**Gangs and Environment: A Comparative Analysis of Prison and Street Gangs**

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**Summary**

The purpose of the article is to evaluate the differences between prison gangs and street gangs regarding organizational structure and ideology. Because existing gang literature focuses on primarily on street gangs and fails to account for the potential effect of environment on prison gang characteristics, the study attempts address the shortcoming by assessing the potential impact of respective environments. The author presents a comparative model of prison and street gangs that highlights differences across major aspects of each type of organization, including membership, leadership, organizational operations, and relationships with authority figures. Therefore, the central research question of the qualitative study is as follows: *Does environment affect how individuals experience gang membership in prison compared to their street experiences? If so, how?*

**Methods**

To test the hypothesis, data was collected through an exploratory qualitative process involving 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with formerly incarcerated gang members. The characteristics of interest for those interviewed were individuals who were 18 years or older and experienced gang membership both in the free world and in an adult prison. The average age of the interviewees was 29.48 and served prison sentences ranging from four months to fifteen years. Additionally, the sample was taken from different states in the New England area and across multiple jurisdictional levels including federal, state, and county level facilities. The interview questions ranged from a discussion of the subject’s experiences to general questions about prison and street gang culture, structure, membership, roles, and norms.

**Results**

Findings from the study indicated that environments affect how gangs operate and associate. Gang membership and leadership structures in prison are rigid and not susceptible to changes common in street gangs. Additionally, environment dictates how gangs manage conflict. Specifically, violence and crime in street gangs is chaotic while prison gang violence is controlled by leaders due to mutual need for violence reduction within correctional facilities. Finally, while street gangs experience an antagonistic relationship with law enforcement due to formal and informal established policies, prison gangs have a complicated relationship with correctional staff due to a contained environment and regular interaction association.

**Implications**

Findings from the study are significant to existing gang literature because it addresses the gap in empirical and theoretical literature on the prison/street gang comparison. The study sheds light on how environment affects relationships between gangs and criminal justice officials. While prison and street gangs serve similar functions (e.g., protection, financial support, etc.), the data suggests they differ in terms of membership, leadership, and ideologies. These differences also reveal a need to reevaluate and reassess policies aimed towards addressing gang violence.

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