

David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker. Competing for Control: Gangs and the Social Order of Prisons, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge UK, 2019; 310 pp. (including index): ISBN 978-1-108-73574-2, \$34.99.

This is a timely and informative book on a topic of great importance. David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker bring their wealth of knowledge and experience to the study of prison gangs. The core focus of the book is a research project based on interviewing gang and non-gang prisoners in a Texas correctional institution. The primary contribution of the book is descriptive. They document many interesting facts about both types of prisoners. A second contribution is methodological: interviewing gang members in prison is more informative than we previously believed.

The foundation of the book's analysis is a cross-sectional sample of prisoners housed in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The authors use an interview-based survey to question 802 people (368 gang and 434 non-gang prisoners) who would soon be released from custody. The authors demonstrate that their sample is representative of the population of prisoners, so they can therefore draw accurate descriptive inferences. They also use data from both official prison records and statewide law enforcement files. When crosschecking information reported by prisoners with information from law enforcement, the authors show a high degree of overlap. For example, the correlation between self-reported gang membership and membership according to administrative records is about 83 percent. This suggests that, conditional on access and funding, we can learn much from speaking with gang members.

The book draws on this data to ask a range of questions about prison and gangs. They look at the characteristics of who joins gangs, how influential gangs are in prison, whether people in gangs experience more misconduct and victimization than non-gang members, and how people avoid, join, and leave gangs. Each chapter typically proceeds in two stages; they first compare gang members and non-gang members and then they examine variation across four types of gangs. The authors are detailed in explaining and analyzing the data. More generally, the book also provides a useful overview of the existing literature.

They find significant differences between the characteristics of gang members and non-gang members (chapter 4). Gang members are younger, more likely to be Latino, less likely to have served in the military, and reported that their home neighborhoods were more likely to have lower levels of informal social control and more gang presence. Gang members' first arrests happen at younger ages. Based on official records on gang membership, gang members have more arrests, more stints in prison, and more years incarcerated. Finally, gang members are more likely to follow the code of the street, the convict code, and to view correctional officers' actions as illegitimate or unfair.

Chapter 5 describes variation in gangs in prison with a focus on group-level characteristics. Two-thirds of gang members said that their gang operates in both prison and the street. Prisoners do not see a stark dichotomy between street gangs and prison gangs. All of the gangs represented in the survey existed for more than 25 years – gangs are durable. Gangs are overwhelmingly

ethnically homogenous. Finally, this chapter describes significant heterogeneity across the types of gangs in prison. While the authors do not explain this variation, documenting its existence is a necessary first step in doing so. Chapters 8 and 9 likewise engage with many descriptive questions, including providing quantitative and qualitative evidence about who joins gangs in prison and why, who leaves gangs in prison and why, and how they leave. Chapter 10 discusses implications.

While their research design is excellent for many descriptive questions, it is not as well suited to making causal claims or to testing certain causal theories. For instance, the authors overstep the bounds of what the data can speak to when examining misconduct and victimization. In chapter 7, they write, “[i]n a notable twist, new to the study of gangs, we determine if *gang activity* is principally responsible for the amplification of misconduct and victimization among gang members” (155, emphasis in original). However, their sample is a cross-section, so there is no variation in an individual’s gang membership and misconduct or violence over time in the data. There is also a substantial selection bias in who becomes a gang member and when one leaves – as they document in chapters 4 and 9. As a result, even with some statistical controls in place, we cannot simply compare rates of misconduct or victimization between gang and non-gang members. That is, gang members might commit more violence than other prisoners do, but these same people might have committed *even more* violence if not in a gang (as suggested by past work, such as R. Trammell’s *Enforcing the Convict Code*). Their research design cannot distinguish between these possible counterfactual outcomes. These problems are not unique to this book, and they plague existing studies on the relationship between gangs and misconduct and victimization (see work by J. Byrne and D. Hummer in *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2007). Nevertheless, when taken together, it means we can say little about whether gang activity is “principally responsible” or not.

In sum, this book makes several important contributions and points to important ways forward. In particular, it demonstrates the usefulness of interview-based surveys with incarcerated gang members and provides a tremendous amount of new information about prisoners and gangs in Texas. Finally, with a modified research design, surveys like these might be able to address causal questions, such as why gang membership, activity, and influence varies across time and across prison systems.

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