

Gang Subcultures and Prison Gangs of Female Youth

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Abstract

Inmate violence, disruptions and problems recently have been attributed to the rise of prison gangs. While some research has investigated this phenomenon, studies of female inmates, especially the juvenile population, have been largely ignored. This study examines the role of female gangs and subcultures by giving detailed, firsthand accounts from thirty-four young incarcerated women. The models used for the analysis include both the importation and deprivation views of prison subculture development. Results include interpretations of the nature and extent of prison gangs, gang recruitment, prison gang problems and friendship patterns based on gang alliances. Findings support both subculture models depending upon the contextual question.

Both in media and public discourse, prison gangs have evoked negative reactions. They are viewed as disruptive and violent. For more than two decades, the proliferation of gangs in prison has disrupted many American correctional institutions (Fong, Vogel & Buentello 1996) with prison gangs regarded as a major source of violence and other correctional problems. A comprehensive study conducted by Camp & Camp (1985) identified the presence of 114 male prison gangs nationwide with a total membership of 12,634 in 33 adult prison systems. While these prison gangs accounted for only 3 percent of the country's adult male prison population, they have been found responsible for over 50 percent of prison management problems (Fong, Vogel & Buentello 1996). A study conducted by the American Correctional Association (1993) found similar results. They concluded that prison gang members accounted for 6 percent of the prison population and were responsible for approximately 20 percent of violent incidences toward prison staff and 40 percent toward other prisoners.

In spite of prison gangs receiving more attention and being partly responsible for inmate problems, little research has been directed toward gangs in prison. Furthermore, to date there has been no comprehensive study looking at prison gangs in state juvenile facilities for either males or females.

How gang involvement may influence the processes of prison subcultural devel-

opment for females is unknown. While gang involvement in women's prisons may be viewed as the product of importation, that is, females in gangs before incarceration continuing their gang affiliation while incarcerated, it may also be the result of deprivation, i.e., gangs forming to compensate for the lack of close-knit peer groups or for protection, just as in male institutions. It also may be that gangs develop due to a combination of both reasons. Regardless of origin, a primary assumption is that gang membership in prison provides opportunities for achieving power, feeling protected and acquiring a vast array of comforts to make the prison stay more tolerable.

This study attempts to fill the void of both subcultural and prison gang research by examining the role gangs play in inmate subcultures of female adolescents, in particular, one juvenile correctional facility located in the Southwest. The questions of deprivation and importation are examined in the context of adaptation to incarceration while specifically looking at the role of gangs. This research examines to what extent gangs account for how adolescent females react and adapt to imprisonment using the deprivation and importation models. These concepts are measured through in-depth analysis with thirty-four young women to examine individual and collective responses on reactions to confinement and gang life.

Policy and Inmate Subcultures

Unfortunately, policymakers have implemented correctional policies without a clear understanding of how gangs impact the correctional experience. Further, policy is best informed by those closest to the problem (Petersen 2000; 1995) and as such, why listening to and understanding these young women is of particular significance.

Some literature has concerned itself with the question of whether gangs are imported into prisons or are an outgrowth of the deprivations of prison life. For example, McConville (1985) seems to suggest the latter is more prominent with mandatory minimum prison sentences a major factor contributing to gangs in prison. However, the recent growth of prison gangs may be the result of more individuals sentenced to prison who are gang members and as such, importation would also be a factor.

The increase of female gang involvement has most likely influenced inmate subcultures by altering the dynamics of power and status. With the increase in girls' participation in gangs, what they import into the institution and their variable effect on inmate subcultures are extremely important issues. The present research investigates how the values and norms of incarcerated gang girls may affect the values and norms of inmates who are not affiliated with gangs. Currently, no research in the literature exists involving juveniles detained in correctional facilities exclusively regarding the issue of gangs. There are also no reported studies of girls and gangs lodged within the network of inmate subcultures. How female gang involvement and affiliation represent the processes of importation or deprivation is unknown.

Importation and Deprivation: Female subcultures and gangs

The most popular belief in the existence of prison gangs can be attributed to importation. This perspective asserts that the inmate's social world is shaped by personal and social characteristics imported into prison (Irwin, Cressey 1962) with gangs in prison one result of such pro-

cesses. Importation would suggest that gangs in prison are a result of individuals bringing their gangs into the prison. For example, if an individual is part of a street gang prior to incarceration, s/he may bring this mentality and behavior into the prison culture. How s/he adapts to the incarceration experience would be, in part, shaped by his/her prior gang affiliation. They may see prison life as an opportunity for extending their hometown gang.

Conversely, a polarized perspective on the existence of prison gangs is that of deprivation. This model argues that since the social world of inmates is shaped by a variety of prison deprivations (Clemmer 1940), gangs in prison may be the result of "easing the pains of imprisonment" especially if faced with a lengthy prison sentence (McConville 1985). Deprivation would view that individuals are deprived of, for example, companionship, status, power or protection and would form or join a gang to compensate for such losses. Inmates may find it necessary to form into groups for self-protection, power and/or dominance with such groups often developing into "prison gangs." These prison gangs are seen as notorious for incidences of violence, threats, intimidation and other types of disruption within the prison milieu.

It is, however, also possible that prison gangs develop for a combination of both deprivation and importation reasons, something previous literature on subcultures has not adequately addressed. Matthews (1999) contends that an important relationship exists between the social and cultural backgrounds of those who enter prison and that such backgrounds provide a framework for understanding the ways in which the pains of imprisonment are experienced. In fact, both the importation and deprivation models could be intertwined to better understand gang development in prison. For instance, gang subcultures on the outside can be imported to the institution via values, culture, norms, symbols, and language. Moreover, since youth are deprived of intimate peer relationships, they may join a gang or continue affiliation to compensate for their

lack of intimacy, power, leadership, or even as a method of survival. These assertions can be applied to the understanding of gangs in prison. Clearly, the lack of knowledge and understanding of the world of female gangs lodged within the inmate social system merits serious examination.

Prior research on both female adult and juvenile subcultures is scant, at best, especially when compared to studies of male prisons (see Ward, Kassebaum 1965; Giallombardo 1966; 1974; Heffernan 1972). These and other investigations of female inmate subcultures often have been based on gender stereotypes with a preoccupation of sexual relations, in particular, homosexuality, and the role of pseudo-family relationships (Otis 1913; Ford 1929; Selling 1931; Kosofsky, Ellis 1958; Halleck, Hersko 1962; Ward, Kassebaum 1965; Konopka 1966; Giallombardo 1974; Carter 1981; Propper 1981). While incarcerated young women may be involved in homosexual relationships and may form pseudo-families, our knowledge of inmate subcultures of female youth virtually stops there. Furthermore, the few studies exclusively focused on inmate subcultures of female adolescents have produced mixed results as to which model explains subculture development accurately (Giallombardo 1974; Propper 1981; Carter 1981; Arnold 1994). It is, therefore, unclear as to the methods of how females adapt to incarceration, i.e., importation and/or deprivation, and how prior gang affiliation may account for their adaptation.

There are generally three types of ways females are involved or affiliated with gangs: (1) membership in an independent, all-female gang, (2) regular membership in a male or mixed-gender gang, and (3) female auxiliaries of male gangs. Research has overwhelmingly found the auxiliary roles most common (for example, Bowker 1978; Brown 1977; Campbell 1984; Flowers 1987; Hanson 1964; Miller 1975; 1980). These girls often are identified as girlfriends, friends, sisters or cousins of male gang members with their role in the gang minimal, i.e., carrying weap-

ons, driving the get-a-way car, partying with the male gang members. It has been suggested that female gang membership has been increasing steadily in all the above categories, but this is far from certain and research has not concretely substantiated such claims. As such, considerable ignorance exists concerning the role of females and gangs, especially relating to the impact of such gang affiliation on imprisonment.

Since more young women are being incarcerated every year accompanied by changes in gender roles, it is critical to explore how the various dimensions of social life affect inmate subculture formation. Because the perspective that gang research literature has about girl gang membership may no longer be accurate given contemporary conditions, it is important to understand the importation view of gang culture into the prison experience. It has been speculated that incarcerated gang members are often versions of their hometown gangs who merely have been regrouped in prison. What type of effect this has on subculture formation and inmate adaptation of young female inmates needs closer examination.

The goal of this study is to add to the understanding of the dynamics of gang affiliation among females relating to inmate subcultures. Specifically, I examine (1) whether the youth were involved with gangs before incarceration, (2) if they continued their gang affiliation while committed, (3) the impact of gang affiliation on subculture formation, and (4) if girls who were not in gangs before commitment decided to join while imprisoned and why.

Methodology

Given the state of the prior research and literature on this topic, the goal is not specifically hypothesis-testing. However, my reading of the literature on the role of females and gangs and on the importation and deprivation models in male prisons leads me to suggest some patterns I would expect to find. Specifically, the gang literature suggests that gangs play a lesser role for females than for males and the prison literature suggests that females feel

the pains of family/role deprivation more than males. Thus, this would imply that the deprivation model may be more suitable in explaining the dynamics of gangs for incarcerated young women.

The intent of this study is not to produce a quantitative, statistical account. Rather, it is an exploratory study (Creswell 1994) designed to build constructed descriptions and interpretations of social events by the young women themselves. The findings of this study, based solely on the interview responses, are to be understood through Verstehen, that is, empathetic understanding and meaning (Weber 1949) which underscores the importance of the context of the girls' lives. This study is meant to add a holistic understanding to the role of subcultures and gangs in a juvenile correctional facility. Inferences regarding the impact of incarceration on gang membership cannot be universally generalized. However, it is hoped that through this type of methodology, the role of subcultures and gangs can be well-understood, especially pertaining to correctional and public policy.

The interview model used in this research most closely relates to the interpretive approach toward social knowledge and meaning. Interviews framed for these purposes result in one-to-one casual conversations with the interviewer listening closely to the context of what is being said. The interviewee is treated as a conversational partner rather than an object of research (Rubin, Rubin 1995). The interview is very much like an ordinary conversation, but with more depth and detail. Kahn & Cannell (1957:49) describe in-depth interviewing as "a conversation with a purpose."

All accounts must be interpreted in terms of the context in which they were produced. According to Hammersley & Atkinson (1983:126), "Interview data, like any other, must be interpreted against the background of the context in which they were produced." Interpretations of meanings are made by the social actors, in this case, adolescent females, and by the researcher as well as by the audience reading the final study.

Method and Setting

Establishing rapport with subjects is crucial for this type of study. Rapport enhances the researcher's ability to convey empathy and understanding without judgment, to elicit more truthful responses, and to build detailed answers to questions. Incarcerated young women may feel intimidated that an adult stranger, whom they may perceive negatively as an "authoritarian figure" or an "intruder" in their lives, is asking them personal questions while they are incarcerated. Therefore, it is important to underscore the importance of rapport in this study.

It should be noted that since I was a volunteer at the institution for approximately six months before the study commenced, many of the girls and I had established good rapport, and I believe a certain amount of trust already existed. Volunteers are usually perceived differently than correctional staff and are often thought of as wanting to help a population without monetary compensation or a particular political agenda. It was hoped that the young women recognized and respected this attribute. Furthermore, after some youth were interviewed, it was assumed that other youth would ask them about their experience and about the researcher and that this would help to alleviate potential suspicions. In addition each youth was awarded a certificate of appreciation for participation in the study.

Since in-depth, unstructured interviews are the method used for this research, taking notes while conducting the interview would limit the ability of recording verbatim responses. Moreover, note taking can prove disruptive with the interviewee becoming self-conscious about what is being written down. Taking notes also minimizes the informal nature of the unstructured interview and diminishes eye contact and interactive conversations. Recording interviews increases the validity of data collection, which is systematically transcribed at a later time, allowing the interviewer to be more attentive to each respondent. It was, therefore, essential to use a tape recorder during the interview.

Instead of assigning pseudo-names, each participant in the study has been given an identifying number, i.e., Youth #14, to organize data analysis and to examine differences and similarities among perspectives. Since this research is primarily a qualitative study, numeric accounts and frequencies of perspectives are not calculated quantitatively, with the exception of descriptive demographic information. Rather, categorized responses of thirty-four youth are collectively enumerated through qualitative descriptions based upon the following frequency continuum: none, one, a few, some, several, about half, over half, many, the majority, most, nearly all and all. Arranging responses using this method of analysis permits further understanding of their perspectives both collectively and individually.

The research took place at a juvenile correctional institution in the Southwest, henceforth referred to as SWI¹. By law, if organizations receive federal subsidies, parental/guardian consent is required to study minors. As such, parental consent was needed for this study. According to the supervisory staff at SWI, the best and most common way they reach parents/guardians was through the mail since many of the youth's parents/guardians did not have working telephones. As such, letters were sent to each parent/guardian during a seven-month time frame, from July 1996 to January 1997. One-hundred-three young women were incarcerated at some point during this study period.

A self-addressed stamped-envelope to the researcher was included in the letter to increase the response rate. If a response or a signed parental consent form was not received within three weeks, a follow-up letter was sent. Of the total 103 letters mailed, four notices from the youths' parents were received indicating that they did not want their daughter to participate in the study. A total of thirty-six signed parental consent forms were returned. Two of these youth had been incarcerated less than a month and were dropped from the study². All thirty-four remaining girls were asked to participate in the study. All thirty-four agreed to participate which

constitutes the total sample number of youth's interviewed³. The time length of the interview varied with each individual but ranged from forty-five minutes to over four hours with the average length of time approximately ninety minutes.

One final note on parental consent should be mentioned. Thirty-three percent of the girls incarcerated during the study time-frame were interviewed. I did not find it too surprising that over 60 percent of the parents/guardians did not sign and return the consent form. First, other research has shown that response rates for mailings, especially when the subject matter is sensitive and when the subject is a minor, are low and tend to fall between 10 to 50 percent (see Esbensen, Miller, Taylor et al. 1999; Kearney, Hopkins, Mauss et al. 1983; Miller 1991; Moberg, Piper 1990; Neuman, Wiegand 2000; Severson, Ary 1983). Unfortunately, since parental consent results in lower response rates, this invariably carries over to reduced sample sizes which not only increases the probability of subject selection bias but limits the validity and generalizability of study results (Hollmann, McNamara 1999). Second, I would speculate that many of these parents/guardians were suspect of an unknown "outside researcher" not directly connected to the correctional facility to possibly interview their child about personal issues. Finally, I would also contend that parents/guardians would not want a person to pry further into their child's life by asking a series of sensitive questions. As such, it is difficult to estimate the effect of such nonresponses to this study's overall findings.

Data Analysis

Central to the analysis is gang importation into the institution, how this influenced subculture formation, and if girls joined gangs or continued gang involvement for either importation and/or deprivation reasons. The issue of gangs is addressed in themes according to perceptions of gangs, the extent of gang activity at SWI, if girls in gangs try to recruit non-gang inmates into their gang and the extent to which the latter is accomplished all

within the framework of inmate subcultures. To keep the study and analysis focused, the analysis highlights only those issues that pertain to inmate subcultures.

Demographic Information

Of special importance in giving meaning and shaping interpretation of the girls' voices is to profile some demographic information, i.e., age, race, length of disposition, total time served at interview, and previous geographical residence. Such descriptive information aids in understanding the perspectives of youth. Since this researcher was not allowed access to court or other official records, all data and information collected here are gleaned from the youths themselves⁴.

At SWI youth can be committed up until the age of eighteen. Table 1 illustrates the average age of the youth was 15.4 years with the range from thirteen to seventeen. Only one youth in the study was younger than fourteen. Table 1 indicates the ethnicity of each individual. Fifty-percent of the youth were white, followed by Hispanics (23.5%). The state in which the youth were confined is predominately white, with the largest minority population Hispanic. Hence, these findings tend to mirror the general population.

The length of institutionalization has been found to be related to the formation of inmate subcultures. The table notes the average length of incarceration was approximately nine months with the range from three months to over thirteen. For most of the young women, this was their

first time sentenced to SWI. However, four indicated that they had been incarcerated at least one time before the study took place: two indicated that this was their second time at SWI; one said that this was her third time; and one expressed that this was her fourth time.⁵ To understand more clearly how the duration of incarceration affects subcultures, the table shows at what time during the sentence the youth were interviewed. As illustrated, over fifty percent of the youth were interviewed within six months of their initial incarceration. Since the average length of sentence was around nine months, these findings are not surprising. Finally, Table 1 also indicates the youth's geographic residence prior to incarceration. Urban cities are measured by a population of at least 500,000 people. Suburbs and rural towns in the state are also included. Small cities included in the analysis are areas with approximately 40,000 residents. These findings suggest that a large number of youth previously resided in urban areas.

Previous studies profiling females in prison (American Correctional Association 1990; Glick, Neto 1977) have found similar demographic characteristics, especially age and race. However, my study further explores the geographic location of residence before incarceration.

Gangs at SWI

Analysis of the interview transcripts soon made it clear that a major factor in the girls' pre-prison experiences was their prior involvement with gangs. Gang af-

Table 1: Demographic Information (n=34)

Age	13 1 (3%)	14 8 (23.5%)	15 9 (26.5%)	16 8 (23.5%)	17 8 (23.5%)	\bar{X} 15.4
Ethnicity		White 17 (50%)	Hispanic 8 (23.5%)	Af.Amer. 4 (12%)	Native Am. 4 (12%)	Asian 1 (2.5%)
Length of Disposition		3-4 mos. 7 (22%)	6-9 mos. 15 (44%)	11-12 mos. 9 (26%)	13+ mos. 3 (8%)	\bar{X} 8.7
Total Time Served at Interview		1-3 mos. 12 (35%)	4-6 mos. 12 (35%)	7-9 mos. 6 (18%)	10+ mos. 4 (12%)	\bar{X} 5.4
Area of Residence		Urban 22 (64%)	Suburban 6 (18%)	Rural 2 (6%)	Small City 4 (12%)	

filiation was evident among this group of girls with twenty-two of the thirty-four girls indicating that they were involved in gangs⁶ before incarceration. In some ways, this seemed to imply that importation, not deprivation, would be a major factor in the development subcultures. However, not all thirty-four girls were members of gangs prior to incarceration. Also, the extent to which subcultures formed in prison based on such gang alliances was further questioned by those young women affiliated with gangs as well as by those not involved with gangs.

Claiming gangs

When a young woman first enters the cottage at SWI, one of the first things that is asked by her peers is, "Where are you from?" As one non gang member noted, "I said that I was from [A City]. But that's not what they meant" (Youth #6). What the girls mean when they ask this crucial question is, "What gang do you claim?" not which part of the state one is from. One youth stated that "When they [the girls] first come in [to SWI], most of the girls let it be known that they are in a certain gang or not in a certain gang" (Youth #10). Moreover, Youth #4 who is associated with a gang stated that "people asked me when I first got here if I was from a gang and I said 'no'. But then they asked me who I 'kicked-back' with, then I told them."

Some girls continued claiming their gang at SWI while others do not. As illustrated by Youth #3, "I told them [peers at SWI] I am affiliated with it [gang] but that I stay away from it because it's not what I want to do with my life." On the other hand, some still identify with and claim their gang throughout their incarceration because, as illustrated by one youth not involved with gangs, "I think a lot of the girls here want out of their gangs but are afraid of being alone when they do leave here. A lot of the girls need something here to help them out and make them feel wanted" (Youth #22). Claiming the gang may not terminate inside the institution, although, their desire to get out of the gang may subside.

These findings seem to suggest that im-

portation may be a factor in inmate subculture formation in that the girls who are affiliated with gangs bring this identity into the institution. At face, the youth still seem interested in knowing who is or is not a gang member and some still claim their gang, which can be interpreted as part of the importation model.

Based on these perspectives, there appears to be four major reasons why prison gang subcultures are not pervasive at SWI. First, many youth affiliated with gangs "do not want to be a part of the gang anymore" (Youth #4). Another young woman suggested that, "I'm trying to get out of it [gang]. I'm really not into it as much as I was. I am getting out, slowly but surely" (Youth #19). Based on the interviews, nearly all the girls involved with gangs did not want to be part of their gang anymore and their desire subsided before entering SWI. As Youth #22 illustrated, "A lot of the girls try to get out of their gangs in here, try to leave them...when they walked in the door, leave them there and not pick them up when they leave." Another young woman involved with a gang wanted to get jumped into her gang after release from SWI but was having second thoughts: "The way I see it is a way of getting into more trouble." (Youth #20). Accordingly, getting jumped into a gang would mean more involvement with other gang members and thus, more trouble. Still another youth articulated that "I quit caring about the gang life. Besides, everybody was getting locked up" (Youth #1). Youth #4 mentioned that she started to lessen her involvement with the gang before coming to SWI because "it got stupid to me. I stopped claiming [the gang] 'cause I thought the gang groups was starting to get stupid."

Second, girls affiliated with gangs knew that they would be further sanctioned if indications of gang involvement were present and visible, i.e., claiming their gang, throwing gang signs and talking about their gang. One youth pointed out the dangers of gangs at SWI: "I never throw up my gang sign at the institution 'cause I know you'd get in trouble. Not only that, but because your gang member

friends aren't in here with you so, they [rival gang members] can throw it back at you" (Youth #8). A third and related reason is that the SWI administration and staff discourages these activities and rules prohibit such behavior. For example, SWI attempts to restrict gangs through forbidding gang signs and requiring girls to wear only certain colors. To illustrate, the girls wear light colored t-shirts, sweatshirts, sweatpants, shorts and identical state-blue jeans. Youth #10 indicated that "that's why we have these peach and yellow shirts 'cause they are so far off from being gang-related [colors]." Similarly, Youth #30 said that, "You can't wear red or blue here. You can't have nothin' here red or blue. You can't even have toothbrushes red or blue." Similarly, another youth added that, "you can't even have a blue toothbrush in here. That's how bad it is. When God made colors, I'm sure He didn't have in mind that it was going to belong to a gang" (Youth #9). The issue of gangs at SWI has, in part, influenced correctional policies by placing additional restrictions on the dress code and having other rules to curtail gangs.

A fourth reason for the lack of core, prison gang subcultures at SWI is there exists an absence of protection or a defined "turf" in such small living quarters. Some youth involved with gangs may be used to a defined turf on the streets. This is related to the final reason why gangs at SWI are not rampant. Since no gang territory at SWI apparently exists, each youth is forced into the same territorial area. They have no choice but to do their time with others surrounding peers and gang life may be further minimized by personal relationships, many of which are non-voluntary. As such, the minimal presence of gangs in prison may be related to structural and ecological factors in the institution downplaying the effect of both importation and deprivation.

Recruitment at SWI

One major question this research intended to address was the issue of gang recruitment at SWI. Do girls affiliated with gangs try to recruit others into their gang, whether this be a young woman not

part of a gang or an individual already associated with another gang? By and large, the answer to this was "no." In the words of Youth #20, "they [gang members at SWI] just mind their own business." In fact, as illustrated previously, several young women in gangs were either slowly getting out of them before institutionalization or realized that "my gang only got me here" (Youth #1). Therefore, recruiting others into a gang appeared to be minimal, at best.

Youth #8, affiliated with a gang, mentioned that, "There's pressure to join a gang [on the outside], but there's no pressure in here. The ones that are not [part of gangs] don't want to join one." A young woman not involved in gangs explained that, "They [girls in gangs] don't want to talk about getting nobody in it. Pretty much, they talk about getting out" (Youth #24). Still another young woman not involved with gangs illuminated that being in a gang is synonymous with violence and drugs: "I didn't want to be physically involved in drugs. I didn't want to have to carry a gun and look behind my shoulder every ten seconds. That's not my idea of fun. That's basically how gang life is: do or die" (Youth #7). Furthermore, there are dangers of trying to recruit others into a gang at SWI as illustrated by Youth #26: "People really don't try to recruit gang members here 'cause they might end up staying longer." Apparently, there may be sanctions by the institution for trying to recruit gang members and hence, this activity is largely avoided by the young women.

From the various interview responses of both girls affiliated with gangs and those not, it does not appear that gang members try to recruit others into their respective gang. Those who are part of gangs do not try to recruit others into their gang, and those who are not part of gangs do not want to become associated with gangs or gang members. In fact of those young women not affiliated with gangs prior to incarceration, none joined a gang while at SWI. As to how girls in gangs initially became involved on the outside and how this could affect importation, most were not actively

recruited into their gang as they seemed to slowly "fall into" the gang lifestyle.

The same can be said to occur at SWI, as the girls involved with gangs do not actively recruit non-gang members and thus, is an illustration of importation. To further demonstrate this assertion, the girls not part of gangs often believed that a gang was nothing but a bunch of scoundrels. To illustrate, Youth #19 said that, "[A gang] is a bunch of whimps that can't fight for themselves, so they have to have a whole bunch of people do it for them." This view was further illustrated by Youth #20: "[Joining a gang] is trying to take the easy way out. It's a cop-out for life and it's not gonna get you anywhere." Youth #6 also believed that gangs were "a bunch of stupid people who go out making their own [family and friends] in the wrong ways. They're out to prove something and they're out to have others supposedly love them and have their backing on everything." Youth #28 suggested that "there's some reasons why people do join gangs 'cause they didn't get the acceptance in their family and they didn't get the love in their family, that's understandable. But there's other ways to get that [besides being in a gang]. You don't need to go out killing people." Youth #25 said "I don't like gangs. I don't have nothin' to do with them...I think there is no point to them."

Thus, the young women imported these views into the institution which can be said to be a major reason they would not join a gang if they were approached with the situation in prison. Youth #5, a gang member, suggested that "The [girls] that are not [in gangs] don't want to join one" either in prison or when they are released from prison. In this context of importation, there would be no reason why non-gang girls would join a gang while incarcerated. A notable question would be, why would they join? For those involved with gangs, the prison milieu is completely different than what they are used to in the "real" world. These above reasons tend to suggest that deprivation is not the active factor in subculture formation and that in regards to gang recruitment, importation has some explanatory power.

Gangs as Problems at SWI

Some youth thought gangs were problematic⁷ to institutional life but most did not. Furthermore, their opinions did not appear to be formed based on gang membership. In other words, just as many gang girls and non-gang girls thought that gangs were problematic or not problematic at the institution.

The girls who viewed gangs at SWI as causing many problems gave various reasons. For example, Youth #24 said that, "Gangs are a really big thing in here. A lot of people will use their gang signs to get back at people, to put them down." One young woman affiliated with a West Side gang indicated that she purposefully avoids initial contact with rival gang members at SWI to avoid any type of conflict: "At the beginning when the new girls get here, I don't talk to them if they're from the South Side or from the North Side, especially from the North Side 'cause man, I don't get along with them or the South Side at all (Youth #3). More commonly, gangs appear to be problematic on an individual-level. For example, "If two people get into an argument and it's over something stupid, they'll bring their gang into it...they'll throw their gang signs or claim their gang as better" (Youth #19). As such, the girls may try to bring their gangs in for the feeling of being protected or backed-up while incarcerated, an example of importation.

However, others thought that "gang stuff is not used a lot" and that "they usually keep their gangs to themselves." Many youth responded by saying that the girls who are part of gangs "leave it at the door." According to one gang member, "I think some of us [gang members] leave the gang stuff at the door. It's like, we're in jail. What are we supposed to be fighting over? We don't have a street corner here, although, some girls think that they brought it in their pocket or something" (Youth #4). Youth #2, affiliated with the Crips, explained that, "In here, I get along with the Crips, Bloods and Brown Pride. Now, I've had some confrontations with other Bloods [at SWI] but that was no problem." This process was reinforced by Youth #24

who suggested that, "People get along despite their gangs. It really don't matter." Youth #13 added that, "Gangs are an issue in here, but not an everyday one." Similarly, another youth said that, "Gangs are really not a problem here. Everybody hangs out with everybody" (Youth #15).

These findings suggest that most young women, regardless of gang affiliation, did not see gangs as problematic to everyday, institutional living at SWI. However, some believed that gangs can cause trouble on a more micro-level, that is, between two or more people rather than at a macro-level, i.e., the institution. When asked if the gangs were a problem at SWI, most of the girls (both gang members and non gang members) indicated that gangs at SWI did not pose a serious problem and that the girls in gangs "pretty much keep it to themselves." Exceptions to this were when a conflict arose between two or more girls and then they started claiming their gang or throwing their gang signs at each other, which can be said to be a product of importation as they brought this type of defense mechanism with them into the institution. Sometimes, the conflicts were based on friendship alliances while other times, they were not.

Friendships

Friendships often form through some type of commonality between two or more people. How friendships develop for the incarcerated young women and what form they take, especially in relation to gangs, was examined. One youth said that when she first arrived at SWI, she noticed that "two girls, one's a Blood and one's a Crip, are best friends. They're really, really good friends. And I know two others. One's a Crip, one's a Blood, and they're tight...they're tight as anything. They don't care about the gangs" (Youth #4). It appears that even though two or more people are from rival gangs in the community, they tend to often get along at SWI. It may also be the case that rival gang members become friends because they have a common bond of gang affiliation. For example, Youth #2 said "I see a lot of Crips talking to Bloods and a lot of Bloods talking to Crips and a lot of Bloods

and Crips talking to the Mexican, Brown Pride gangs. It don't really matter in here. We really don't get into fights about it like we would on-the-outs." It appears that some girls in gangs click together even though they may be from different or even rival gangs, and as Youth #31 noted: "Despite their gang differences on-the-outs, they come together real close." The young women seem to form some degree of friendships in spite of being from different or rival gangs and in spite of being of different races. Since the youth reside and work in small areas at SWI, they often form friendships based on whom they have regular contact with.

Thus in these cases, importation does not appear to be a major factor in inmate subculture formation, particularly relating to gangs. This could be due, in part, to the fact that while incarcerated, they do not have much of a choice on whom to befriend. Since the youth live in small living quarters, have three to four roommates and work with other peers, they often are "thrown into" establishing some type of relationship with other peers. While many of the young women were affiliated with gangs before incarceration, this did not appear to have much impact on how they adapted to institutional life. They either wanted to quit the gang or their previous gang affiliation had little impact on the friendships that were made. Thus, the ways girls formed friendships were based on easing the pains of imprisonment or the deprivation model.

Treatment and Punishment

This study proposed to briefly examine if the type of institution (i.e., treatment or punishment) would have any bearing on inmate subcultures, as gleaned from the voices of the young women. Opinions were mixed and some thought SWI practiced both punishment and treatment elements. However, overwhelmingly most believed that SWI was more interested in discipline rather than treatment and/or punishment. "I really don't see it [SWI] as punishment 'cause I see it more as discipline" (Youth #10). As a matter of fact, Youth #19 indicated that, "I enjoy the discipline here." By this, she alluded to the

strict schedule and structure at SWI something previously not noted in her life. And another youth added that, "In here we learn how to be structured" (Youth #3).

On the issue of treatment, Youth #3 suggested that "this is more of a treatment place than jail 'cause we do groups and stuff and gotta be positive." Another agreed and indicated that "this place is more like treatment, about issues that you have, if you like, have a drug problem and stuff like that" (Youth #33). Furthermore, one young woman suggested that the group sessions "make you think about what you've done that's wrong and how you can improve" (Youth #9).

Still others believed that treatment was in the form of not only groups but also education, as the young women were required to go to school several hours per day unless they received their GED. Others explained that SWI is treatment if one makes it out to be that way. To illustrate, "I feel it's a place...if you want to have treatment and if you want to change yourself. The girls that don't want to change themselves, it's not treatment at all. It's just a place to do your time" (Youth #32). Youth #24 agreed: "You get out of this place what you put into it, pretty much."

Many viewed SWI as a place of punishment and a place to do time. To illustrate, Youth #18 said that, "I think it's punishment being behind these walls, you know." Another young woman believed that "this is real punishment because having my freedom is gone" (Youth #28). One young woman expressed that "I think it's a place of punishment 'cause you're not able to go home and do what you want" (Youth #22). Another youth (Youth #27) described her thoughts on punishment in great detail:

I think it's punishment for the crimes I have done in the past. But, I mean, when you do something wrong in here, you don't get punished. I mean, you get punished; you go to separation or something like that. But you don't get like, five months added on. You don't get too much taken away from you when you do something wrong. And I think that should happen. That way it

might stop you from doing something wrong again.

This particular individual believed if punishment at SWI was implemented fully, it could possibly act as a deterrent to future misbehavior.

Another youth described that, "I feel it's punishment...we get absolutely no treatment here. So, I basically feel like our line-movements is more important than our learning how to stay off drugs and getting our act together and figuring out what we want to do with our lives" (Youth #4). As such, this particular individual believed that treatment was virtually non-existent at SWI and that the institution stressed other issues which were not treatment-oriented. Similarly, Youth #7 suggested that, "I think it's more punishment and it all revolves around punishment. We have a point-system here and they tally down mostly the bad things you do, but not the good things." And Youth #34 suggested that, "I look at this place sometimes and 'we're treatment' and I just laugh. I mean, I've only talked to a psychologist once since I've been here [five months]."

From the voices of the youth, it appears that SWI has both treatment and punishment elements with variations based on individual responses. However, many young women indicated that SWI is a place of discipline, rather than punishment, and that it does offer some programs and treatment services. Accordingly, whether or not SWI was treatment or punishment depended upon the attitude of the individual and what she made of the incarceration experience. As such, views were individualized depending upon the perspective of each inmate. I did not find any congruent perspectives on this issue.

Subculture Formation at SWI

The inmate subculture at SWI that does exist may be explained by the time spent at SWI (with an average of nine months), which may not be long enough for distinct, intense and different subcultures to develop. At the time of the interviews, the young women had been incarcerated for an average of 5.4 months. Wheeler (1961) notes that when inmates become aware of

their imminent release, their reference group orientation shifts from within the walls to outside of the walls. This anticipatory socialization illustrates that the youth may not need to make as many adjustments or compensations to prison life knowing that they will soon be released which appears to be the case for many young women at SWI.

Since most studies of prison gangs have been based on adult males, whose sentences are generally longer, prison gangs for young, female inmates may not be omnipresent. These young women may not be sentenced long enough to feel as if they need to join or form a gang and thus, the deprivation model may not be suitable for this particular phenomenon.

It seems as if many youth view SWI as a place of discipline and not necessarily treatment or punishment. On a custody-treatment continuum, SWI leans toward treatment in the types of services actually provided. Many hours are spent in group sessions, thereby employing a type of "therapeutic community" within the institution. Therefore, both the amount of time spent in the institution and the level of custody-treatment influence the extent of inmate subcultures. In this study, the average sentence length was nine months. As such, both the minimal time spent at the institution and the "treatment" characteristics of the institution may help explain the nature and extent of the inmate subculture at SWI. It appears as if most young women want to avoid trouble, finish their sentence and get out as quickly as possible and affiliating with gangs would hinder such goals.

Conclusion

A limited amount of empirical research exists on the nature and extent of inmate gangs, let alone female, juvenile prison gangs. This research examined the issue of gangs through a case study involving in-depth interviews of thirty-four incarcerated young women. The interviewing methodology was fitting for this study since it examined perspectives in context, lessened objectivity of the subject-researcher role (Rubin, Rubin 1995) and

gave the young women a public voice. This study of a relatively unknown area of investigation began with no pre-defined hypotheses, and the topics, themes and data analysis evolved throughout the research process. Originally, the study planned to examine generally the deprivation and importation models of institutional life. However, after interviewing several youth, it incrementally became apparent that the issues of gangs and peer relationships were extensive. Thus, after analyzing the interview notes, I decided to focus almost exclusively on these two issues and how they relate to the extent of inmate subculture formation. This research examined the extent to which gangs account for the development of inmate subcultures of female youth using the deprivation and importation models.

A major conclusion of this study is that even though twenty-two youth were affiliated with gangs prior to incarceration, most of these young women indicated they no longer desired to be associated with gangs. Many youth involved with gangs appeared to leave their gangs "at the door" and did not want to become involved with them at SWI or upon release. Moreover the majority of females associated with gangs were slowly lessening their activities and contacts with the gang prior to incarceration. Thus, all of these reasons can be said to be a function of the importation model.

Even though over half the inmates were affiliated with gangs, they did not try to recruit non-gang member inmates. Those not affiliated with gangs had virtually no interest in gang life before or during incarceration. None of these women joined gangs while at SWI. The incarcerated young women not part of gangs were even more turned-off by gang life, partly as a result of being incarcerated with many girls who were affiliated with them. These women learned about gang-life in explicit detail by hearing stories of those affiliated with gangs and through living in such close proximity to each other. In the eyes of one youth, "the more people you know, the more people you talk to, the more you get into trouble. The more you stay to

yourself, the better off you will be" (Youth #10). These findings support the importation model since while in society, those involved in gangs were not actively recruited themselves. Furthermore, the youth not affiliated with gangs had no desire of being involved with gangs while in society or while incarcerated and as such, could be an illustration of importation.

Nevertheless, this could also be interpreted through deprivation in that girls associated with gangs may not recruit non-gang members due to fear of being further sanctioned by the staff at the institution. Most young women appeared to simply be "sitting out" or merely waiting for their sentence to end and thus, did not really form distinct gang subcultures. As Youth #1 illustrated, "I just want to get out [of SWI]." Many youth tried to avoid trouble, find activities to fill their days, make limited friendships and do what they thought was necessary to survive so they could get out as soon as possible. Since several youth indicated that they just wanted to "do their time and get out," this finding was not surprising.

A limitation of this research was that it did not adequately address the extent of the young woman's affiliation or how strong her ties were to the male gang. It could be hypothesized that the more involved they were with the gang or if they were actually a gang member, that they would be more inclined to bring these bonds into the prison and not be as hasty to forget about their prior gang life, especially as the gang relates to whom they befriend.

In society friendships are often formed by some type of common bond that attracts two or more people together. Friendships of incarcerated girls appear to form in a similar way. Those who are affiliated with gangs often develop friendships with those who are also associated with gangs, including rival gangs, as this was the "type" of friendships they made while in society. This context suggests the importance that importation has in the development of friendships along "gang" lines.

This study found both deprivation and importation influential in the development

of inmate subcultures at SWI, depending upon the contextual question at hand. However, the importation model appeared to have more influence on the nature and extent of subculture formation particularly relating to gangs. Such findings do not support previous research on inmate subcultures of female youth (Otis 1913; Ford 1929; Selling 1931; Kosofsky, Ellis 1958; Halleck, Hersko 1962; Konopka 1966; Giallombardo 1974; Carter 1981; Propper 1981). One reason may be that SWI is a vastly different context from other sites that theories were founded upon; another reason is that the few previous studies based on female juvenile inmates were done decades ago when the social roles of female youth were different than in contemporary society; yet another important conclusion is that the length of stay at SWI may be too short for subcultures to mature and develop. Studies have found that the more time an inmate spends in prison and custody-level institutions, the greater the inmate's antisocial attitudes, and hence, the greater the prisoner subculture (McConville 1985; Wheeler 1961). It may be that this group of youth, and other juvenile correctional populations serving time, are not committed long enough for any type of formal or distinct subcultures to mature, particularly relating to gangs.

The principal adaptation technique in this study appears to be doing time and avoiding trouble. The young women want to stay out of trouble so they can do their time to get out as quickly as possible. This seems to be the motivating force behind their efforts of conformity and adaptation to prison life. Therefore, new subculture concepts need to be developed or refined for other prison contexts, especially for juveniles often serving shorter sentences than adults. As such, this study concludes that gangs for these young women at SWI have limited influence on adaptation strategies and subculture development.

This study not only is significant to understand the context of subcultures and gangs but also to realize how such responses can effect policy. Correctional and public policy is frequently developed without going to the source for answers

(Petersen 2000; 1995). As such, this is antithetical to democracy. Ordinary citizens, such as gang members and young offenders, are not often involved in the policy process, yet they are the ones toward whom policy is directed. "The end result is detrimental for youths and ultimately to society, in that people without power often become more alienated from democracy without further 'buying into' society" (Petersen 1995:648). It is, therefore, crucial to look at the ones most affected by criminal and/or juvenile justice policies, i.e., young offenders and gang members, to not only ask them their input but for them to have a meaningful effect on the way policies are framed.

By giving these thirty-four women a voice, it is hoped that this can lead to empathetic understanding to impact the direction of future policies. The findings of this research could enlighten policymakers with clearer understandings of the nature and extent of gangs in prison which could provide the basic tools necessary to conceptualize and develop gang programs both in prison and in the larger society.

A final note on parental consent

Legal and ethical standards require parental consent if the subjects of research are less than eighteen years old. It has been well-documented that parental consent reduces sample size. Moreover, I would argue that parental consent further reduces the sample size of youth who are part of the juvenile or criminal justice system and who are asked to participate voluntarily in a study normally conducted outside the purview of the system, i.e., university-based research, even if advocated by the justice system.

I contend that a major motivation behind refusal of their son/daughter to participate in such study is due to emotional distress that the interview questions, often of a sensitive nature, may inflict upon their child. The parents may perceive that their son/daughter has already "been through enough" and may want to minimize any type of further anguish. Another almost equally valid reason rests on the issue of

trust. The parent(s) do not know the person directing the research or conducting the interview. They may have doubts as to the real nature of the study and if the researchers will positively keep their child's name confidential or anonymous. They are suspect of the entire study.

The research environment with adolescents is not "user friendly" especially for incarcerated youth and female adolescents. Getting parents to read the consent form, "buy into" the study, sign the form and return the form is an arduous process. This should not halt researchers from trying to study youth but this is a fact and something that appears not to change anytime in the near future.

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Notes

¹ It was agreed by both the author and the correctional institution that SWI would be the pseudo-name used for the study.

² The rationale behind dropping these two from the study was based on the premise that since they had only been incarcerated a few days or weeks, their insight into subculture formation, reactions to confinement and friendship development would be naive and incomplete.

³ Demographic information of the sixty-nine non-participants was either not avail-

able to this researcher nor incomplete and therefore, not included.

⁴ Lack of official data/records and reliance solely on self-reporting may reduce the credibility of findings. However, not only was I restricted from obtaining their official records but the purpose of this study was to obtain information about gangs and subcultures, often not known in official records, from the actual participants to parallel the methodology of interpretivism and Verstehen.

⁵ This particular individual was seventeen years old and indicated that in each of the three previous times she was incarcerated, she was confined to SWI each time for approximately one week.

⁶ After interviewing several young women, it became apparent that there were "official" girl gang members (i.e., those who had been "jumped in" to a gang) and those involved/affiliated with gangs (those who "hung out" with gang members or who had friends/close relatives in a gang) but who were not formally initiated into a gang.

⁷ In this context, a "problem" could mean something to them personally, to their peers or to institutional life. Each youth responded to this in various forms of what she defined and perceived as a problem.



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