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# Gang Interventions in Jails

## A National Analysis

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This national-level study surveys the perceptions of 134 jail administrators in 39 states about the prevalence of gang members in their facilities. Consistent with previous empirical work, approximately 13% of jail populations are thought to be gang involved, and although there are no regional differences in these estimates, small jails report having fewer gang-involved inmates. When asked about the problems that these inmates cause in their facilities, respondents report that gang members are less disruptive than inmates with severe mental illnesses but are more likely to assault other inmates. The use and efficacy of 10 programmatic responses to gangs are evaluated, with respondents rating the gathering and dissemination of gang intelligence as the most effective intervention. Implications for practitioners and gang research are outlined.

**Keywords:** *gangs; gang suppression; gang interventions; jails*

Most of our knowledge about gangs in correctional facilities is based on research conducted in state or federal prison systems (Camp & Camp, 1985; Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffran, & Suppa, 2002; Ralph & Marquart, 1991; Stastny & Tyrnauer, 1983). Typically, these studies have found that the proliferation of gangs and the number of gang members in prison settings have increased substantially since the 1980s (Decker, 2003). Understanding the extent of the gang problem is an important issue for prison administrators because gang-involved inmates contribute to higher rates of prison violence (Camp & Camp, 1985), increase racial tensions within prisons (Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 2002; Ross & Richards, 2002), challenge rehabilitative programming by supporting criminogenic values (Decker, 2003; Fortune, 2003), engage in criminal enterprises within prisons (Ingraham & Wellford, 1987), and contribute to failure in community reintegration if these parolees return to gang activities on release (Adams & Olson, 2002; Fleisher & Decker, 2001b; Olson, Dooley, & Kane, 2004).

Fischer's (2001) study of Arizona prisons, for instance, reported that "members of certified prison gangs (security threat groups [STGs]), uncertified prison gangs, and street gangs commit serious disciplinary violations at rates two to three times higher than do non-gang inmates housed in units of the same security level" (p. ii). Thus, by better understanding the scope of the problem and the efficacy of different types of interventions, jail professionals can work to reduce the influence that gangs have in their facilities. In addition, other stakeholders also need to better understand the extent of this social problem. Esbensen, Winfree,

He, and Taylor (2001) observe that research about gangs is also important for researchers and theorists:

For researchers, it is important to refine measurement: to assess the validity and reliability of the measures being used. For theorists, it is important to better understand factors associated with gang membership and associated behaviors, whether testing or constructing theory. (p. 122)

These scholars also acknowledge the importance of information sharing and collaboration between academics and policy makers, although we also suggest that jail practitioners ought to be involved in the research process as they have intimate knowledge of the success and failure of different interventions within their institutions.

Comparatively little is known about the extent of adult gangs in jails.<sup>1</sup> Increasing our knowledge about gangs and tactics designed to respond specifically to these groups is an important issue given the size of the jail population—approximately 714,000 inmates are housed in local correctional facilities (Harrison & Beck, 2005b). Unlike prisons, jails are intended primarily for inmates awaiting court processes and incarceration for periods of less than 1 year. Operated by counties and local governments, there are more than 3,300 American jails that range in size from four or five beds to the Los Angeles County jail system, which held an average of 18,629 inmates in the third quarter of 2005 (Corrections Standards Authority, 2005). Parallel with federal and state prison systems, however, local jails have also experienced dramatic growth during the past two decades (Cunniff, 2002; Harrison & Beck, 2005b; Stephan, 2001). This growth has stretched county budgets (Davis, Applegate, Otto, Surette, & McCarthy, 2004), increased staff turnover (Kerle, 1998), and may contribute to higher rates of inmate violence (Tartaro, 2002). Altogether, these changes produce less predictable conditions within America's jails (Mays & Ruddell, 2004).

It is plausible that some of the problems in the day-to-day operations that jails confront are a result of expanding gang populations. As a result, an important first step is to examine the extent of the problem. Wells, Minor, Angel, Carter, and Cox (2002) surveyed jail administrators and found that approximately 16% of all jail inmates were members of STGs, whereas 13% of prison inmates were STG members. There are a number of reasons why jail populations have rates of gang involvement that closely correspond with prison systems. First, although jail populations tend to be more heterogeneous than prisons (a wide variety of persons from different demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds are admitted), this diversity is a function of the short-term nature of jail incarceration. Most inmates are held for a day or two until they make bail, but serious or persistent offenders, such as gang members, may have more difficulty securing release and may wait months or even years for the conclusion of their trials. James (2004, p. 4) found that 11.3% of jail inmates were held more than 6 months and that an additional 6.5% were held more than 1 year.

A second reason why rates of gang membership in jails parallel prison rates is that jails act as an entry point for prisons. Virtually everyone who is admitted to prison will first spend time in jails, either awaiting court dates or pending their transfer to prison. Approximately 10% of all jail inmates have already been sentenced to a term within the state prison system, but overcrowding keeps these inmates in city or county facilities awaiting transfer (Harrison & Beck, 2005b). Finally, jails hold persons sentenced to periods of incarceration up to 1 year, and some may serve much longer periods of time in a local jail (James, 2004). Although early scholarly work reported that jail inmates were primarily members of the underclass held on relatively minor offenses (Goldfarb, 1975; Irwin, 1985), current research indicates that offenders in many

urban jails are held on more serious crimes. In fact, Rainville and Reaves (2003, p. 33) found that nearly 75% of all persons sentenced to jail incarceration were felony offenders.

Organizational characteristics of jails might also contribute to gang membership. Jails hold a diverse mix of short- and long-term inmates, which can contribute to unpredictability. Although prison populations are fairly stable through periods of years, the population in a jail unit may change completely in a single week. Jails with high levels of population turnover are less predictable for jail officers and inmates alike (Richards, 2003). The short-term nature of jail confinement relative to prisons also makes classification and programming more challenging. Wright and Goring (1989) observed that “prisoners come in directly from the street as unknown quantities, often with alcohol, drug or psychiatric problems” (p. ii). A combination of this instability and high populations of gang-involved inmates recently lead to riots involving thousands of inmates at a Southern California jail (Cable News Network, 2006).

Although the unpredictability of jail incarceration is bearable for a few days, it may contribute to gang affiliation as months stretch into a year. As Ross and Richards (2002) remark, “in some prisons you absolutely need to affiliate with a group that will protect you. The loners, the people without social skills or friends, are vulnerable to being physically attacked or preyed upon” (p. 133). Lhotsky (2000) describes the pressures to join a gang in a large urban jail: “Everything here is gang politics and you have to be involved, one way or another . . . and you better participate or you’re gonna get beat bloody” (p. 213). Consequently, the characteristics of an individual jail or the types of inmates incarcerated within a facility (both the demographic and offense-related characteristics) may also contribute to gang membership (Santos, 2004).

Despite the problems that gang-affiliated inmates cause, there is some evidence to suggest that jails have been slow to adopt gang intervention programs, especially compared with state prison systems (see Wells et al., 2002). Moreover, there has been very little empirical attention devoted to the issue. This national-level study examines the prevalence of gang members in jails, based on information about the methods that jails use to classify gang involvement; perceptions about the types of problems that gang-affiliated inmates cause; and the efficacy of strategies intended to reduce the harm that gangs create in jails.

## **Interventions With Incarcerated Gang Members**

Jail officers and administrators have developed a number of gang intervention strategies during the past few decades. The types and methods of intervention are based on the prevalence of gang-affiliated populations within a jail, the levels of inmate involvement in gangs, resources available to the jail, and the location of the facility. Gangs have been observed to exhibit considerable diversity across the United States in terms of organization and structure (Klein & Maxson, 1996) and criminal involvement (Howell, Egley, & Gleason, 2002). Correctional settings are not immune to this variation. A county jail located in rural Texas, for instance, is likely to have an entirely different gang problem—and response—than a state prison that draws its population from Los Angeles or Chicago.

Previous empirical work has reported that there are regional as well as urban-rural differences in the type of gang problem that a jurisdiction is likely to encounter (Egley, Howell, & Major, 2004; Weisheit & Wells, 2004). Demographic and offense-related characteristics of the gang population, for instance, may influence the involvement of gang members in disruptive

activities within an institution. Younger gang members, as well as those sentenced on violent offenses, have a higher likelihood of involvement of gang members in disciplinary infractions (Fischer, 2001). In addition, some prison gangs were established generations ago, and the types of problems that teenaged “wannabe” gang members from small rural gangs cause are fundamentally different from those caused by members of the Aryan Brotherhood or Mexican Mafia, as these established gangs have established networks that transcend the jail or prison.

Decker (2003) outlined a number of tactics that correctional facilities have used to control gangs, including

use of inmate informants, the use of segregation units for prison gang members, the isolation of prison gang leaders, the lockdown of entire institutions, the vigorous prosecution of criminal acts committed by prison gang members, the interruption of prison gang members’ internal and external communications, and the case-by-case examination of prison gang offenses. (p. 58)

The types of interventions that a jail or prison develop are likely to depend on a number of organizational characteristics, such as the size of the facility, the internal and external resources that the institution can draw on, and the nature of the gang problem. Decker (2003) notes that the efficacy of the approaches outlined above have typically not been evaluated—a common limitation of many criminal justice interventions (Sherman, Gottfredson, MacKenzie, Eck, Reuter, & Bushway, 1997).

Wells et al. (2002, p. 14) solicited information about the effectiveness of different interventions to control STGs in their survey of correctional administrators and reported that 76% of prisons had established such interventions, compared to only 44% of jails. Prisons also deployed a greater range of gang interventions. Wells et al. also found that many jails reported supervising inmates through a central monitoring unit, although this is a common characteristic in direct-supervision facilities. Contrasted to prisons, these researchers found that jails were more likely to use segregation and protective custody. Respondents from prisons, however, reported that they relied on monitoring inmate communication, collecting information from searches, and compiling this intelligence.

A number of “containment” strategies have been used to control gangs in correctional facilities. Long-term isolation or the transfer of gang leaders, for instance, has the goal of reducing a leader’s ability to recruit or influence other members, and this tactic has been successfully used in some jails (Decker, 2003). Another approach, which has been used extensively in the federal prison system, is bus or “diesel” therapy. Inmates perceived to be disruptive, including gang members, are transferred from facility to facility for periods of months (Knox & Tromanhauser, 1991; see Richards, 2003, p. 134, for a discussion). Yet such transfers are beyond the ability or resources of a single county jail.

Jail interventions also include information collection from informants as well as intelligence gathered by law enforcement agents or correctional officers (Norris, 2001). Intelligence gathering may include the development of gang profile reports, classification of inmate affiliation, and information about gang involvement in offenses—either internal or external to the jail (Nadel, 1997). In some cases, aggressive prosecution of unsolved cases or current criminal activity (such as the sale or distribution of narcotics) may result in additional prison terms for the gang-involved inmate and their associates.

Containment approaches vary by jurisdiction. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice, for example, attempted to consolidate all hard-core gang members in several designated

prisons, which reduced their ability to influence or recruit others (United States Department of Justice, 1992). A similar approach was undertaken in Arizona prison systems, and Fischer (2001) reported that isolating (or incapacitating) these inmates resulted in declines of “rates of assault, drug violations, threats, fighting . . . by over 50%” (p. ii). Furthermore, Rivera, Cowles, and Dorman (2003) outlined how one state sent all nonaffiliated inmates to “gang free” prisons, a strategy that has also been used in Illinois (Olson et al., 2004). Ultimately, this approach attempts to reduce the influence of gangs and provide a safer environment (which, in turn, may reduce the likelihood of nonaffiliated inmates joining gangs to increase their feelings of safety).

## Data and Method

In June 2004, 418 surveys were sent to jails throughout the nation soliciting information from jail administrators about their experiences with “special needs” jail populations, including persons with mental illness, gang members, repeat offenders, and long-term inmates. With the exception of six states that had integrated state jail systems, all states were included in the sample. A random sample of jails was completed, choosing facilities listed in the American Jail Association’s (2003) *Who’s Who in Jail Management*. The exception to the random selection was an oversampling of large jails. Harrison and Beck (2005a) found that the largest 50 jails (mostly located in urban areas) held approximately 30% of all jail inmates, so all jails with a rated capacity of more than 1,500 inmates were surveyed.

To enhance the response rate, each facility was contacted by phone, and survey team members spoke with administrators and encouraged their participation. Survey instruments were either mailed or faxed to the administrators, although in some cases, the surveys were directed to mental health professionals or classification officers at the request of the official who was contacted. Responses to faxed surveys were somewhat better than those that were mailed and tended to be promptly returned. The survey instrument solicited responses from jail administrators about their experiences with gang members, including asking how gang affiliation or membership was defined, estimating the prevalence of these populations within their jail, and analyzing strategies that worked or that were not effective in responding to gangs. Although most respondents returned the survey within 2 or 3 weeks, we continued to receive responses to the survey for several months afterward. Altogether, 134 surveys from 39 states were returned, a response rate of approximately 32%.

There were several limitations with the survey results. Jails in the northeastern states, for example, were underrepresented in the surveys that were returned, as were returns from small jails. This underrepresentation rests on the sampling strategy used in this study. Integrated jail-prison systems in Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Rhode Island, and Vermont were not sent surveys. Fewer surveys were also sent to smaller institutions, and the smallest jail that returned a survey had 28 beds. More than 10% of the sample were smaller jails, but the responses from these facilities were disappointing. Of one group of 25 facilities of 35 beds or less, for instance, only 1 was returned. It is plausible that larger jails are more likely to have classification experts, administrators, and mental health specialists who have more time to respond to such requests for information. Thus, the generalizability of the findings in this study is limited somewhat by the facilities that did not respond to the survey or were not included in the sampling strategy. Although the response rate was somewhat less than the Wells et al. (2002) study, the estimates in this research are based on a sample more than 3 times as large.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Jail Characteristics: National Jail Sample**

Participating jails	134
States	39
Rated capacity (beds)	941.8 ( <i>SD</i> = 1,279.4)
Average daily population	898.7 ( <i>SD</i> = 1,261.2)
Percentage rated capacity	93.8 ( <i>SD</i> = 26.2)
Daily cost	55.4 ( <i>SD</i> = 19.1)
Turnover (annual admits/average daily population)	30.8 ( <i>SD</i> = 64.4)
Total rated capacity (beds)	125,259
Region	
Northeast	7
Midwest	36
South	45
West	44

Table 1 reveals the organizational characteristics of the facilities that were represented in this study. With an average rated capacity of 941.8 inmates (*mdn* = 512 inmates), jails from large urban areas were overrepresented. The standard deviation of 1,279.37 inmates, however, indicates considerable skewness. Altogether, the facilities represented in the survey had a total rated capacity of 125,259 beds, or 19% of all jail inmates nationwide. The jails examined in this study were also smaller than those in the research reported by Wells et al., as the mean size of their sample was 5,638 beds.

Respondents reported that their facilities operated near capacity: The average jail operated at 94% of its rated capacity (*mdn* = 91%, *SD* = 26%). Based on the average daily population and admissions data, we extrapolated several statistics, including an average inmate turnover of approximately 31 inmates per year and an average stay of approximately 12 days.<sup>3</sup> As most jail inmates only remain in custody for a day or two, this finding suggests that there are a large number of inmates who serve lengthy periods in county jails, either awaiting their court dates, serving a sentence of less than 1 year, or some combination of these two factors. Consequently, one question on the survey asked respondents to estimate the percentage of inmates that had been in the jail for periods in excess of 1 year, and the mean was 12.7% (*mdn* = 5.0%, *SD* = 16.8%).

## Results

Jail administrators were asked to select methods of classifying gang affiliation in their facilities. Table 2 outlines the five different options for classifying or defining gang membership that were provided. Respondents overwhelmingly reported that they defined gang membership on the basis of tattoos, clothing (gang colors), or hand signs, although designation of gang membership by another law enforcement agency was commonly used to define gang membership. Eighty-one percent of respondents reported that an individual's self-declaration as a gang member was used as a method of classification. Correspondingly, law enforcement agencies report frequent use of this technique as well (Egley & Major, 2004). It is important to report that there is considerable research that supports the validity of this measurement

approach (see Esbensen et al., 2001). Furthermore, almost three quarters of respondents based definitions of membership on the basis of the inmate's associates. Respondents were least likely, however, to base definitions of gang membership on claims by informants. These results indicate that self-report remains a viable and frequent method of identification among criminal justice practitioners. In addition, there is considerable overlap between police and jail methods of classification, extending the validity of the measurement approach to yet another group.

Using the methods of designating gang affiliation reported above, respondents were asked to estimate the prevalence of gang members in their jail. Fong and Buentello (1991) outline how correctional administrators have historically been reluctant to provide information to researchers about internal problems, such as gangs or gang violence. Anecdotal information from administrators suggests that gang members may not be forthcoming about their gang affiliation with classification or intake officers. As a result, the true rate of gang membership is likely to be undercounted in many places, especially if jails do not collect such data on admission or do not have gang intelligence officers that track these populations.

The mean (unweighted) estimate of gang membership among jail inmates was 13.2%, which closely approximates the national-level estimate of 16% reported by Wells et al. (2002). Estimates varied greatly, from 11 respondents who reported having no gang members in their facilities to 1 California jail administrator who reported that 70% of inmates in their facility were gang involved. In fact, by subtracting the facilities that reported having no gang members in their facility, the mean increased to 15.2%. Overall, half of the respondents estimated that the prevalence of gang members in their facilities ranged from 1% to 10%.

A number of statistical tests were completed on these data to determine the relationships between jail characteristics and the prevalence of gang members, and these results are presented in Table 3. First, a bivariate correlation between average daily population and percentages of gang membership was estimated, and there was a significant positive association between the rated capacity of the jail and the percentage of gang members. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) models were also estimated to compare the means between gang membership and jail characteristics, including the size of the facility, the daily cost to house an inmate, and the region where the jail was located (using the four U.S. Census Bureau regions). The only variable that had a statistically significant association with the percentage of gang members was the average daily population of these facilities. Bigger jails were likely to house a greater number of persons thought to be gang members. Although gangs are more apt to be found in urban areas, another plausible reason for this finding is that smaller jails have been known to underestimate the true rate of "special needs" populations, such as persons with mental illness (see McClearen & Ryba, 2003). This suggests the need for greater attention to classification issues in such facilities, perhaps not only for gangs.

Forty-five percent of jail administrators reported that the gang problem had increased during the past 5 years, and an additional 40% said it had stayed the same. The finding that a majority of respondents report a decreasing or stabilizing gang problem corresponds to law enforcement reports of local gang problems during the same time period. From 1996 through 2002, declining or stabilizing gang problems and populations were increasingly reported among police and sheriff's agencies, especially among those serving the less-populated, rural areas (Egley et al., 2004). These parallel findings suggest a dynamic and divergent gang problem both within the general population and within correctional settings.

Table 4 presents the perceptions of jail administrators regarding the likelihood of problem behaviors in special needs populations. These problem behaviors included suicide,

**Table 2**  
**Jail Administrator Definitions of Gang Membership**

	%	<i>SD</i>	Range
Inmate has been designated a gang member by another law enforcement agency	83.3		
Inmate has been identified as a gang member by a reliable informant	65.3		
Inmate claims to be a gang member	81.7		
Inmate displays symbols of membership: clothing, "colors," hand signs, or tattoos	86.8		
The inmate is known to associate with and/or has been arrested with known gang members	71.4		
Average reported gang membership (84 jails reporting estimates)	13.2	15.5	0 to 70
Jails reporting no gang membership (11 jails) <sup>a</sup>	13.1		
Jails reporting 1% to 10% gang membership (42 jails)	50.0		
Jails reporting 11% to 25% gang membership (19 jails)	21.4		
Jails reporting more than 25% gang membership (12 jails)	14.3		
Admissions of gang members have increased during past 5 years	45.0		
Gang members younger than other jail inmates	55.0		

Note: All figures are percentages.

a. Totals might not add up to 100% because of rounding.

**Table 3**  
**Tests of Association Between Jail Characteristics and Gang Membership**

Jail Characteristic	<i>r</i>	Test	<i>F</i>
Average daily population	.240*		
Average daily population		ANOVA	2.349**
Daily cost		ANOVA	.689
Region		ANOVA	.478

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

incidents of self-harm, victimization, assault (either inmates or staff), disruptive behavior within the facility, escapes (or attempts), or other criminal conduct. Gang members were compared to three other special needs populations: inmates with severe mental illness, "frequent flyers" (repeat offenders with more than 20 admissions), and long-term inmates (prisoners who had served more than 1 year of jail incarceration). A disruption index was calculated where 1 point was counted each time a respondent checked that a special needs group was likely to be involved in one of the disruptive behaviors listed above. Of a possible total value of 1,072 (if inmates were coded as being disruptive in all categories by all respondents), inmates with mental illness had the highest disruption score of 610.4 Gang

**Table 4**  
**Perceptions of Jail Administrators on the Involvement of Special Needs**  
**Populations in Problem Behaviors**

Population	Disruption <sup>a</sup>	Assault Inmates	Assault Staff
Gang members	367	90	65
Frequent flyers	233	44	30
Inmates with mental illness	610	78	81
Long-term inmates	201	35	21

a. Disruption Index = sum of the following categories: likelihood of suicide, self-harm, victimization, assault (other inmates or staff), disruptive behavior, escapes (or attempts), and other criminal conduct (highest possible value = 1,072).

members followed with a value of 367, whereas the remaining groups had much lower scores. This finding reinforces the findings of previous research that found gang members represent a significant challenge to correctional operations (Fischer, 2001).

In addition to estimating the overall potential for disruption, perceptions of involvement in violent behavior were also collected. Jail administrators reported that gang members were more likely to assault other inmates than any other group of special needs inmates. Fischer's (2001) surveys of 463 Arizona prisoners found that

inmates believe that inmates who are not members of a gang are safer than those who are: 69% said that inmates who are not members of a gang are very safe, safe, or somewhat safe, while only 57% said inmates who were members of a gang were very safe, safe, or somewhat safe. (p. 172)

Furthermore, although inmates with mental illness were perceived as the most likely special needs group to assault officers and staff, gang members were also considered to pose a physical threat to jail staff.

Administrators were also asked about the efficacy of 10 different jail-based interventions to respond to gangs. Of the tactics presented in Table 5, the three that were considered most effective were segregation or separation of gang members, intelligence gathering, and sharing this information with other agencies. Thus, these results are consistent with the findings reported in the earlier national study of jail interventions (Wells et al., 2002) as well as Decker's (2003) research. It is interesting to note that for every category, the "not effective" category was the lowest for every intervention strategy. Stated differently, jail administrators were highly inclined to view any intervention strategy as effective.

The strategies perceived as least successful in reducing the influence of jail gangs were placing restrictions on outside visitors, transfers of gang members to other facilities, or legal sanctions for criminal behavior. Few administrators reported that they used these tactics, and those facilities that used these approaches did not deem them very effective. Transferring gang members is not, for example, a feasible approach in most local jails. Respondents also indicated that some approaches were ineffective, including the loss of "good time" credits and limiting program participation for gang-involved jail inmates.

The finding that 15 jail administrators reported their facilities used none of the interventions outlined above was surprising. Chi-square analyses were used to evaluate the relationships between the number of gang interventions used by a given jail (split at the median) and

**Table 5**  
**Perceptions of Jail Administrators About the Efficacy of Gang Interventions (Percentage of Respondents)**

Programs or Responses	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Not Effective	Not Applicable
Segregation or separation	36.2	30.8	1.5	31.5
Restrict outside visitors	10.9	15.5	5.4	68.2
Transfer (e.g., other jail)	5.5	20.5	4.7	69.3
Facility sanctions for gang behavior	27.5	36.6	6.1	29.8
Legal sanctions for gang behavior	11.6	20.9	9.3	58.1
Loss of "good time" credits	19.8	22.9	9.2	48.1
Information sharing (other agencies)	36.6	35.1	3.8	24.4
Intelligence gathering	33.1	39.2	3.1	24.6
Written policies or procedures	26.8	40.9	2.4	29.9
Limit program participation	15.4	26.9	11.5	46.2

Jails that report using none of these tactics = 15  
 Jails that report using two or fewer of these tactics = 34

the following variables split at their median values: the daily cost to house an inmate, the estimated gang membership, and the rated capacity of the facility. Consistent with expectations, the only variable that had a significant association with high levels of gang interventions was the size of facility; larger facilities used a greater variety of interventions.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This research examined the perceptions of jail administrators about the problems that gang members cause in their facilities, the prevalence of these populations, methods of classifying gang membership, and approaches that may reduce the disruption or violence associated with these groups. The findings reported above suggest that the estimate of gang populations vary greatly by location, and although there were no statistically significant regional differences, smaller jails were less likely to report the presence of gangs. Although 11 facilities reported that they had no gang members in their populations, a number of jails reported that more than half of their populations were gang involved.

Estimating the true population of gang members is problematic, especially considering that there are different degrees of membership. Silverman (2001, p. 284) outlined seven different classifications of membership from hard core members to "sympathizers and wanna-be's." The United States Department of Justice (1992) estimated that hard core members represent only 15% to 20% of the total gang membership. It is important to distinguish between these different categories of gang membership, although there is little evidence to suggest this is regularly performed within prisons and jails. There is an intuitive conceptual appeal to the notion that strategies for long-term hard core members need to be fundamentally different than those who have less commitment to the gang.

Depending on the categories and methods of classifying gang members, estimates of the prevalence of gang members within jails are likely to vary greatly. The definition of gang

membership used in this study was broadly inclusive in that it asked respondents to base their estimates on the five categories outlined in the survey and did not distinguish between “street-gangs,” “prison-gangs,” “unaffiliated gangs,” and “STGs.” Still, the finding that 13.2% of all jail inmates in this national sample were gang involved suggests that accurately estimating the gang populations is an important step for jail administrators. Extrapolating this estimate to the 2003 national jail population, for example, would result in 90,000 gang members held in American jails on any given day.

A second relevant research question is to evaluate the commitment to the gang of these 90,000 inmates: Are the estimates of 15% to 20% of hard core members accurate today? Is gang membership, for instance, a situational or temporary condition for most inmates? Furthermore, at what point of a person’s incarceration does that person become gang affiliated? Knowing the answers to such questions may enable us to prevent gang affiliation in the first place or create more effective interventions to discourage jail inmates from joining such groups. Such questions can only be answered through further empirical work, including interviews with gang members.

Eleven jails reported having no gang members. Of these facilities, the mean rated capacity was 271 inmates (*mdn* = 119 beds), which is approximately one third the size of the average jail in this study. Yet one of the jails that reported having no gang members had a capacity of nearly 1,500 inmates, which does not seem plausible. Although rural communities are less likely than other localities to develop gang problems, a number of scholars have found that these areas are not immune to gangs (Egley & Major, 2004; Weisheit & Wells, 2004). It is likely that some administrators are not aware of the scope of the problem, are in denial, deliberately underreport the percentages of gang-involved inmates, or do not regard gangs as problematic (Fong & Buentello, 1991), concerns that apply elsewhere to law enforcement officials (Huff, 1990).

Most administrators reported that gang members challenged the operations of their facilities through illegal or disruptive behaviors and a greater involvement in violence. In response to these problems, jails have adopted a number of strategies to reduce the prevalence or harm that these special needs inmates pose. The foremost of these strategies was gathering intelligence and disseminating this information within the facility and to other law enforcement agencies. Also effective was the segregation or separation of gang-involved jail inmates, although this strategy may not be feasible in all locations or in some jails. An examination of the American Jail Association’s (2003) national inventory of jails reveals that there are some 650 facilities of 25 beds or less, and these institutions are unlikely to have the ability to separate or segregate any inmate.

Despite the fact that most inmates serve short terms of temporary incarceration, there are long-term jail populations that may be vulnerable to gang recruitment. In some cases, inmates may serve years in local jails (James, 2004) and serve part (or all) of their state prison sentence there (see Ruddell, 2005). Moreover, of the estimated 13% of gang members in this sample, some may have weak ties with the gang. If jail-based interventions can prevent gang recruitment or prevent those “wannabes” from becoming full-fledged gang members, the benefits may be felt throughout justice systems. First, by reducing gang populations, jails will be safer. Safe jails are important not only from a human rights perspective, but high levels of violence might also contribute to increased membership as inmates affiliate themselves with gangs in search of safety (Lhotsky, 2000; Ross & Richards, 2002).

The second advantage of jail-based gang interventions is that jails serve as the entry point for prison populations. Reducing gang membership in local facilities and information sharing with state correctional systems may enhance the effectiveness of prison-based gang interventions. Furthermore, high-visibility interventions may deter nonaffiliated inmates from joining gangs by increasing the “costs” of membership. Some correctional systems, for instance, provide inmates with “guidelines” of the lost opportunities that occur when they affiliate with a gang (see Connecticut Department of Corrections, 1995).

One issue that requires careful consideration is whether society can provide realistic alternatives to the safety and status that gangs offer. Returning vulnerable young people from jails to the community with little hope of meaningful opportunities makes joining a gang more likely. Fleisher and Decker (2001a, pp. 69-70) outline the many barriers to successful reintegration of gang members into the community. Thus, although correctional interventions can attempt to reduce the prevalence of gangs and control their criminal behaviors within these institutions, these jail or prison-based programs need to be supplemented with a corresponding increase in community-based gang-intervention programs to support prisoner reentry.

## Notes

1. Jails are operated by city or county governments, and some jurisdictions may have a jail system where the population resides in several facilities. Further, some states, such as West Virginia, are moving toward regional jails, where operations are consolidated between several counties. Last, jails in “Indian Country” or detention centers and Metropolitan Correctional Centers operated by the Federal Bureau of Prisons also house jail populations. We use the term *jail* to describe these different variations.

2. Within the sample, response rates for the jails larger than 1,500 beds were 42.6%, whereas the response rate for the jails smaller than 1,500 beds was 29.8%.

3. Average length of stay in jail depends on a number of factors, including the number of sentenced and detained inmates in a particular facility. The California Board of Corrections (2004) notes that an increasing number of detainees will reduce overall length of stay.

4. In some cases, the respondents did not complete all categories, so the total of 1,072 represents the highest possible total of all participants who provided a response. It is likely that these categories are not mutually exclusive, as there is some possibility of overlapping categories (e.g., a long-term inmate could also be a gang member).

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