.

And he done that and he got their respect. [Prisoner]

As described earlier, this pressure to give up commodities or face violence is a key element of the initial pressure that pushes new arrivals toward gang membership as a source of protection.

While it was generally described as straightforward theft, some participants said that extortion may also take the form of an offer that cannot be refused. While in some cases the offer may be genuine, often it came in the form of a demand. Two gang member participants admitted to doing this, and both framed their method as being an ethical and fair way of getting what they wanted. The preferred currency was packets of instant noodles.

"Oh, yeah. Well this is what's going to happen. You know your chickens?" "Yeah." "Can you give them to me? Well, I'll give you something for them. It's up to you." "Hey. Oh no, I like my chickens." "Well, you don't no more."

"Do you want a noodle for them or do you want a hiding for them? It's up to you." You are putting it on them, but then you are giving them the option. [Prisoner]

I'd be on you like a leech, bro. I'll be on you as soon as you come in. "Bro, where's your lozenges? I'll give you some food for them," you know? "And if you say no to me, I'll get angry". [Prisoner]

A connected practice described by some participants was the paying of 'rent' to gangs who were powerful in a given unit. This generally meant that other prisoners had to give up goods like chickens on a regular basis to avoid being singled. This type of arrangement was described as common by some participants, but was unheard of by others, indicating that the practices were dependent on local circumstances.

While it appeared clear that it was in fact extortion, this was often framed as being a koha that was due to respected members of the community, reflecting the strength of gangs in the hierarchy of the prison.

Oh, you got to pay rent to established gang members that have been in so many years, because of what they did and who they are in terms of gang membership. You got to pay them a chicken a week to pretty much save yourself from getting hurt in the stomach area, because that's where they're attacking now.

On the special chicken night, you get a nice chicken, then everyone has to give it to this guy no matter who you are, him and his mates, for the gang mates. [Prisoner]

It appears evident that part of what makes chickens and lozenges so valuable in prison is their scarcity. Because nicotine and protein are hard to get and in demand, they become worthwhile for gangs to steal from others, and desirable for them to control the supply of. This scarcity, however, is created by Corrections' limitations on their supply.

Providing freer access to scarce resources may reduce the harm caused by gangs:

Working in the kitchen means that not only are you eating really well, you get \$14 a week, and eating really well and having \$14 a week for toiletries and things like that, that's all you really need in jail. So if a prisoner can have that, you automatically get rid of all that tension and all that violence.

[If] everyone was employed, and people were getting 20 or 30 dollars a week, they'd be able to afford everything that they need, and there'd be bugger all problems. [Prisoner]

On the other hand, reducing scarcity may just increase the size of the market and the problems associated with it.

As with many findings of this research, the degree to which taxing of legal and illegal goods occurs, varies greatly. While the taking from lower-status prisoners is rife, there are a number of reasons why it is not universally done. One reason is that some principled gang members find extortion unpalatable. A number of participants reported that gang members would often protest against exploitation of the weak. This means that the degree to which bullying occurs varies greatly from unit to unit. Another reason that gangs allow free trade to continue is that it is beneficial in the long run. Unconnected inmates will be deterred from smuggling drugs in, for example, if they get robbed of them. One final reason is that the taxing of goods can lead to tensions and conflicts in units where the dominant (and often older) players may simply want to get on with their lags.

While the degree to which gangs exploit lower tier prisoners relies greatly on the personalities and gang dynamics of individuals, another influence is the way units are managed, which will be looked at later in this report.

DEBTS

Many key elements of the informal prison economy, from which gang members predominantly benefit, are backed up with violence or the threat of violence. One key element that links the economy and violence is debts, that were seen as a significant spark for disputes between prisoners and gangs.

Debt was something frequently identified as significant by participants as an important part of prison society. In the cloistered community of the prison, a person paying their debts, and keeping their word in general, was seen as highly important. But in an environment where many people have so little, debts often accumulated to the point that they could not be paid. Sources of debt included borrowed money for food and phone cards, debt to drug dealers, and money lost in gambling. Gambling was described as a common source of entertainment in prison.

It has previously been noted that being in debt to a gang is often used as leverage to undertake tasks for the gang, such as by smuggling contraband. When the debt was between members from different gangs, there was pressure on the debtor gang to ensure it was paid. Getting into debt is regarded as a source of embarrassment for the gang, as it makes their members look weak and dependent.

...people get into debts. Making us look stupid by doing silly things. Those sort of... And so we'll have to sort them out. What're you doing? Sort it out, man, you're making us look silly. [Prisoner]

Debts were also a key issue that could spark gang tensions, in particular because the code of behaviour in prison generally held that one member could be responsible for another member's debts if the original debtor had left the unit or otherwise failed to pay. If the debt could not be collected or made good in some way, violence is the inevitable consequence.

Gang violence

Violence, or at least the underlying threat of it, is ubiquitous in prisons. Gang members are disproportionately involved in this violence. Violence is used to bully and extort, to uphold the prison codes and hierarchy, and as the ultimate means of dispute resolution.

Key findings:

- Participants reported that fights and assaults are common in prison, and that most go unreported to staff. Gangs are a disproportionate driver of this violence.
- While fights are not unusual, gangs generally seek to minimise larger gang-on-gang conflicts in prison, and groups that are in conflict outside of prison maintain a state of largely peaceful but often tense co-existence within prison walls.
- External gang conflicts can make their way into the prison if they are particularly serious or if people close to gang prisoners are hurt.
- Gang conflicts can arise from seemingly trivial breaches of etiquette between gang members due to gangs' unwritten codes of behaviour, which mean that members are unable to back down from conflict and must support each other regardless of the circumstances.
- One-on-one fights are a key tool for dispute resolution among prisoners, particularly between gang members, and may be used to defuse gang tensions before they escalate. The fights are said to follow a set of unwritten rules, although these rules are often overlooked.

THE USE OF VIOLENCE IN GANGS

Fighting is a key part of gang culture, and indeed much of the criminal subculture generally, where individual strength and toughness are generally considered to be a man's foremost attributes. Violence is used in many ways by gangs, including as a tool for establishing dominance in the criminal community, or to maintain order within the gang itself (Gilbert, 2011: p.194).

There is a variety of occasions that may call for group violence against an individual within a gang, such as an initiation into the gang, as a means of exiting the gang, or as punishment for a serious rule infraction (Decker, 1996: p.255; Gilbert, 2013: p.157). The target's role in this can vary by occasion and by each gang's customs: in some cases the person is expected to defend themselves, for example in a patching, while in others, such as if they are being sanctioned for breaking a rule, their role may be simply to accept the beating.

As discussed earlier, the strong prohibition on narking to authorities within the criminal community is a key factor within the criminal world (Gilbert, 2017: p.317). In prison, gangs maintain much of their position through violence or the threat of violence. Examples outside of prison include demanding that drug dealers operating within a gang's territory pay a tribute to the gang, or extorting money or possessions from those who have offended the gang in some way (known as 'taxing') (Gilbert, 2017: p. 317). Those within the underworld often have no recourse but to either accede to these demands or suffer violence, because going to the authorities would mean both the potential exposure of their own criminal activity and the enduring brand of being labelled a nark.

Violence is also a key tool for balancing tensions with other gangs. Violence often arises from disagreements between gangs or from conflicts of interest. These disputes, if not settled quickly, can

spiral out of control and become what are generally known as wars – escalating conflicts that can result in significant violence. In this way even minor slights can lead to full-blown gang wars if the process of ratcheting up of tensions is not arrested. There are some generally agreed-upon rules to gang conflicts – most notably that members’ homes and workplaces are off-limits to attack (Gilbert, 2013: p.171-172). But like everything in the gang world, there is an abundance of examples (such as the 2007 Mob killing of toddler Jhia Te Tua) of these so-called rules being completely overlooked.

While these activities may take place primarily outside of prison, all forms of gang violence can be in transferred to prison as well.

GANGS AND VIOLENCE IN PRISON

Gangs have historically been significant drivers of violence in prisons (Newbold, 2007: p.80). This is confirmed by this research, and is supported by data provided by Corrections; although, as will become clear this is certainly and significantly under reported in the official numbers.

Those with gang affiliations are highly likely to be violent offenders, and the proportion of gang affiliates in prison for violent offences has grown somewhat in recent years. As shown in Figure 10 below, since 2010 the proportion of gang affiliated prisoners incarcerated for violent offending has not fallen below 50%, and in 2023 was sitting at 56%.

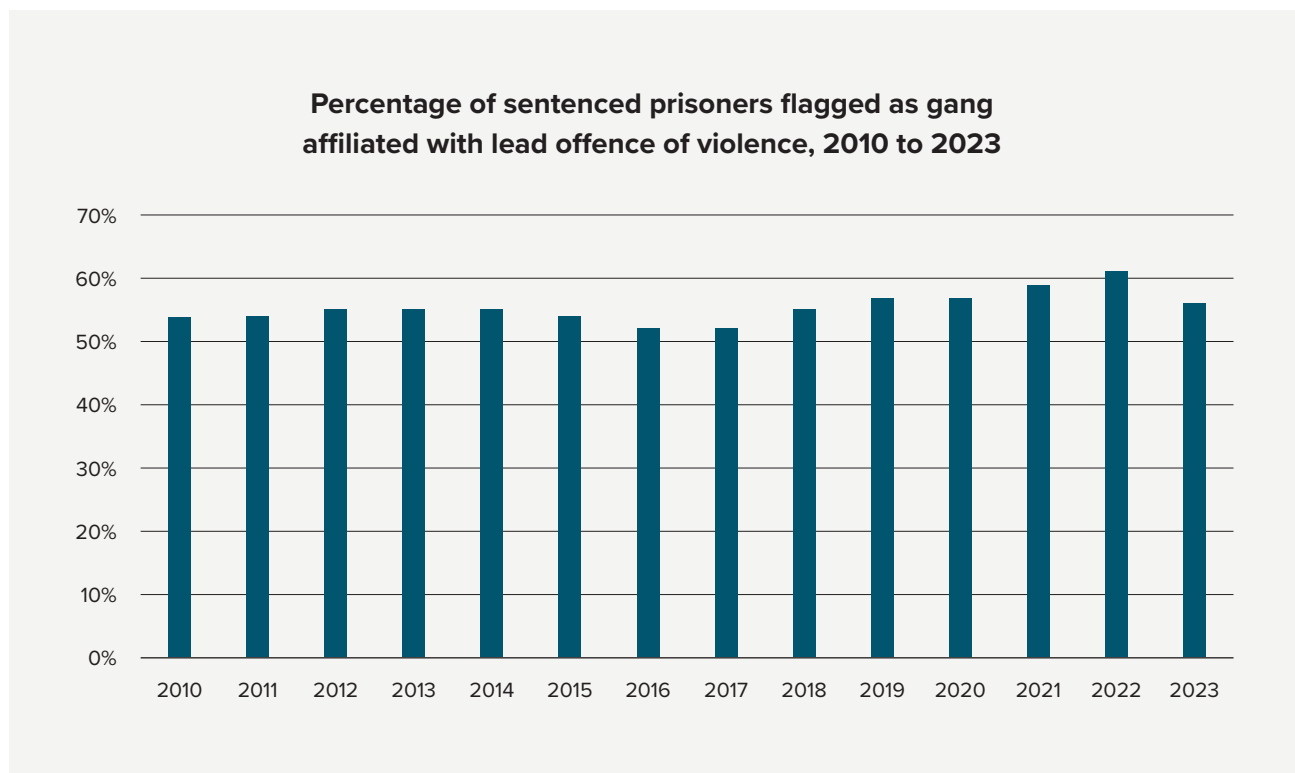


Figure 10

Prisoners reported that fights and assaults in prison are relatively common. Most participants agreed that a lot of fights occur without staff becoming aware, or with staff turning a blind eye to them. Gang participants in particular reported having been involved in large numbers of unreported fights.

I've had about fifty fights since I've come to jail, and only about eight of them got discovered. [Prisoner]

Since I've been on this lag, I've had too many [fights]. I can't even remember how many. More than 20. [Prisoner]

The no narking rule prevents most fight from being reported, even by injured parties, and participants reported that it was generally understood that incidents in which neither party reported a fight or assault would usually not be discovered by staff.

It's up to the prisoner who was assaulted if they want to lay charges or not. And nine out of ten times they don't.

Someone has to [complain]. Otherwise there's no... the staff can follow through with it, but they prefer not to cause it's a hassle for them.

If the prisoner doesn't want to testify and that, then the staff have to. And they don't want to do that. They're just here to do their job, and they don't want to have to go to court cases and shit, make fuckin vendettas against gang members, against them and their families. [Prisoner]

Complaining to prison officers was an obvious violation of the rule against narking, so was not considered an option, even for those who felt they were being targeted, because being labelled as a nark would result in much more violence.

It was better to go in [and fight] than hide and push the [emergency] button and tell the officers, cause that's just being a nark, and if you nark, everyone's going to beat you up and fucking stand you over. Once you're considered a nark, that's it, you're fucked. [Prisoner]

The rule against narking meant that even when prison staff were aware of violence or intimidation, the victims were generally a barrier to their ability to do anything about it.

Staff, they always ask you, "You all right? Everything all right?" And you always say yeah anyway.[Prisoner]

You know, if you get a hiding you come out, "what's wrong?" and you don't say nothing to me? Well, I can't do anything, can I? [Prisoner]

Outside of narking, the only real options that those being targeted repeatedly had were to fight and gain a tier two status, enter voluntary segregation or join a gang for protection.

Assault data⁹ provided by Corrections show that in general, gang members are involved (as either perpetrator or victim) in around half of the assaults that are recorded in prison. It must be noted that these data record only those incidents that staff are made aware of and choose to report. Nonetheless, these data provide a valuable illustration of the overall trends of gang violence in prison, and of the relative impact of different types of gangs.

As shown in Figure 11 below, the number of assaults, both gang and non-gang, recorded in prison has generally been decreasing over the last five years presumably in part due to the steep decrease in overall prisoner numbers. But the proportion of assaults that involve gang members has been rising.

⁹ Assault in this case refers to acts resulting in injury of some kind. This included both serious and non-serious assaults.

This can be presumed to be connected to the rise in the proportion of gang-affiliated inmates over the same period, as discussed previously.

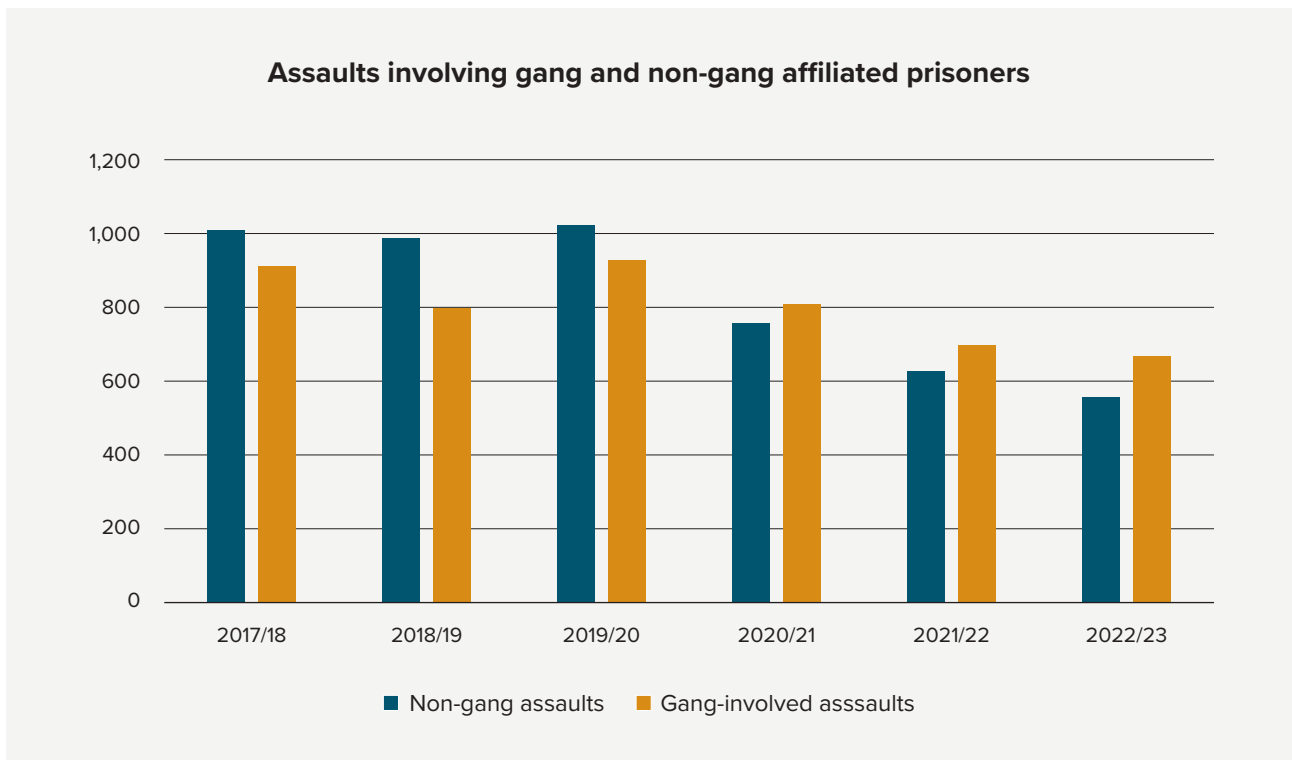


Figure 11

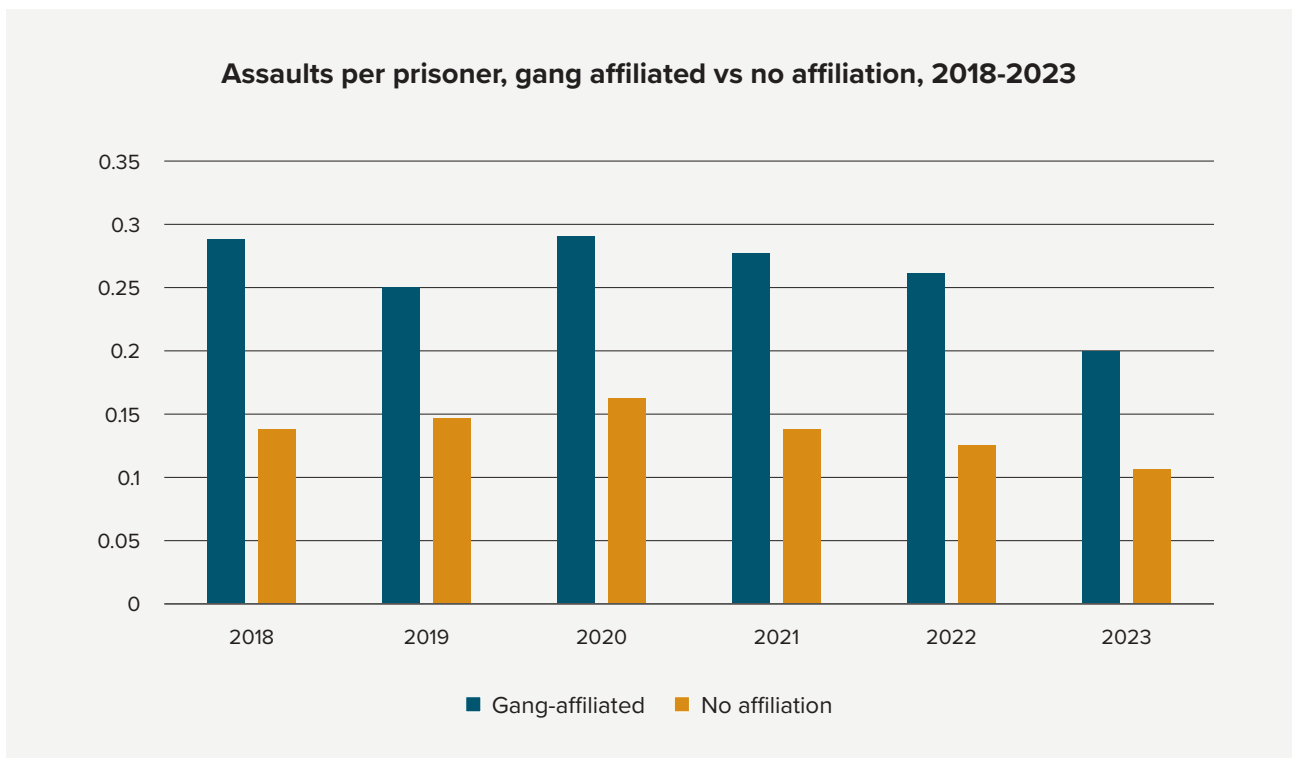


Figure 12

Gang affiliates were involved in assaults at a rate that was significantly higher than that of non-affiliated prisoners. As illustrated in Figure 12, assaults per prisoner have been consistently around twice as high for gang-affiliated prisoners as those with no recorded gang affiliation.

This violence is not evenly spread across all gangs and gang types, however. As shown in Figure 13 above, patched street gangs and LA-style gangs are involved in the lion's share of assaults, while outlaw motorcycle clubs are involved in much fewer.

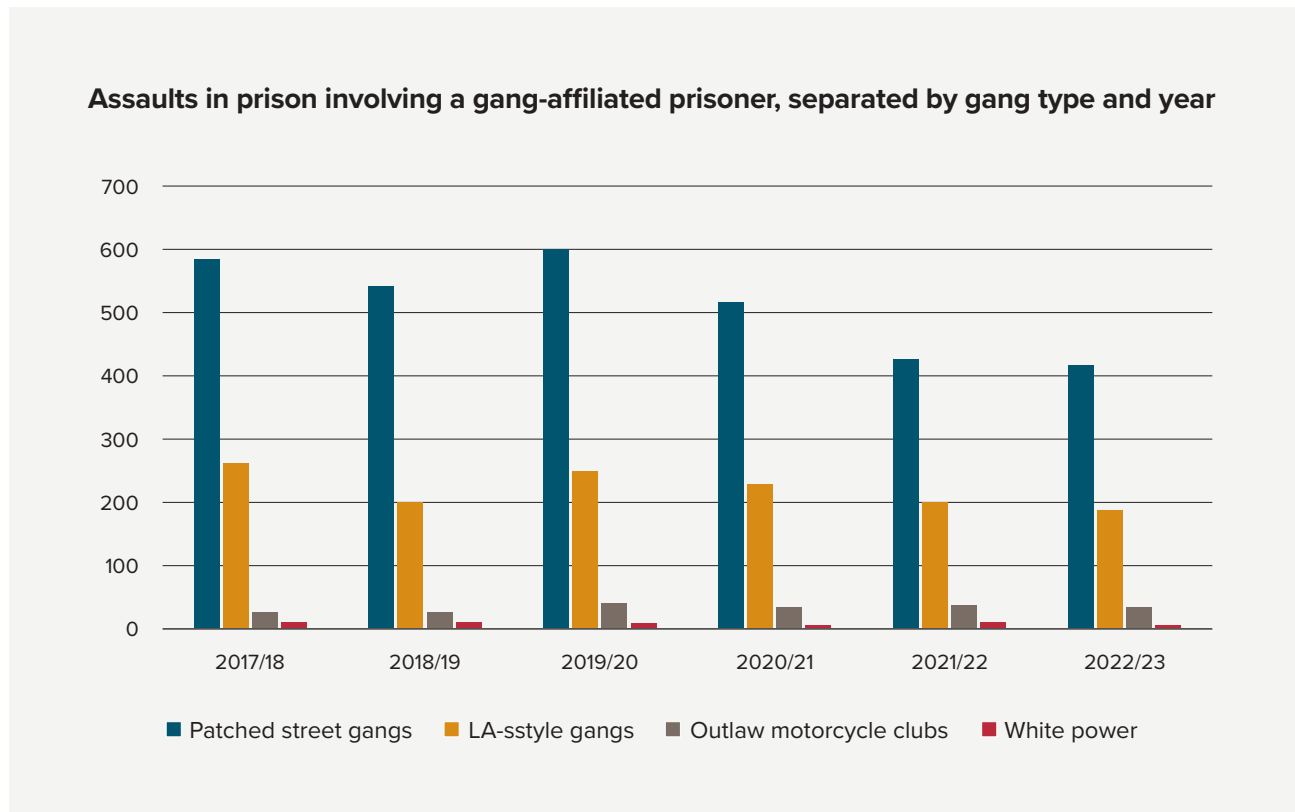


Figure 13

When looking at violent incidents on a per-member basis, however, a different picture of the relative violence of each type of gang emerges. As shown in Figure 14, LA-style gangs¹⁰ were involved in the most reported assaults per member, with patched street gangs a close second. Notably while white power gangs were involved in violence at a high rate per member, the actual number of white power members and assaults was very low, meaning that it is difficult to draw conclusions from, and were inconsistent from year-to-year.

¹⁰ Note that for the purposes of this analysis, only the major LA-style gangs – Bloods, Crips, and Killer Beez – were included as LA-style gangs here. Smaller prison gangs with small membership but whose characteristics could not be definitively verified as being LA-style were excluded.

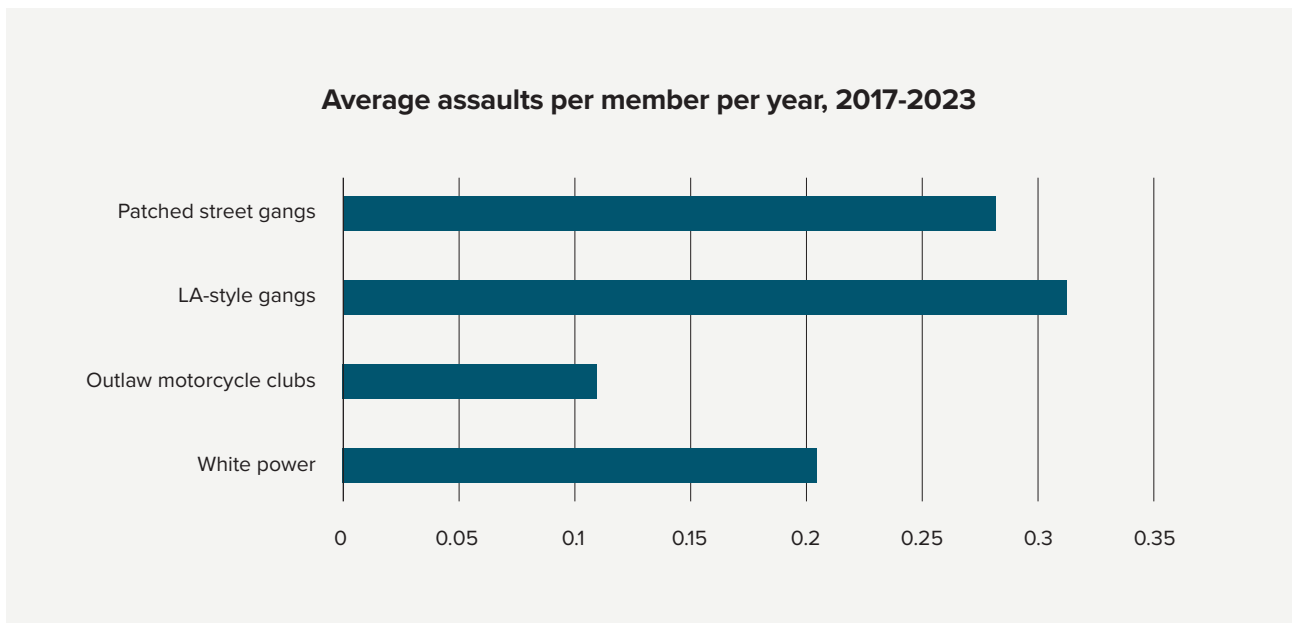


Figure 14

This was in line with the experiences of staff, who reported that LA-style gangs were often the most violent. Staff attributed this to their younger members, greater desire to make a name for themselves and their gangs, and their less hierarchical structure.

They're less traditional. I mean, the old traditional Mob, Black Power. The older style prisoners in that never used to cause you much hassles. That is young feeder groups want to make names for themselves [and are the source of much more violence]. [Staff member]

This may also be an important driver of the high rates of assaults among patched gang members – as noted earlier many of New Zealand's gangs have undergone something of a resurgence in recent years, and have taken on large numbers of new recruits, many of them young and eager to prove their worth in ways that older members are not. It is possible that taking a sample of only younger patched gang affiliates would see a rate of assaults more akin to those in the LA-style gangs.

While rates of assaults were relatively high among white power gangs, it should be noted that because the white power gang population was very low, they represent only a small number of assaults.

Violence can also be heavily dependent upon individual members as well. Staff reported that a small number of people were responsible for a disproportionate share of the violence in prison, and in many cases specific individuals arriving in a unit can dramatically increase the level of violence and general unrest in that unit.

You can have spikes in incidences on units or, or just unrest. And when you when you look back at it, it's like 90% of this stuff is caused by like 5% of the population. One or two bad apples or whatever you want to call them that arrive in a unit can really upset the balance. [Staff member]

This is often tied to the age of the gang member, with those younger members more likely to want to build a reputation. Also, prospects are ordered to commit acts of violence in order to prove their dedication to the gang and/or protect the leadership from facing the consequences of the violence.

Older members, and older prisoners in general, said that they were less concerned with jockeying for gang status and the violence that came with it.

I find the older members don't really give a fuck. I mean, we've got [members of a variety of gangs] in here that are all sort of over 40 and they all get along. They'll sit and eat together and celebrate each other's birthdays and shit, and I'm thinking what's the fucking point [of fighting]? That's another reason, I've done so much jail time and watched so much treacherous shit going on on different sides... I'm like, well fuck I don't really get it. Yeah. [Prisoner]

As noted in the review of literature, this is in line with international findings on declining prison gang violence and duration of membership (Gaes et al., 2001).

GANGS AND ASSAULTS ON PRISON STAFF

Alongside assaults on other prisoners, gang members are disproportionate perpetrators of assaults on prison staff members.

This was identified as a significant concern by staff, and one that had become more acute in recent years.

We've seen other phenomena happening in prison that we you just wouldn't have seen 20 or 30 years ago, female officers being assaulted, even non-custodial staff being assaulted nurses, you know, program providers. You just never used to see that back in the day, you know, just didn't happen. [Staff member]

As shown in Figure 15, gang affiliated prisoners have been responsible for at least half of the assaults on staff members in the last five years, despite being only around a third of the prison population.

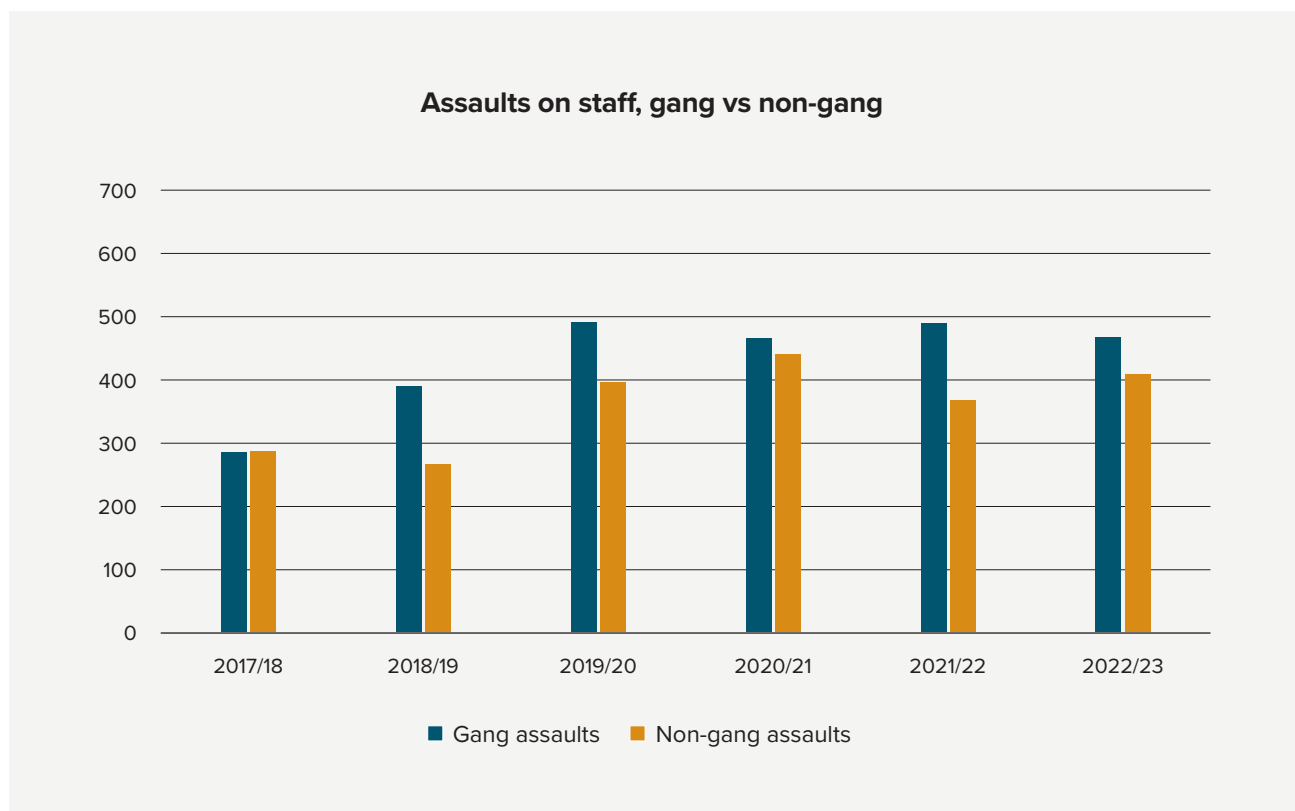


Figure 15

As was the case with prisoner assaults, assaults on staff are not distributed uniformly across gang types. As shown in Figure 16, patched street gangs and LA-style gangs are responsible for the large majority of assaults on staff.

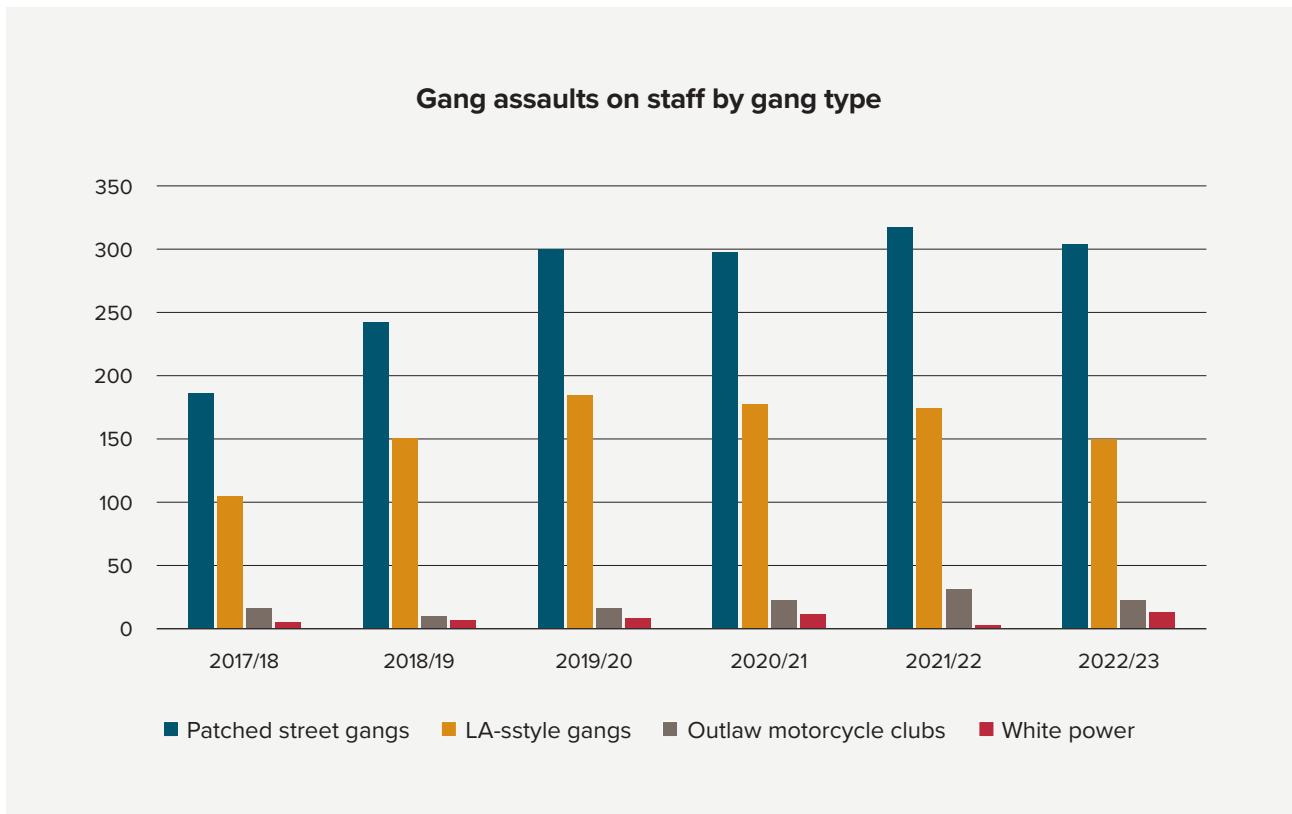


Figure 16

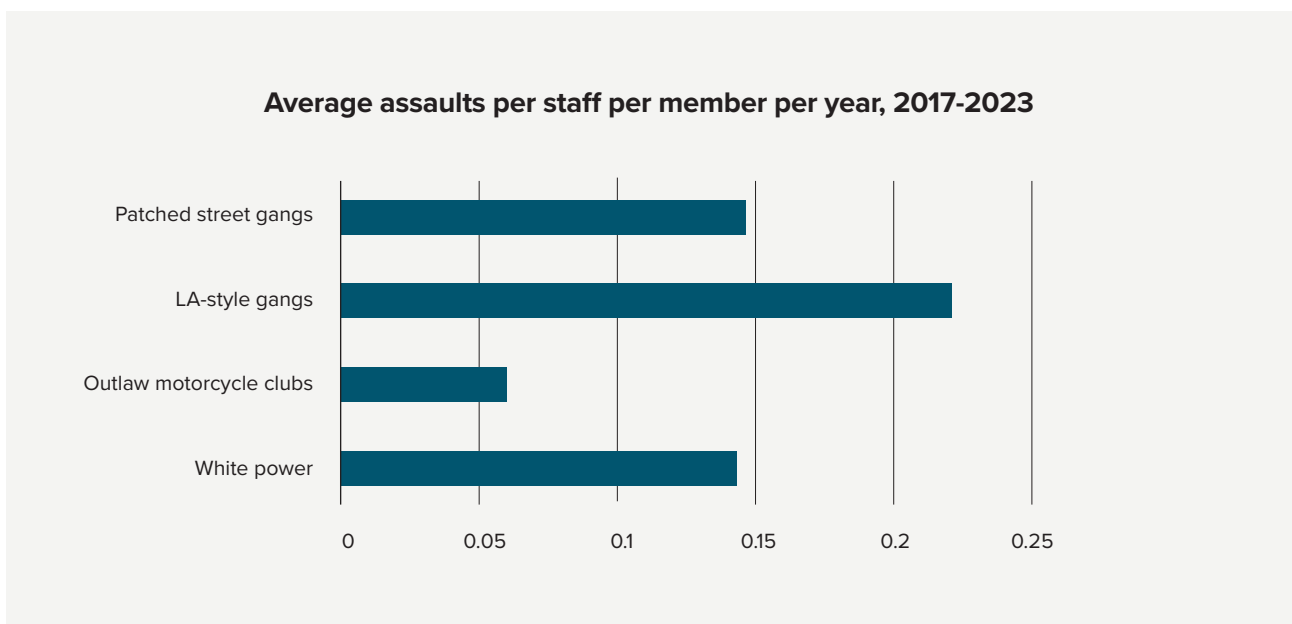


Figure 17

While patched street gangs are responsible for the largest number of assaults, on a per-member basis LA-style gangs are once again the most likely to commit assaults on staff. As discussed earlier, while white power groups also have a high rate of assaults on staff, the very low number of members and assaults involved makes this difficult to draw clear conclusions from.

INTER-GANG VIOLENCE AND GANG INFLUENCE ON VIOLENCE IN PRISON

Despite the prominence of violence in prison and gang culture, the common state described by many gang members in prison was one of somewhat tense but necessary coexistence with other gangs. This 'armed truce' was in contrast to gang life outside of prison, where rival gangs have much less contact with one another and were much more likely to conflict when they did come into contact. The realities of prison life – where members could be moved into a unit where they were outnumbered by other gangs at any time, meant that for the most part it was simply not worth engaging in dangerous disputes. As a result, gang members often said that their units could go for long periods of time without any serious trouble.

You always have incidents from time to time, but what most people don't realise about prison is that 99% of the time, nothing happens at all. [Prisoner]

Ongoing close contact between gangs also meant that violence could also erupt suddenly, however.

Lately it's been pretty good. It's been pretty mellow. I'd say a few months... [But sometimes] it changes just like that. But then all the guys you've been getting on with pretty well can suddenly become an enemy potentially. [Prisoner]

It occurs in stages, what I'm noticing. It is like you'll go through a three-month period with very little violence, and then all of a sudden, two weeks, there'll be heaps of violence, and then it'll peter out again. [Prisoner]

Where fighting did develop, gang enmities in prison generally centred around personal disputes that escalated to involve the gang as a group. These issues were described as often being petty and trivial interpersonal issues, but the unwritten rules of gang membership nonetheless required that other members become involved, and that the gang project an outward impression of strength by refusing to back down.

If there's a beef it's not usually to do with the club beef, you know what I mean? [It's usually personal]. [Prisoner]

When something happens, yeah, and I mean, the reality is, is that [when] violence occurs [between gang members] it's usually over something pretty fucking minor and stupid. [Prisoner]

If any Black has a problem with any other club or anything, well we're all in there. Because if we don't act, they're going to act on us, you know? [Prisoner]

When gang conflicts arise it is a stressful experience that is broadly felt.

When there's tension in the air, you can feel it. They could go off if... like just for example me and you had a problem, we're both from different gangs, and then that spreads on your side, your team, and then my team's all fired up. You can feel it in the unit because it's just a little circle and you can feel if somethings going to go down or not. Yeah, there is a bit of tension and it's quite... you can say noticeable, it stands out like dog's balls, mate. [Prisoner]

If the problems cannot be resolved through discussions or one-out fights (described below), then they can escalate into serious inter-gang rivalry.

To stay prepared for conflict, and to project strength and power in general,¹¹ gang members described a strict regime of regular exercise and training. Gang members were generally expected to train together on a daily basis, and could be sanctioned if they failed to do so. This training could include organised fights.

Yeah, we box and kick box. You know, that's how we... And then we spar each other. That's how we train each other. We train each other like that. Then we get into the physical fights and shit just to make sure that we're on point, you know? [Prisoner]

While gang members prefer units dedicated to their gang, peaceful coexistence was still maintained in units where gang populations were integrated. When populations swung too far in the direction of one gang, however, that gang would often begin to expect preferential treatment.

It's much better when numbers are even, evenly balanced. Without question. Without absolute question. [Prisoner]

There was only one of every gang member pretty much. There was me, which they classed as a Killer Bee, there was one Bandido, one Black Power, one mobster. So we were all kind of equal, and we all hung out together. It was weird. But it was all good. [Prisoner]

In situations where one gang is strongly dominant, the incentive to avoid conflict is reduced. Solitary gang members in units dominated by other gangs described resigning themselves to being targeted and potentially suffering serious injury. While they could ask to be sent to another unit this was generally considered a dishonourable choice.

Yeah, oh second day. Because I came in at night time, and then the next day, I got a hiding.

I got lumps and shit. And then the second day, because I thought ok its over, like and still being in the first time in jail before, this is part of jail, let's go out. It's all gone, done with. And that happened three times. Three nights in a row. Three days in a row. Then on the fourth day, or the third day after my hiding...the screws moved me. [Prisoner]

I've been in predicaments like that, too. Like a whole wing wanted to kill me as soon as they found out I was a nigger [Black Power member].

Yeah, I was ready. I had shanks ready to go. I was ready to get it on. Fuck, if you die, you die, you know? It is what it is. [Prisoner]

THE INFLUENCE OF GANG CONFLICTS OUTSIDE PRISON

While generally gangs left wider disputes at the prison door, serious external conflicts or those closely connected to particular prisoners can move through the palisade walls and impact the prisons.

Gangs in prison, overall, are somewhat insulated from the activities of their counterparts outside. Gang members generally do not take orders from or coordinate with gang leadership outside – although this can happen – and they were unlikely to pursue gang conflicts that were occurring outside within the prison.

It doesn't always come in. The outside shit, it's usually outside shit. [Prisoner]

¹¹ This training also had important benefits unrelated to violence, such as providing gang members with something to do and structured daily activities, and fostering group cohesion.

This was also driven by practicality: as discussed, engaging in gang conflicts within prison was something that gangs generally tried to avoid because of the stress, imbalance of membership within units, and potential repercussions.

Another important factor in this was the disorganisation of gangs in many units. As noted earlier, although many prisoners in a unit might be from the same gang, they were often from different chapters of large, nationwide groups, meaning that while they had a shared loyalty to the gang as a whole, they did not necessarily know one another prior to arrival in the unit, and did not answer to the same people. As a result, gangs within prison often do not have the same hierarchies or formalities of function that are central to gangs outside the wire, and operated more as an alliance of connected individuals than a chapter as such.

Nevertheless, if an external conflict became serious enough, or the rival group did something that was perceived to be especially egregious, that conflict could make its way into prison as well.

But if say, a rival gang shoots at the house and it's a family house or shit like that, that's when it'll come in. Or if there's a death, that's when it'll come in. Tensions are high. [Prisoner]

Similarly, if a conflict happened to be personally connected to a member within the unit, and they wished to pursue it, the collective nature of gang organisation meant that other members would be drawn in.

...say something could have gone on the news about them having a war out there. All it could take is one member to come in here that doesn't agree with that and walk in here and tell the other Mob members, "Look, we've got to [get involved with] what's going on," and that'll change it. [Prisoner]

External connections could also bring in orders related to gang conflicts, but these were described as very rare. Such orders were unlikely come through phone calls or other communication methods that could be intercepted, but could be delivered surreptitiously in other ways.

So, if there's anyone that needs to be got or anything, that will never be said over the [phone]... Yeah, it's very dicey about talking over any sort of device, do you know what I mean?

Someone will come in, or visit. Or one of the boys will go to court and get a message in the dock or something. Or if we've got a cell phone then ... you can be a bit more open. [Prisoner]

RESOLVING DISPUTES IN PRISON

The key to gang dominance in prisons is their strength in numbers and willingness to use their strength against other prisoners. Gang members are obliged to jump into a situation where one of their members is threatened or attacked, even if the gang member initiates the aggravating incident that sparked it. This means that disputes that start off between individuals can escalate to involve many others, either immediately or in the future, because gangs do not want to lose face or reputation by losing.

Furthermore, gangs will gang attack or ambush other prisoners, in uneven numbers and/or involving weapons, if they feel they need to. These tactics are an important element of why the gangs generate so much fear.

Notwithstanding these facts, an important means of dispute resolution among all prisoners is one-on-one fights. In relation to gangs specifically, these one-on-one fights are used to ensure smaller disputes do not become bigger ones. This is often preferred because it allows aggrieved parties to settle their dispute between themselves, without drawing the gang as a whole into the conflict, and to do so in a way that was seen as being fair.

They're just by themselves [in the cell], and there will be probably a couple gang members from each side standing outside to make sure nobody goes in. It's a one on one. [Prisoner]

Fights were generally done in prisoners' cells, where sightlines were obscured and no cameras were present.

There's no cameras [in the cells], no one can see. [Prisoner]

They've got cameras everywhere these days, but not in toilets and rooms. [Prisoner]

These fights tended to follow a set of unwritten rules that included a prohibition on the use of weapons, and the expectation that a fight would end when one participant is incapacitated. Organised fights were often presided over by referees or corner men, who stand at the door and ensure that things are fair and do not get out of hand.

People all sit at the door, make sure everything's done cleanly, there's no stabbing sort of thing.

So if someone's knocked out on the ground and this dude's still hammering him, this dude will come in and pull him off, like yeah, that's enough. He's obviously fucked, he can't do anything anymore, just leave him. [Prisoner]

These referees are usually either neutral parties or a balanced representation of the two groups involved.

So if there was a Mob member fighting Blacks, obviously you're going to have something else. Like a Crip or Blood standing at the door, making sure everything's fine... either that or one of each gang come in to watch it. So I've noticed that now recently actually. So Mob was having a fight and this Black was having a fight. Another Mob came in and another Black come in they will sit down and make sure what happens happens cleanly. So yeah. There's a mutual agreement to making sure that everything is clean. [Prisoner]

There was no certainty that the rules would be followed, however, and some participants commented that they might be obligated by the internal rules of their gang to step in when a close friend or senior member was fighting and losing.

You can never really guarantee that everyone's not going to jump in and smash you over.

It would depend on the situation, I'd say. but I'd definitely [sometimes have to step in to help a fellow member fight] ... especially if he was someone who I'd spent a lot of time with, or he was one of the high ups, I'd definitely jump in. [Prisoner]

All going well, a key element is the practice of formally ending the dispute by shaking hands afterwards.

Shake each other's hands. And that's it, it's sorted. That's the beef gone. [Prisoner]

This was designed to signal that the matter was settled and there would be no further escalations of violence.

You literally have to shake hands, yeah, otherwise... they might come and get a knife and stab you. [Prisoner]

While participants emphasised that measures were always taken to keep these fights hidden from staff, some participants were also of the view that staff would sometimes turn a blind eye to this type of violence for the sake of either personal safety or the harmony of the unit as a whole.

If something's going on, with us particularly, and they know something's happening, they just don't want to do anything because they know that they're outnumbered sort of thing. [Prisoner]

This was not reported consistently, however, and it was unclear whether some instances may simply have been cases of staff being unaware of what was happening.

Some prisoners felt that allowing these instances of controlled violence in some cases was the best way for staff to manage tensions.

Sometimes it's better if they turn a blind eye and let it sort itself out. And it's better for us too when these issues arise to get them dealt with, because no one likes walking around for days on end on eggshells, you know what I mean? [Prisoner]

Participants emphasised that in most cases, the focus in these dispute resolution methods was on avoiding a situation where things could spiral into full gang conflict, but this was balanced against each group maintaining their honour.

Again, however, it needs to be emphasised that gangs cannot allow themselves to lose face, so these rules will often be broken if they lose. Like many findings of this research, this will depend on the gang balance of the unit, the prisoner leadership in the unit, and the individuals involved.

Gang recruitment in prison

As noted, prisons have been identified internationally, and in the limited older New Zealand research, as significant sites for gang recruitment. This research finds that to be undeniably true. This has ramifications for prison management, but also wider society.

The key factors that drive prisoners towards gang membership in prison are a need for protection, access to goods and other material benefits, status, and the sense of brotherhood that gang membership brings. These factors are similar to those often present in gang recruitment outside of prison, but are also shaped by the unique realities of the prison environment, including the prison hierarchy and prison culture.

A key time for gang recruitment was at the start of a person's imprisonment, when uncertainty and fear allowed gangs to make a particularly strong case for obtaining membership. These concerns may diminish over time, however, and it was often agreed by gang members that prison was actually more difficult and stressful for those who were in gangs than those who were not.

Key findings:

- The most commonly reported reasons for joining gangs in prison are protection, access to goods, status, and brotherhood.
- Arrival in the prison, and to a lesser extent in a new unit, are key junctures for gang recruitment. This is when fear of violence and extortion is at its greatest, and gangs exploit this fear to draw new recruits in.
- While some of the benefits of gang membership are real, often they do not match the realities. Many gang members regarded membership as more stressful than remaining neutral, due to the importance of maintaining the gang's status and protecting their own status within that gang.
- New membership is often solidified by gang tattooing, which is a significant issue.

THE PROCESS OF JOINING A GANG

Traditionally within patched street gangs and outlaw motorcycle clubs, members must undergo a 'prospecting' period, during which time they are part of the gang but not full members, whose bidding they are expected to do (Gilbert, 2013: p.84; Bradley, 2018: p.7). This generally includes tasks relating to the upkeep of the gang, such as cleaning and guarding the gang pad, as well as other jobs such as manning the bar at events and sober driving members home. It may also, but often does not, include committing crime on behalf of the gang or its members (Taonui & Newbold, 2016). This period can last anywhere from a few months to a number of years, and ends with a 'patching', in which the prospect receives their patch (Gilbert, 2013: p.84-85) They may also be expected to 'take the rap' for crimes committed by members.

In groups of other types, such as LA-style street gangs (such as Bloods and Crips) and skinhead gangs, the process of entry is often less formalised, and generally does not require a prospecting period (Gilbert, 2013: p.58). These gangs, in particular those that are smaller and more youth-oriented, often serve as "feeder" gangs for the patched street gangs, with particularly dedicated or effective members graduating into a patched gang as they mature.

The rules regarding becoming a member of a gang in prison also vary. Some gangs encourage members to join in prison and actively recruit prisoners (Carr and Tam, 2013: p.15), while others will allow prospecting in prison but not patching. Some do not consider time spent in prison while prospecting to be a valid part of a person's prospecting period at all. It was clear from our interviews, however, that prison was a significant gang recruitment centre. This was a view not just of all prisoner participants outside of voluntary segregation, but of all staff participants as well.

As noted earlier, gang numbers are currently rising across the country, due to concerted efforts at recruitment, in part driven by a 'numbers race' between gangs. Once-strict entry requirements have in many cases relaxed in recent years, meaning making membership easier.

GANG RECRUITMENT IN PRISON

It is a clear finding of this research that prisons are a place of gang recruitment in New Zealand. It was the opinion of all of the prisoners and staff that spoken to for this research that New Zealand's prisons are significant sites for entry into gangs, and that many of those who join gangs in prison may not have done so if they were not in prison. Often the original significant contact was being encouraged to train with the gang, and from there the process begins.

As noted in the review of literature, previous research has identified gang recruitment in New Zealand's prisons as a significant concern, but is now significantly out-of-date. More recent Corrections administrative data show that few prisoners who enter prison without a recorded gang affiliation leave with a recorded affiliation (Long-term insights briefing: Justice Sector, 2020), apparently demonstrating limited recruitment of prisoners, although it must be noted that because Corrections data records only gang affiliation as opposed to membership, those who go from a limited but identifiable gang connection through to prospecting or full membership while in prison would record no change in gang affiliation status, despite an immense shift in their actual level of gang involvement. In line with this, the processes of recruitment described by participants did not necessarily involve going entirely from no gang affiliation to full membership, but rather for many was a case of solidifying and formalising gang connections that already existed. This was, nevertheless, not necessarily something that would have happened had the environment and stresses of prison not put the choice directly in front of them.

Of the 22 participants who were (current or former) gang members or prospects, seven reported that that they had joined their gang in prison.



Figure 18

REASONS FOR JOINING GANGS IN PRISON

As noted above, the reasons for joining gangs outside of prison are complex, and well-documented in literature. Reasons can involve ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors. Push factors are the negative elements that push individuals away from prosocial life and toward gang membership, such as poverty, experiences of adult abuse, and educational failure, while pull factors are those that draw individuals toward gang membership, such as safety, status, and money.

As with recruitment on the outside, in prison it is usually a combination of factors that work in combination, with a variety of factors being important for different people.

This research found four primary factors that drew potential members toward gangs in prison. These were protection, access to goods and other benefits, status, and brotherhood. The first of these, protection, is primarily a push factor, in that prisoners are pushed toward seeking the support of the gang by the threat of violence and extortion, while the other three represent pull factors, in that they pulled new members in with the promise of benefits.

Notably, no participants, either members or non-members, described being put under any significant direct pressure to join a gang. This would appear to indicate that the pressures or influences to join a gang are external to the gangs themselves: rather than intimidating prisoners into joining, gangs create an attraction to join by positioning themselves at the top of the prison hierarchy and as a solution – or perceived solution - to a variety of problems, many of which are created by the gangs themselves.

Protection

As outlined above, prison can be a frightening and potentially dangerous place, and fear of violence and extortion are key drivers of gang recruitment in prison.

Many participants suggested that they were pushed toward gang membership because it was a means of protecting themselves from extortion and violence, and of gaining the sense of security.

This was something that was highly visible to staff, who described it as the most important driver of gang recruitment.

[They feel like] they've got to do it to survive... they feel that they need to act like they need to join a gang to make sure that they're not preyed on. [Staff member]

Short term protection [is the key driver of gang membership] in my mind. Yeah... I'll join, because if they don't join that gang, they'll get beaten up. [Staff member]

The key thing that gang membership offered protection from was violence. Gangs provide their members with a guarantee that other members will back them up at all times, protecting them from bullying, extortion, and violence in general.

Some people... they get treated like, if they can't look out for themselves they may be treated pretty bad. Picked on, food taken off them... [But once they join the gang] they're looked after. [Prisoner]

One participant described forming his own small gang in response to bullying and extortion efforts from another gang; a solution that he reported was effective.

Many of the decisions to join a gang happen in the earliest days of a person's time in prison. As outlined, new prisoners are targeted immediately and aggressively to assess their status – an experience that can be highly intimidating. At this time, gang membership offers significant attraction.

Access to goods

The first of the pull factors that were identified by participants was that gangs provided their members with greater access to material goods.

Gang members reported that when they joined the gang they were provided with resources taken from others, and with resources pooled between members.

...going in with nothing, I all of a sudden had everything like smokes, food, munchies, TV, stereo. I was just given everything. If I didn't have it I could get it. Drugs.

Ciggies, they were being taken off people left right and centre and just divvied out between us. Yeah. [Prisoner]

Because where we're housed is a two storey, all the gangsters are upstairs and all the neutrals are downstairs, kind of thing. And we've all got like flash shoes and flash fucking, brand new undies and socks and glasses, and clothes and that. And then they've all got... Downstairs and that, they've all got like, just the jail jandals and stuff like that... [Prisoner]

As noted earlier, gangs could also expect to be provided with a portion of the contraband that other prisoners brought into the prison, as part of the cost of doing business, thus gang members gain significant access to drugs and other contraband.

Status

As noted, prison has an informal hierarchy that places gang members at its apex. Gangs' strength provides a significant sense of status to their members, both inside and outside of prison, and participants described gang members as automatically receiving a level of respect (or at least fear), and often favour, from other prisoners and even staff, which was a strong pull factor.

Gang members tended to refer to non-members as 'civilians' or 'neutrals', if they are 'stand-up' prisoners, or by more derogatory terms such as 'peasants' or 'bundies' if they were not.

But other people, like neutral people and the people they call peasants. But I feel sorry for those sort of people. I try to include them too because it's hard for them because you're not a gang member. [Prisoner]

Some participants also noted that staff would sometimes allow gang members, and in particular senior members, extra privileges.

They'll let them out for longer and let them go and have extra phone calls, just so they don't [make things difficult for staff]. [Prisoner]

Because we get treated differently [by] the screws and that... Like we get more yard time and long showers or whatever. And we get to fuck around a bit more, while the other ones are locked up in their rooms already. [Prisoner]

A key benefit in this vein was access to employment: gangs were reported to hold de facto control of the prison jobs in many – notably high security – units, either because they were given special treatment by staff, or because they were able to stop other prisoners from accepting jobs through intimidation.

It's normally the gangs that get the jobs.

Nine times out of ten, the middlemen that pass around the dinner that night will have to be the same gang. And sometimes the other gangs work together. They have an agreement, you know, Mob in the kitchen, Black Power will be cleaners in the same unit. [Staff member]

This ensured that gang members had access to money, as well as the broader benefits that might come with employment.

Belonging and Brotherhood

Finally, the last widely reported pull factor towards gang membership was brotherhood. Members liked having a group of men that they could rely on, confide in, and enjoy spending time with. This same factor is a powerful draw toward membership outside of prison as well, with many members coming from less-than-ideal family situations, and finding a surrogate family in the gangs (Gilbert, 2013).

Straight up, I had no one. I had no one to talk to.

A couple of my friends were in the blacks [Black Power] and they said well this is like your second family, if not your first family. [Prisoner]

Gangs provided a number of positive social factors in this vein, including training together, organising group meals for special occasions like Christmas and birthdays, and mentoring (whether positive or negative) for younger members.

I felt like I was picked off the ground, and given so much love to change my ways and my lifestyle in a positive way, not in a negative way. And so when I felt that I felt like I could pick people up and do the same thing to them as well. And it got contagious and it felt good. [Prisoner]

One participant noted that gangs provided a place where members could be vulnerable – something that would be an unacceptable risk in the wider prison environment.

If you're in a gang, you've got people you can confide in. If you want to go have a cry, you can go and have a cry. But ain't no one going to show that, you're going to hide it from the rest of the unit because that's a sign of weakness. Vulnerability in this place is a sign of weakness. People sense vulnerability, they'll prey on it. That's when they'll take your shoes, your watch, your check-ins. That's when that shit all starts happening. [Prisoner]

Among the larger gangs, such as Black Power and the Mongrel Mob, this was something that members could rely on having access to in any prison that they found themselves in because of the gangs' reach and breadth of membership.

I could get sent to, where? I'm on South Island now, I could get sent all the way up to fucking North Island.

Yeah, you could be a Mob, so you could go to any jail in the country and you don't know anyone in there, as soon as you go in you go straight to the Mob.

[It makes things] a lot easier, mate. [Prisoner]

While these four primary reasons for joining were clearly influential, and evidently resulted in many prisoners joining gangs, it was notable that many participants found that the draw of gang membership was most pronounced when they arrived in prison, and diminished over time. While gang membership provided easy access to goods, benefits of status and friendship, and protection from harassment, these were all things that would for the most part be accumulated naturally over a time spent in prison. Moreover, gang membership does come with significant downsides (see p.64). These issues were not always immediately apparent to those considering joining in the early period of their sentence.

RESISTANCE TO RECRUITMENT

While recruitment into gangs is a significant issue, large numbers of people who enter prison do not join gangs – as noted earlier, Corrections statistics show that gang affiliates currently make up only around a third of prisoners. There are at least two elements to consider when looking at those who resist gang membership. The first is that not all people who enter prison are acceptable to gangs as a result of, say, age, personality, physical weakness, social class, offence type and so on. These people may fall into the lower status categories within prison. This reduces the number of possible recruits.

Nine participants in the sample of this research reported that they were not, and had never been, members or associates of gangs, and a further six described themselves as non-members with varying degrees of gang association.

The reasons for choosing not to seek recruitment to gangs varied, with answers including not wanting to have to remain a member after leaving prison, lack of interest in the social obligations of gang membership, and taking pride in not relying on others for safety.

Those who did not join gangs, particularly those in mainstream units dominated by gangs, still had to exist within the gang dominated cultural framework, meaning they had to fight when disputes arose.

While some of those who chose gang membership often did so for reasons that were beyond their control, those who did not tended to make conscious decisions.

One reason was the feeling that their families, and in particular their mothers, would be disappointed in them if they did.

No [I never thought about joining a gang], because I know my mum would be disappointed. [Prisoner]

[The main reason I didn't consider joining a gang] was my mum, she'd be disgusted. [Prisoner]

This speaks to the push factors discussed in the review of literature; while the thought of disappointing prosocial family members was a deterrent to some, those who do join gangs are more likely to be those without prosocial family connections, or with families in which gang membership is already normalised.

Some associates said that they were able to gain most of the benefits of gang membership without taking on its obligations, which allowed them to have the best of both worlds.

I've always had the benefit of that anyway. It's because the guys I've known over the years. When I go to most jails, all the Heads usually said, you know, why are you not training with them, sitting at the same table or the same landing? But I get treated like one anyway. Same with the Highway 61s down at Christchurch because we were in Borstal with most of the guys. [Prisoner]

The personal factors that militate against gang membership are important to understand, but the sample contacted in this research was too small to allow definitive conclusions. However, it is worth noting that none in the sample talked about being pressured to join, meaning the pressures or influences to join a gang appear to be external to the gangs themselves and more to do with the dynamics of the prison environment.

ENTRY TO PRISON AS A KEY TIME FOR GANG RECRUITMENT

An important theme that emerged in discussion about gang recruitment was the significance of the early period surrounding their arrival in prison. This was a time when a young person's status within the prison had not yet been fully established, and when their vulnerability to extortion and bullying was high. For this reason, it was a time that new arrivals felt most under threat, and were therefore most amenable to the promise of protection and status offered by gang membership.

Those [young] guys coming in... they're totally different kettle of fish... no discipline at school, no discipline at home. It's streamlined into the jail now. And now they're joining gangs and getting tattooed up straight away as soon as they come in. [Staff member]

While those who held fast and stood up for themselves could generally avoid ongoing harassment, many lacked the strength or resolve to take a stand.

This was not the only time that prisoners might feel drawn toward gang membership, but perhaps represented the juncture at which it was most preventable.

TATTOOING: THE MARK OF SOCIAL CONTROL

Gang tattooing, in particular facial tattooing, is a choice made by some members to demonstrate their undying loyalty to the gang. Tattooing marks members permanently in a highly visible way, multiplying the alienation and social rejection that drives gang membership (Gilbert, 2013). A less discussed issue of tattooing is that gang tattoos are a powerful form of social control.

Both prisoners and staff widely reported that tattooing was common in prison, and that tattoo artists were easy to find. Indeed, gang tattooing is one of the most obvious examples of prisoner ingenuity and, often, skill.

All the gangs in here are trying to tattoo cunts up with their marking. [Prisoner]

You've got [young prisoner], his first time in prison. Nice clean face. He goes to [high security units] and, yeah, then six weeks, a month, maybe less he has a Black Power Fist on his cheek or a bulldog on his forehead...Yeah, that's what happens. [Staff member]

While there are many formal and informal reasons (fear of an exit tax, fictive kin relationships etc.) that compels members to stay in a gang, gang tattoos are significant for two reasons. The first is that gang tattoos are highly regulated, so on leaving a gang a member may wish to get rid of their gang tattoos, which is expensive. Secondly, tattoos are markers that make reintegration into mainstream society (or to another gang) is extremely difficult. In both these ways, then, gang tattooing is a strong impediment to gang exit. What gang members describe as a mark of commitment, can also be seen as an important tool of gang control.

It's another sign of loyalty...

And then you're locked into doing favours for the gang, because you can't gain employment so you have to go to these gang members and collect money for them. That's all you've got, you know. [Prisoner]

Prison tattoos can be done manually with little more than a needle and the hand of the artist, but often improvised tools are assembled, which are highly valued. Tattoo guns are assembled by combining a small motor (such as one taken from a CD player or an electric shaver) with everyday objects like pens and cutlery.

Both manual and electronic means of tattooing require ink, which is derived from soot made by burning plastic cutlery, and thickened with substances like shampoo or toothpaste. Although they were relatively common, tattoo artists could charge a high price for their work, particularly if they were skilled. This latter point is important, as the acting of tattooing is not just a part of gang and prison culture, but also a significant part of its informal economy.

Several gang participants reported having received tattoos in prison, including some who had received facial tattoos.

Participants reported that many tattoos done in prison were not gang related, although among those spoken to, all who had received tattoos in prison were gang members.

Guys like to just draw pictures on people, and to make them pay a bit of money. [Prisoner]

Tattoos were often reported to be done early in a person's membership, in order to reinforce their commitment and make exit difficult. Facial tattoos, which cannot be hidden, are considered particularly effective in this regard.

That's what they tend to do when they recruit them, the first thing is a tattoo on the face. [Staff member]

[The gangs say] "we'll look after you. But we'll only do that if you get a tattoo on your face." [Staff member]

The prevalence of tattooing varies by prison and unit, and changes over time depending on the availability of equipment and artists; although participants stated that both are usually plentiful.

Several participants reported that tattooing was most often done overnight, with the tattooist and the person receiving the tattoo sharing a cell.

[I've seen people] locked up overnight and then come out the next morning and some guy's got a big fucking skull finger [symbol of the Killer Beez] on his face or something. Yeah. I've seen one guy had his whole back done right in one night, big Killer Bee thing over his back and yeah. [Prisoner]

One participant noted that tattooing has slowed down as prisons have moved back to single celling. When prisoners are double bunked, tattoos were much easier to do, he reported.

...they're moving everybody to single cells, that's stopped a lot of the tattoos. [Prisoner]

This was echoed by staff.

I think, single cells, yeah. It's not just tattooing, but a lot of trouble we have in prison [would be reduced] if every prisoner was in their own cell. [Staff member]

As noted earlier, gang tattooing in New Zealand began in prisons and has since become widely adopted by many gangs. In this sense, the activities of the prison have much broader ramifications within the gang realm and with that wider implications for society. Gang tattooing is, therefore, a significant issue and one returned to in the section on Gang Control.

THE DISADVANTAGES OF GANG MEMBERSHIP

Despite the strong recruitment pull in prisons and the high status provided by gang membership, most participants – including gang members – reported that life was not better as a gang member in prison. The main reason for this was added stress, largely tied to upholding the mana of the gang and inter and intra gang politics of gangs. Those who were not aligned with gangs were in a position to keep their head down and 'get on with their lags', while those who were in gangs could expect to be drawn into gang activity in a variety of ways, regardless of their own attitudes.

A central element of this was conflict or the threat of conflict with other gangs, and the management of ongoing gang tensions.

I think that people who are in gangs have more stress. Definitely we had more stress. I think I'd be stressing out more about where I'm going or what unit I'm going to, just in case there are those people there that are rivals that might do something. [Prisoner]

Being a gang member is harder because of the enemy, so to speak. [Prisoner]

Because it is the primary source of their status within the criminal underworld and prison society, gangs are highly focused on projecting an appearance of strength, and on maintaining their position in relation to other gangs. Participants reported that this created significant added stress for gang members, who have to consistently act in particular ways to avoid being seen as weak.

You got to show who you are, you stand your ground, and don't let no one punk you, you know? Someone comes in, you know, and... your bros are watching you, you know? And I'm like, "Fuck." I've come to those situations a few times, you know? [Prisoner]

This can apply to status within the gang as well.

It's the politics, jail politics, they get you. The people, your own bros that have been in here for a long time, in their head they've got this power thing going because they've been here longer, they control everyone that comes in with a fist. [Prisoner]

Gang membership also created obligations relating to other members.

I could walk into a unit and if there was someone from my gang there earlier that owed and ran away, that bill's mine now. [Prisoner]

You're respected more, but like, either you're expected to like in... now if there's a fight going on, you're expected to jump into that. [Prisoner]

For weaker tier three prisoners who are not in protective custody, who are subject to extortion and bullying, gang membership is likely to be seen as easier than being neutral, but for those tier two prisoners who can look after themselves physically, remaining unaligned was generally considered much less stressful.

And then people that are not with clubs [gangs] but they can hold themselves, it's easier for them. [Prisoner]

So while gang membership may look attractive to many when they enter prison, the reality often plays out very differently. While gangs can and do offer benefits to membership, gang membership overall can create significantly more difficulties than non-membership.

These concerns extend beyond the informal working of the prison and its culture, but also to security classification and gaining parole.

Gang exit

While entering gangs was common in prison, leaving them was widely reported to be much more fraught. While the removal of status and benefits of gang membership are significant inhibitors to leaving a gang generally, in prison there is the fear of retaliation for what is seen as an abandonment or betrayal. In the prison mainstream there is nowhere to escape from retaliation if you renounce your gang allegiance. All participants of this study said leaving a gang in prison was extremely difficult, indeed next to impossible.

Gang membership is a significant inhibitor to desistance from offending (Wood & Alleyne, 2010), so enabling prisoners to leave their gangs represents an important opportunity to reduce the chances of recidivism. Participants had little awareness of any support available to those hoping to leave a gang in prison without going into voluntary segregation.

Voluntary segregation represents a good option for those leaving gangs, but comes with significant social stigma in the criminal underworld because of its association with narks and child molesters, being those in the lowest tier of the prison hierarchy.

Key findings:

- Gang exit is very difficult in prison due to the difficulty of avoiding gang members in mainstream prison units.
- Entering voluntary segregation is a practical option for those seeking to exit gangs, but carries significant social stigma.
- Direct support for gang exit from prison staff is limited.

LEAVING GANGS IN PRISON

Gang membership is styled as a lifetime commitment, and as such the penalties for quitting are generally harsh. Even those leaving with the permission of the gang can often expect to pay a fine or tax, surrender property like motorcycles and cars, and have to submit to a beating by other members. Those leaving without the approval of the gang, and without having submitted themselves to fining and violence – can be targeted for more significant and ongoing violence and harassment.

Yeah, it's nearly impossible [to leave a gang in prison]. [Prisoner]

If I leave I've got to pay 15 grand, and the possibility that I will get a severe hiding or even killed.¹²
[Prisoner]

These same penalties apply in prison (with fines potentially being claimed on release), although their form is shaped by the prison environment, which can make leaving gangs particularly difficult.

A common strategy for avoiding violence outside of prison is simply to hide from members – often by leaving town – until cooling feelings and other turnover of members has led the gang to lose interest. This was seldom possible in prison, save for by choosing to go into voluntary segregation, meaning that those who left gangs were subject to a near-constant threat of violence.

Cause you're known. You'll get, if the word does go round... I'd hate to know what it's like in jail to leave. You can't just leave. You'll get treated like a little fuckin dickhead, you'll get smashed over every day until you get out. It's not easy to leave, bro. [Prisoner]

Unless you sign on protection or go to the at-risk unit. Unless you get out of the unit, nah. Unless you sign on protection ... you're going to get hidings every day. [Prisoner]

Voluntary segregation is certainly an option for gang exit, but as noted in the section below, does have some issues, notably the social-psychological barriers of going from the highest tier in the prison hierarchy to being housed with the lowest.

Shifting to other prisons is an option with some smaller gangs, but was generally not possible for those leaving nationwide gangs whose membership is large enough that they have populations in all major prisons. Word of their departure could be expected to spread quickly between prisons, and the violence may continue.

The one possible exception to this was seen as older gang members, who may be given a pass. Those who have been with the gang for a long time and are respected were reported to be much more likely to be able to leave without paying tax or suffering violence.

[For older members] yeah, it's different. You've put in your work. You can pull away straight away, yeah.
[Prisoner]

PRISON SUPPORT FOR GANG EXIT

As described by participants, support from prison staff for those considering leaving gangs was limited. One participant suggested that there were some steps that prison staff could take to help those seeking to leave gangs.

Yeah, get them out of that unit, put them in a unit where that gang [isn't].

And if they say they are leaving a gang, take their word for it. Some guys tell the screws, "Hey, I don't want to be in that yard, I'm not with them," however at the time, they still chuck them in there... And then next minute they've gone back to their old ways again. [Prisoner]

¹² Notably it is not unusual for gang members to report a concern that they could be killed by their former gang for leaving, and this appears to be a common threat that is levelled against members. In reality, however, deaths relating to gang exits are incredibly rare.

Voluntary segregation (also known as voluntary protective custody) is the primary mechanism by which those fearing violence in prison can seek support from staff, and as such is a key tool for prisoners in need of a safe environment after gang exit.

Segregation of prisoners is generally done in special units comprised entirely of prisoners in voluntary isolation. Prisoners can ask staff to enter voluntary segregation at any time, although they generally must have a credible reason for doing so and are subject to assessment by staff.

Voluntary segregation is a feature in New Zealand's prisons that came into use in the 1980s as prison musters grew and the proportion of those imprisoned for violence rose. As reported by Newbold (2007), use of voluntary segregation was initially low, at only 4% of the prison population in 1983, but rose to around 20% in the mid-2000s, and has continued to rise in recent figures provided by Corrections, which show it has reached a full third of the prison population in 2022. This rise corresponds to the growth of gangs in prison, which appear to be a key element driving prisoners towards voluntary segregation.

Notably, the actual number of prisoners voluntary segregation has remained steady over the last five years, but, as shown in Figure 19 below, because of significant declines in the prison population over that time, this amounts to a significant proportional increase in its use. In 2018 some 24.5% of the prison population were in voluntary segregation, but as of 2023 that proportion had risen to 35.08%.

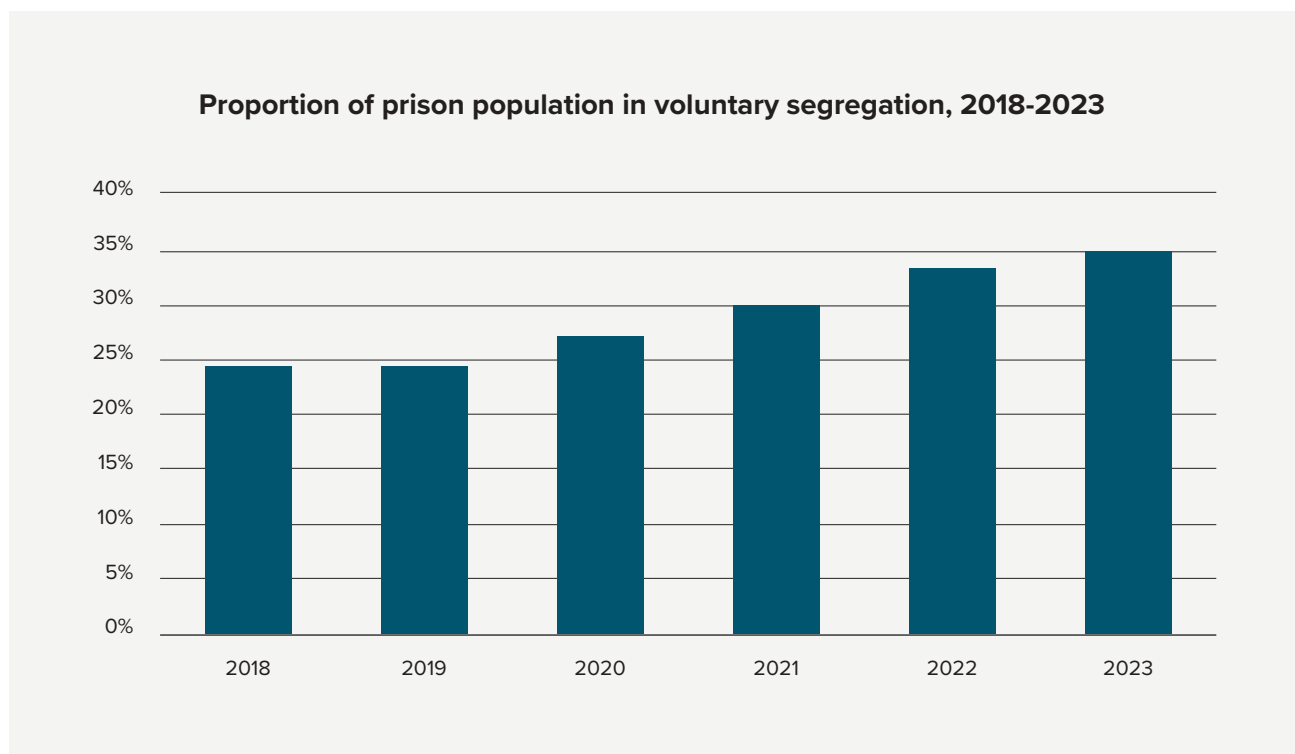


Figure 19 Proportion of prison population in voluntary segregation 2018-2023, sourced from Ara Poutama.

Within the voluntary segregation units, there are nevertheless a number of gang prisoners. This is interesting because universally going to protective custody is seen as weak by gang members and would ordinarily not be tolerated. As shown in Figure 20 below, overwhelmingly prisoners in voluntary segregation are not recorded as gang affiliates, but there are still a significant number (between 400 and 750 between 2018 and 2023). While some are undoubtedly gang members, it appears likely that most are gang affiliates but this would need to be investigated further.

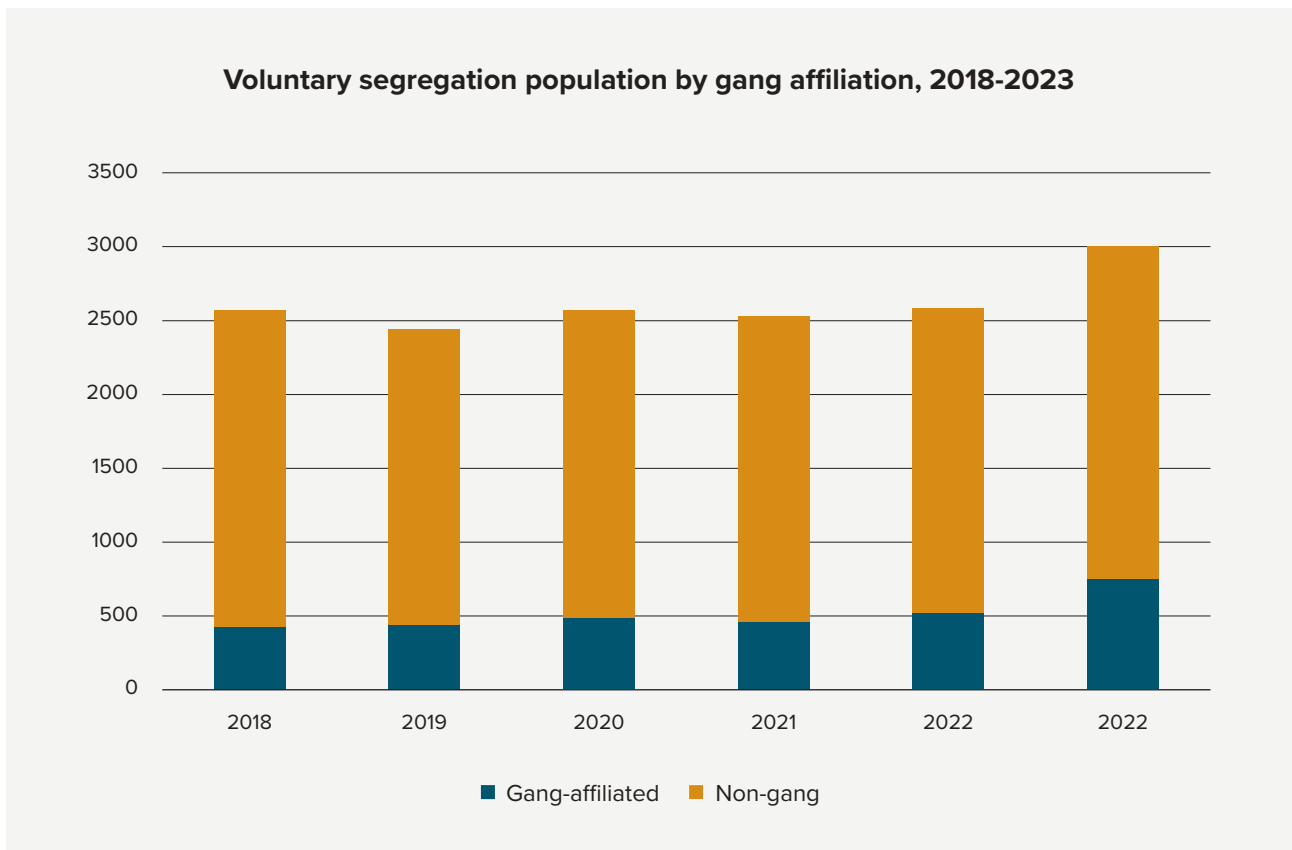


Figure 20

Prisoners described voluntary segregation as a safe environment where the issues of gang activity were generally not present.

It's more of, I just want to put my head down, do my lag sort of unit. [Prisoner]

A critical deterrent to the use of voluntary segregation for leaving gangs, however, is the stigma attached the entering voluntary segregation among gangs and prisoners in general. Because segregation is perceived to be primarily for 'narks' and child sex offenders who would otherwise be targeted as the lowest in the hierarchy of the mainstream prison community, those who enter voluntary segregation are viewed with suspicion, and often hostility. This can mean that entering voluntary segregation comes with a loss of face in the criminal underworld, on top of the loss of friendship and support from former associates. While being forced away from criminal associations may not be a bad thing from a desistance perspective, it can create a significant social barrier entry that may discourage those considering gang exit from taking the steps to properly commit to it. Dennehy and Newbold (2001) argue that one solution to social exclusion is to join a religious group, and many choose this option.

Potential avenues for improvement in enabling gang exit are discussed on page 76 of this report.

Addressing the problems of gangs in prison

As discussed previously, gangs create issues of organised violence, bullying, and extortion, and are significant contributors to the importation and trade of illicit goods in prison. Gangs and gang members can be significant disruptors within units, and can interrupt the structure and benefits of programmes run in prison. Gangs also recruit heavily in prison, exploiting the fear and uncertainty felt by new prisoners, yet are seen by many as a source of support and safety.

Staff were united in their assessment of gangs as the foremost concern affecting the running and effectiveness of New Zealand's prisons.

I think gangs are probably a number one issue within prisons. And that's a very broad term, I'd say gangs, as in the recruitment, the violence, the drugs, the harm that they pose to staff and other prisoners... I would say it's by far our biggest risk to the site, and it's probably the biggest barrier to stop genuine change helping other people as well. [Staff member]

As it stands, there is no reason to expect these issues to decrease at any point in the near future. As noted earlier, gangs are experiencing a resurgence in New Zealand, with gang numbers growing across the country, and a concomitant growth in gang imprisonments can be expected. Moreover, if prison numbers continue their current pattern of decline, gang members (whose offending is typically more serious, more violent, and therefore more likely to result in imprisonment) are also likely to continue to grow as a proportion of the overall prison population.

The findings of this research offer no silver bullets for ending the issue of gangs in prison, but one can highlight some key features of effective gang control, and some insights into the gang recruitment exit processes that are likely to be of value.

We acknowledge that many of the suggestions and elements featured in this section will come as little surprise to those involved in the running of prisons, and will be limited by physical and staffing resources.

Key findings:

- Staff acknowledge the serious issues that gang cause in New Zealand prisons, and have a realistic outlook on their approaches.
- Balancing gang numbers in a unit appears to be the best meaning of controlling gangs, as is quickly isolating disrupters.
- Greater staff training around gangs and their control is important, but perhaps the most significant issue is creating greater consistency in staff treatment of gang and non-gang prisoners.
- The creation and sharing of intelligence between different agencies is important for gang control, and appears to be a strength of Corrections.
- Efforts at reducing gang entry and encouraging gang exit should be a priority of prison management.

CONTROLLING GANGS IN PRISON

There emerged from our interviews with staff and prisoners a number of practical areas that are important to effective gang control in prison. Interestingly, often the same views were held by both prisoners as well as staff. This is not an exhaustive list, but provides avenues for investigation and highlights areas of potential importance. Furthermore, there are a range of measures like restricting contraband, which are general and obvious issues that can assist with the management of gangs in prisons, but the focus here is on issues more specifically related to gangs, although many of these elements will be important ideas for managing prisons or prisoners generally.

Balancing the gang numbers

As noted in earlier in this report, the general rule in New Zealand prisons is to balance gang numbers. Although separating gangs in small sections of high security units does occur, generally it appears that merging gangs is a better strategy, albeit one that requires careful management.

An important tool for minimising gang harm in prison is the balancing of gang numbers in a unit to avoid giving one group control. This was identified by both staff and prisoners as important, and as preferable to a system of separation.

It is better to have a balance of the different gangs...You normally say, well, if two of them, two of them, two of them... [Staff member]

Participants reported that units with balanced numbers would be less likely to see one gang abusing their power, resulting in less violence overall and less gang related harm for non-gang prisoners.

Non-gang prisoners placed in single-gang environments were felt to be at much greater risk.

If you have too many in one if you've got a unit is solely dedicated to a unit to like, say the Mob and the Mob in this unit... if you put anyone else in they'd be highly at risk. So yeah, we have to try and ameliorate them across the estate. But that's not always easy to do. [Staff member]

This balance creates something of a cold war-like effect, whereby no gang can gain a significant upper hand in a unit and therefore wield too much power among prisoners. Furthermore, essentially giving one gang its own unit can mean that, rather than expending their energy jostling for status with other gangs, the single dominant force turns its attention towards staff. This would create significant management problems, would impede efforts at fostering positive change, and potentially place staff at risk.

This was something that has to be balanced carefully, and can be undone quickly, however. A sudden influx of new prisoners can shift the balance of a unit dramatically, as can the arrival of a single particularly troublesome individual. It is important to isolate these prisoners quickly.

Isolating the disruptors

The disruption that can be created in a unit by particularly troublesome individuals – often gang members – was something that all prisoners acknowledged could happen, and something they all disliked, even if the disruptor was a member of their own gang. A relatively peaceful unit could be swiftly transformed by these people.

Given that the potential harm created by an individual can be considerable, it is important to recognise and isolate disruptive influences as quickly as possible, both within the units and in programmes.

Because of the gangs' requirement that members back each other up in disputes and fights, regardless of cause, troublesome individuals can dramatically alter the gang dynamic within a unit. One young member seeking to make a name for himself by picking fights can quickly cause tension and retaliatory violence.

Such individuals are recognised as problematic, especially by older members. Some participants even reported that they may take steps to get rid of difficult members of their own gang, including having them beaten up by rivals.

It is noted that the idea of isolating highly disruptive prisoners is being undertaken by the Persons of Extreme Risk Unit (PERU) in Auckland's maximum-security facility at Paremoremo.

Communication and rapport building

Staff reported that the key to managing gang prisoners, in large part, is the ability to build rapport with them. While this is true of all influential prisoners, there are often nuanced elements to gang relationship that can provide extra challenges. Rapport building then, does need to be viewed in concert with training and intelligence gathering and sharing (discussed below).

As noted, gang culture is highly focused on projecting strength and maintaining individual and collective mana, which plays an important role in shaping their interactions with staff and other prisoners. In simple terms, this focus on strength and power means that gangs are averse to being seen backing down from a challenge, regardless of the harm it may do them. This can have significant implications for how gangs respond to prison rules and staff.

It is widely understood that inter-gang conflict creates cohesion within gangs, deepening ties of brotherhood, and hardening members' willingness to endure punishment on behalf of the collective. This same effect can also be reached through conflict with authorities, and has been documented in New Zealand. Evidence from past gang control efforts by Police shows clearly that suppressive and confrontational methods can produce negative outcomes, and that the methods that are most effective are those that address gang dynamics (Gilbert, 2013).

In a prison context, this means dealing with gang members (and prisoners generally) in a way that avoids falling into the pitfalls of creating and stoking an adversarial relationship.

A key factor to success in this area identified consistently in staff interviews was the ability to build rapport with prisoners.

You'd always get a big guy coming in one day and he's got his basketballs under his shoulders, if you know what I mean. Yeah, He walks in like that and within three or four days and his shoulders start going down. Before you know it, you get a good rapport with him and you're joking around and you're having a good time. [Staff member]

Effective staff are those who can communicate with prisoners well, who are perceived by prisoners to be fair and reasonable, and are clearly understood in the choices that they make.

I always say to people that want to join Corrections; can you talk to people? If they say no, for me, that's a big red flag. Yeah. So if you've got the ability to speak to people [you can be a good corrections officer].

So yeah, for me I'd say 90% of this job is communication. [Staff member]

This includes being respectful of prisoners, but also being prepared to respond firmly when they act out or try to intimidate staff.

If you go out with respect and you know how he treats you... Yeah, I'm saying you treat them how they treat you. [Staff member]

Even punitive measures directed toward gang members are much less likely to be received poorly if they are felt to be a 'fair cop', that is a proportionate response behaviour, something that depends, in large part, on how they are communicated.

Building rapport effectively also includes skills such as knowing when and how to speak to gang members: engaging with them in front of others, for example, can place them in a position where they feel the need to show some form. But the same person spoken to privately might respond entirely differently.

By contrast, staff who rely on an authoritative approach can find themselves cultivating adversarial relationships with groups that are used to arduous conflicts with authorities and other gangs, and which are predisposed to digging in their heels and refusing to back down.

In an ideal world, communication and rapport-building skills are something that Corrections would screen frontline recruits for, but personnel shortages often prevent this.

One of the biggest things we lack is money and resources. Yeah, staffing is really hard at the moment because we're just not getting enough of the right people to fill the positions. [Staff member]

Alternatively, this is an area where better training is likely to be of value, although the resources for such training are limited.

Acknowledging that certain people will naturally be better at rapport building than others, the one area that can be undertaken by all staff is consistency of approach. This was universally seen by staff as vital to managing prisoners, and was acknowledged strongly by prisoners as well.

Consistency

Prisons are clearly a challenging environment to work within, and often difficult decisions need to be made in dynamic situations. This can mean that only basic outcomes are desired.

My thing is if we if ended a day [and] nobody's escaped, we aren't smacked in the teeth, we've had a pretty good day. [Staff member]

This is an unsurprising concern given the rates of assaults on staff, as discussed on page 52.

However a drive for safety can lead to appeasement. Both prisoners and staff acknowledged that in the interests of keeping the peace, gangs often received preferential treatment.

Gang members are able to intimidate staff through threats of violence within units but also outside the wall. Acceding to gang demands was seen by some as a matter of personal safety.

So these compromises are just necessary...necessary through for the means for me to go home safe, for you to feel safe at home. [Staff member]

As previously discussed, however, making small concessions and bending the rules for prisoners is something that can snowball into corrupt practices and a significant loss of control.

In the long term, you start to lose that control. And this is where it just I mean, it just leads to a whole dysfunctional system. [Staff member]

It's massively important, but I think one of the drivers towards inconsistency is things like fear. Staff are scared. ...I don't know that it's worth actually getting into an argument about it. And so slowly, boy, slowly, slowly that line gets eroded...So if you come to work and you're always scared, you're making decisions based on how you feel rather than what serves the policy or procedures. [Staff member]

Remaining consistent was identified as a key factor in staff interviews, but was an area where all acknowledged a need for improvement.

The best run units have got consistency. The prisoners will be treated the same way. And if they get told no they don't go to someone else and get a yes because then you just get everything going wrong. [Staff member]

If you don't have consistency, you don't have control. [Staff member]

When they ask you [for something] and you say no, and the next person says yes and nobody's on the same page, then it's you might as well throw the book out. [Staff member]

Some staff felt that this was an area where standards had declined in recent years.

But back in when I first started, we had more control. And it was consistency. [Staff member]

That's a problem that we've got with the newer staff. When I started in the job, I was told always start with a no because a no can at any stage become a yes [but a yes is difficult when it becomes a no]. [Staff member]

While these inconsistencies and preferential treatment can lead to corruption or the general emboldening of gangs, the overwhelming issue that was reported was it created serious follow-on concerns for other staff. One illustrative example was staff handovers. If a new shift comes into a wing and certain activities have been allowed, and then different rules are enforced by incoming staff, it creates enormous pressure.

The person doing their job well will be hassled or assaulted because other staff aren't doing their job properly. Those staff tend to leave or move toward acting in ways that keeps them safe [by also bending the rules]. [Staff member]

In this way inconsistency may lead to more inconsistency and to a breakdown in order and discipline; all to the benefit of the gangs.

Gangs' exploitation of staff and management systems in prison is facilitated by inconsistent application of rules. While the issue of consistency is for the most part a question of good prison management in general, rather than an issue specific to the gangs, its application is key to effective control of many of the issues that gangs create.

While communication and rapport-building with prisoners is to some extent dependant on individual personality and skills, consistency is something that can be mandated and more effectively systematised. This is something that is likely to significantly aid efforts to control gangs in prison.

Training

As noted on page previously noted, international research has concluded that training of prison staff should be considered a high priority in responding effectively to the challenges presented by prison gangs; and is also in part key to rapport building and consistency.

By providing staff with comprehensive training on how to identify, prevent, and respond to gang-related activity, Corrections can better equip their personnel to handle the complex and sometimes threatening situations that gangs create. Such training can help staff to recognise the signs of gang affiliation, to understand the structure and operations of these groups, and to develop effective strategies for managing gang-related behaviour.

Staff interviewed reported that training provided to custodial staff was relatively limited, and many of the new recruits required more work.

I'm not comfortable overall with the amount of training corrections staff get. You look at agencies like the police and they do six months at college and everything like that. We've actually condensed ours down. When I started in the job in 2000, it was about 16 weeks.

Now it's literally 12 weeks. So you do five weeks of college, four weeks back out. So it's not [enough].
[Staff member]

Potential avenues for useful training include not only gang-specific training, but also the development of skills related to building rapport with prisoners and ensuring consistency discussed above.

Intelligence gathering and sharing

A key addition to training is the collection of intelligence on gangs. Intelligence-gathering plays a crucial role in dealing with gangs in prison by providing staff with the information needed to prevent, detect, and respond to gang-related activity. Through the collection and analysis of information on gang members, their activities, and their affiliations, prisons can gain valuable insights into the inner workings of these groups and develop effective strategies for managing them. This information can be used to identify potential security threats, prevent the smuggling of contraband, and disrupt gang-related communication networks. Additionally, intelligence gathering can help to identify individual gang members who pose a risk to the safety and security of the facility and its occupants, enabling staff to take measures to manage those individuals.

As discussed earlier, while gang conflicts outside of prison are not necessarily replicated within prison, they do occasionally lead to conflict inside. These spill overs can therefore be predicted to some extent.

All staff reported that they thought the intelligence capabilities of Corrections is strong, noting connections with the police at local levels and also at the national level - notably the police Gang Harm Insights Centre. While intelligence was seen as very good, one staff member well summarised the challenges.

So the day-to-day operations, stuff in the jail happens that kind of one level, and you've got Incident Management and all the normal things we throw around there. But then you've got their more longer-term view, you know, so, and all these things have to mesh properly. And sometimes they just don't, because the world's not perfect, right. So sometimes things are happening at a much higher rate of change and speed...it's like whack a mole, you know? You're just trying to, you know, you're just trying to constantly keep up. [Staff member]

REDUCING GANG NUMBERS IN PRISON

As discussed in earlier, the factors that lead to gang membership are most pronounced in areas of community, family, and state care, and influence a person's life long before they arrive in prison. Prison may be the environment that finally converts that lifetime of environmental pressures into gang membership, but it represents only one link in a long chain of disadvantage and marginality.

Properly addressing the problem of gangs, in turn, is something that must begin in families and the community, and no solution can ever be truly effective if it approaches gang membership only at the late stage of imprisonment. Prison, in other words, cannot be a solution to the problem of gangs. Staff spoken to had a mature, realistic and empathetic understanding of this.

First thing, stop making it a corrections problem, 'cause the sooner society realises that corrections is the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, we're not the answer. We're the last resort. Yeah. And so for me, it's about holding people such as families, schools, health care, education. All of those people play a part. [Staff member]

Nevertheless, it is clear that New Zealand's prisons serve as a significant recruiting ground for gangs, and provide an environment where gang bonds are strengthened. These are concerns that are common in the world's prisons, and mean that interrupting and minimising the process of gang recruitment within prison must be a high priority.

The gang funnel

While inmates are not directly pressured to join gangs, the pressures of the prison environment mean that gang membership is both a rational and a common choice. While a number of those who make this choice may later regret it, the difficulty of gang exit means that membership normally continues.

This creates what might be termed a gang membership funnel within prisons, in which large numbers of men enter gangs during imprisonment and few are able to exit.

The problem of addressing gang membership, in this regard, is comprised of two key elements: limiting the inflow of new members, and expanding the channels of exit. Neither task is easy, but there are clear avenues for improvement in both areas.

Preventing entry

Given the numbers of men entering gangs in prison, a focus on preventing entry is likely to provide the greatest return on investment,. Gang exit is a difficult and fraught process, and thus requires significant support in order to be sustainable. Preventing entry, on the other hand, may prove more effective, albeit requiring significant resources and management.

As noted, arrival in prison is a key time when prisoners are the most vulnerable to intimidation, and are the most anxious about their status and safety. Anxieties may be similar on entry to a new unit. Gangs exploit this fear to position themselves as a necessary source of protection, status, and stability. Gang recruitment processes are also often designed to lock new prospects in during this time by tattooing them in highly visible and permanent ways.

Once they have been in the prison for long enough to get used to the environment, however, prisoners generally find that they settle into a position of relative comfort. In turn, prisoners, including gang members, tended to report that gang membership came with its own risks and stresses that neutral prisoners did not have to endure.

If gang recruitment can be prevented during the period of uncertainty that follows arrival in the prison or in a new unit, then in many cases it may not occur at all.

Potential elements of successfully inhibiting the gang recruitment process in the early stages of incarceration may include:

- Educating new prisoners about the realities of gang recruitment,
- A focus on preventing extortion and intimidation,
- Creating prosocial links for vulnerable prisoners,
- Removing access restrictions on goods that are frequently extorted,
- Taking steps to prevent tattooing of vulnerable prisoners, such as avoiding celling new prisoners with gang members or known tattooists.

Many of these are already a focus for staff and the prisons, and this is something that staff reported that they were aware of, but felt they had limited options to achieve in practice.

I think we don't do enough to keep young lads away from gangs and recruiting grounds for gangs... And I'm not saying it's anybody's fault, because what else do we do? I just wish we could do more with young people and keeping them away from gangs. [Staff member]

In reality any strategy intent on targeting vulnerable prisoners would almost certainly require them to be separated. We note that remand prisoners in Christchurch Men's Prison have recently been separated along risk lines. This is enabled by the facilities to do so, which will not be available to all prisons, but it does offer an excellent opportunity to evaluate the efficacy of this approach, and to initiate other initiatives noted above.

Enabling exit

Assisting prisoners to leave gangs while incarcerated is crucial for promoting rehabilitation, reducing recidivism, and limiting the harms done by gangs both in prison and in the community. While there have been some community and Corrections initiatives targeting elements of gang membership, there are currently no programmes, nor have there ever been, which address gang membership specifically.

Any successful initiative of this kind will need to carefully identify those who wish to leave. There seems little point in encouraging members to leave who have no interest in doing so.

A concern identified by some staff was uncertainty about whether an expressed desire to leave a gang was genuine, or merely a strategy to gain lower security or parole.

I think it's very, very easy for someone to say that [they're leaving their gang]. But then again, when you listen to phone calls and they're still communicating with gang members and they're still writing and they're still doing the gang signs and all of that. [Staff member]

As discussed in the review of literature, an important inhibitor of gang exit is that for many, the gang is effectively a surrogate family, and they may have few friends and other relationships outside of the gang. This can mean that those exiting gangs are forced to either cut themselves off from many or all of the close relationships in their lives, or to stay connected with the gang and risk being drawn back in. Moreover, in a prison environment where many of the major gangs are present in nearly every mainstream unit, truly cutting oneself off from those gang relationships is nearly impossible.

One solution offered by staff was to set up dedicated gang-exit units where desisting gang members could be separated fully from the gang and its influences, and could be given the opportunity to build more positive relationships.

Maybe if there was like a specialised unit. One in each region where you could put these people, maybe that would be a really good test for [how committed they are to leaving their gang]. Your phone calls will be monitored. We will check your mail. The walls will stay immaculate and no gang slogans and everything like that. The minute we [see any issues], back to where you come from you go. Maybe that's a possible solution. And then the onus is really on them. We will give you every opportunity to exit the gang and keep you safe. But this is what we need from you. [Staff member]

That would be easier if we if we put them into a unit and we keep them safe and we look after them and we don't encourage that stuff. And you've got people, the people who are continually reinforcing that ethos on them. [Staff member]

Staff reported that when certain benefits – such as remaining in a special unit – are contingent upon good behaviour, prisoners are not only more likely to be more careful about following the rules, but were also likely to expect that others in the unit do the same.

Yeah, I think if a unit has got some perks to it, so to speak... we're not, you know, looked at or bothered too much... and there is a sort of unwritten code not to upset the balance. [Staff member]

These units would require careful monitoring as well as gang exit-specific programmes and resources, and may be a good location for more targeted application of the programmes already discussed. Gang-exit units of this type would undoubtedly come with significant costs, but would also likely generate considerable indirect savings in terms of reduced reoffending, and reduced gang harms in prison. Currently the only comparable options are voluntary segregation, which comes with its own disadvantages and social stigmas, that are a particular impediment to gang members.

We have identified the threats often levelled against gang members for leaving a gang in prison, but the social psychological issues that exist are potentially just as significant. An important element of enabling gang exit is providing access to effective supports for transition to a pro-social lifestyle. Participation in gangs is often a result of social, economic, and psychological factors that can, to at least some extent, be addressed through evidence-based interventions such as counselling, education, and vocational training. By providing targeted programming that focuses on these underlying issues, Corrections can help prisoners to disengage from gang activity and develop the skills and confidence needed to transition back into society. While many of these factors are true of rehabilitative attempts generally, they will be especially true to desisting gang members.

A further important element of limiting the hold that gangs have on their members in prison is addressing the problem of tattooing. As discussed earlier, tattooing – particularly of the face – is a practice that has been expanded and developed by gangs specifically in response to imprisonment, and it is something that both permanently marks and isolates members from society. Tattooing makes the otherwise abstract commitments of gang membership into a contract written permanently on a prisoner's skin, and escaping from gang membership, in turn, will be assisted by the removal of those marks.

Discussion

Gangs are a pressing issue within New Zealand, attracting significant media and political attention. Despite this, they are understudied, and this is certainly true in the prison setting. This research has drawn together key existing information, both local and international, as well as providing new insights on the topic via interviews from behind the prison walls.

What is apparent is the fact that over the years since gangs began to populate the prisons in large numbers in the late 1970s, the prisoner culture has fundamentally changed. The first hints of this change were evident in the 1980s (Newbold, 2013), and since then this study has shown that the transformation has been remarkable.

The largely flat inmate structure that once existed, with its all-for-one ethos, which attempted to quell conflicts and stand-overs in the interests of prisoner solidarity, has been replaced by schisms along gang lines and a prison hierarchy based on might-makes-right. This privileges and promotes gang membership, and creates a hostile environment for other prisoners. It also produces greater challenges for prison management. The prison environment has ostensibly become a gang environment.

As outlined in this report, the impacts on the prisons of this shift are significant, although they vary greatly between units and are generally more sharply felt in higher security units.

The question now, is where will the prison culture go from here? There is no obvious answer to that. But given that the numbers of gang members in prison are unlikely to subside, it is difficult to see the harder edges of this culture improving. In fact, all evidence points to it getting worse.

Efforts to break down the gang influence in prison are obviously desirable, but achieving that is easier said than done. The prison culture is of prisoner making, with gangs having the dominant say. Thus it will require buy-in from the gangs if this culture is to change. That is a tall order. However, given that many older gang members recognise the problems that gang commitment causes, such changes may be possible. Actively promoting gang-neutral units – or entire prisons – with extra freedoms and privileges, may yield results. This might be aided by using pro social leaders in the promotional efforts, including those who are not incarcerated. However, historical attempts to use pro social gang leaders in different capacities has proven to be politically contentious. Since there is little evidence that this situation has changed, proactive policy decisions will have to consider outcome efficacy alongside the risk of political kickback.

Notwithstanding the prisoner culture being internally derived, it can be and is influenced by administrative and staff actions. Some of the issues in this area have been explored in the current report, and highlighting good principles for the control of gangs as well as of prisoners in general. For the most part, the approach to the control and rehabilitation of gangs used by Corrections is somewhat agnostic, in that gangs are not singularly targeted and members are treated as prisoners like any other. Yes, there have been strategies aimed at them – the latest overdue for completion – but generally gangs are not elevated above the myriad of other issues involved in running prisons. While there are sound reasons for this, I wonder if this approach may need rethinking given the significance of the concerns they pose. I say this because the current path gives indications of being unsustainable.

For example, one area where relief from the troubles that gangs cause other prisoners can be found is voluntary segregation, and that appears to work well. But the increase in voluntary segregation does speak to the problems that exist elsewhere in the prison. Furthermore, I wonder if the segregation approach is sustainable. On current trends, virtually two parallel prison systems will be formed, a gang and a non-gang one. If this comes to pass, it will not be by design but by ongoing circumstance. Thoughtful consideration before this occurs appears desirable.

Trends within the prison estate are not the only concerns, however. External changes within the gang scene are also likely to have an increasing impact on prison management. Gang moves into organised crime, almost exclusively in high profit drug dealing, which have been occurring for some time and continue to increase, raise the spectre of corruption of officials. While rare, there have been a number of public examples of corruption involving Corrections staff. When this occurs, it would be valuable to gather intelligence on how it happened and create a document used for training. Even without that specific resource, a focus on insider threats ought to be a priority for Corrections. This may include fostering a culture that minor indiscretions can be disclosed to inhibit those indiscretions being used to create bigger ones.

Many of these issues will be assisted by better training and education of prison staff, specifically around the challenges posed by gangs and best efforts to mitigate them. This will be assisted by intelligence gathering and sharing, which appears to be a strength. Notwithstanding the need for specific policies, consistency of staff approaches is perhaps one thing that can and should be an immediate priority.

Corrections staff talked to directly – formally and informally – as part of this research, were aware of the challenges the gangs created, and they had ideas of how they could be tackled, many of which have been outlined here. The staff were also realistic about the limitations in this regard. Managing the gangs is a difficult proposition, and during the period when this research was undertaken, staff shortages were acute and much of the physical prison estate is not amenable to some of the desirable changes discussed in this report.

The Department of Corrections has committed to Hōkai Rangi, a strategy that seeks an oranga-centred approach with an emphasis on humanising and healing its charges. This is an ambitious enterprise, but perhaps the single greatest impediment to its success is the gangs, which create hostile conditions that impede rehabilitative efforts and draw people into their spheres of control.

One area not touched on by this research is the impact of gangs on women's prisons. While we tend only to think of gangs in terms of the male members, in reality gangs are central to many whanau and communities. Moreover, under the broad definition that Corrections uses – that being gang association rather than strict membership – women are included. Yet the impacts of gangs on the women's prison estate are unknown, and are likely to be different to that of men, albeit significant. The results of research in this area would be fascinating and useful, both on their own and as a comparison to this piece.

International comparisons would also be useful to this research, to contextualise the New Zealand situation and to learn from efforts targeting gangs elsewhere. While some insights can be gleaned from global sources – some of which are indicated in the review of literature – overall, they are of limited value. Not only are international studies somewhat rare, but the gang situation in New Zealand is also unique, meaning that comparisons, where they can be made, are rather imprecise. Notwithstanding that, a detailed review of gang control methods in other jurisdictions would undoubtedly be useful.

One finding of my previous research (see Gilbert, 2013: pp.159-166), was the functional nature of gangs; that is, gangs provide a number of functions for their members including a sense of status, belonging, and fictive kinship. This finding is confirmed by the current research, although an emphasis on providing a sense of protection is prominent within the prison environment. Any efforts at reducing the allure that gang membership has for young prisoners have to offer viable alternatives to these attractions.

Finally, the Department of Corrections commissioned this investigation and supported it throughout the research process. This indicates a genuine desire to understand the problem of gangs in prisons, and to enact effective policies to deal with them. It is hoped that the information contained in this report will contribute towards the achievement of that end.

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