

# Q&A: For many prisoners, gang affiliation drops off after release

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Nearly everyone who enters prison in the United States eventually leaves. In fact, every year about 600,000 people are released from federal and state prisons, according to [U.S. Department of Justice data](#).

Meanwhile, other data suggest that nearly 20% of the [prison population](#) belongs to a gang, which prompts the question: Do prisoners who are gang members maintain their gang affiliations after being released?

Perhaps surprisingly, there has been very little empirical research into that topic until now, according to David C Pyrooz, a University of Colorado Boulder professor of sociology whose research focus includes gangs, incarceration and reentry, and criminal justice policy and practice.

"In terms of gangs, it's a harder topic to study," he explains. "For one, there's a lot of sensitivity around it. Information about gangs is generally treated as intelligence in the sense that it's privileged information that [law enforcement](#) and correctional agencies don't necessarily want to share with the general public."

Additionally, tracking an inmate after their release can be challenging because, as Pyrooz notes, "former prisoners often live chaotic lives. Once they're out, they're worried about [food insecurity](#), about family reunification, about jobs, about housing and all these other things. So, it's a tough population to study. Research obviously ranks low on their list of priorities."

Convinced there was value in knowing whether people maintained their gang ties once released back into their communities, Pyrooz and his fellow researchers conducted a survey of 802 men in Texas prisons—representing a mix of active gang members, ex-gang members

and non-gang members—who were interviewed once prior to their release and reinterviewed twice afterward.

[Their research findings](#) were published in *Justice Quarterly*.

The study findings showed that gang activity declined for all three groups—including active gang members—as the pressure to maintain gang involvement subsides, contrary to what some speculation and anecdotes would indicate, Pyrooz says.

While some active gang members do maintain their involvement after being released, "it simply doesn't occur in a manner that we expected—it's not like it's a straight line from the prison to the street. There's something specific to the prison environment that gives rise to this sort of excess gang activity," he says.

Pyrooz recently spoke with Colorado Arts and Sciences Magazine about this research. His responses have been lightly edited for style and condensed for space considerations.

## **Why did you choose to focus on Texas prisons for your study?**

It's the largest state prison system in the country. It's large and it's diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. The prison population is about a third Black, a third white and a third Hispanic. So, it gives a good racial ethnic representation. ...

And it's got a large gang population as well. There's a large number of white, Black and Hispanic gangs with a lot of variation in how they're organized and structured, which gives us an opportunity to examine whether patterns of behavior are consistent across gang types.

## **Do you have thoughts about why prisoners were open to speaking with you, particularly when sharing details about gang activity?**

There was the longstanding belief going into the study that prisoners would not be open to speaking with researchers, much less telling the truth. In fact, it's one of the major reasons that people have offered us to as to why we don't know a lot about prison gangs, even setting aside the reentry issue.

So we treated the prison interview like an exit interview, in the sense that we tried to target a period of time where we thought ties to gangs ... could be waning, such that gangs couldn't exercise as much influence over a prisoner ... as much (because prisoners are removed from the general population prior to their release). Interviewing prisoners about 48 hours prior to their release is something that we targeted. That was strategic. ...

As to why they spoke with us, we're a neutral party. It's not like speaking with a correctional officer, where incriminating information might be used against them. It's not like a girlfriend who is making decisions about whether she wants to stay with you, an estranged child or anything of that sort with incredible emotional baggage.

There's no past history between us and the person. It's like a blank slate. So, it just gives them the opportunity to be able to reflect on things that they felt comfortable sharing with us.

There were times during interviews where prisoners would say, "I haven't told anybody about this in the entire time I've been incarcerated. It felt great to just get it off of my chest to talk to someone."

Not everybody was like that. There were some interviews that were difficult.

**In your paper you say, 'Not all gang members are created equal.' What do you mean by that? Does it relate to what you refer to in your paper as 'gang embeddedness'?**

A lot of people have this black or white view of, you're a gang member or not. But that doesn't really tell the full picture; it doesn't really capture the different dimensions of involvement...

Gang embeddedness captures immersion in gangs. In the same way that you could differentiate people who are really religious—they're going to church more than one time a week, they're praying at home and they may be a church volunteer for church activities. In contrast, you have people who are sort of the Christmas and Easter crowd, or agnostic or completely atheists. These two groups aren't the same, and there are many shades of gray between them.

There's a belief that, just like you give religion importance, you give the gang importance, and just like people fall away from the church, people fall away from gangs.

**As part of your research, your team interviewed prisoners once while in prison and two separate times after their release. Why was that format important?**

We really wanted to get a first interview while they were inside of prison. We wanted to understand, while they were in that environment, what they were thinking.

But we also wanted to understand, for continuity and change, what spills over from the inside to the outside, versus what stays inside. So, what's sort of this remnant of their past life, of being an incarcerated person, versus returning back to the community. ...

That's what we really were trying to understand, and then to differentiate between, the short-term changes, like within a couple of weeks of getting out, versus how did you start to settle in your life 10 months later? And what percent of them went back to prison, got arrested or were killed after their release?

## **How does this latest paper on gang involvement in and out of prison fit in with your overall areas of research?**

I've been studying gangs for upwards of 15 years, focused on the contours of gang involvement: when people join, how long they stay, when they leave and what the long-term consequences are.

There was this longstanding perception that once you join a gang, you can never get out of these groups—which is a myth. Since I've been doing my research, we've found that not only does it happen, but that's the norm—as opposed to the exception—that people do leave.

I took my first job out of grad school at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, which is known colloquially as Prison City, U.S., because there's so many prisons within not just the city limits, but within Walker County, Texas, including one that was just about two blocks from my office.

And not only is that where the state conducts all of the executions, but it's also one of the major (prisoner) release centers in the state of Texas.



So, continuing with the theme on continuity and change, prisons represent this next frontier to understand whether these gang associations spill out of the prisons to the street and also, when these transitions occur, are (ex-prisoners) able to leave these associations behind when they return to the community?

It fits within a broader agenda of focusing on gangs, but also on this broader criminological interest in continuity and change in the life course.

### **What can corrections officials and law enforcement gain from your latest research, both as it relates to felons while still in prison and once they are released?**

To me, what it suggests right off the bat is that the prison systems need to do something about gangs in their institutions. And by do something, I'm not just talking about housing them differently, akin to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. ... I'm talking about actual prevention and actual intervention.

In other words, blocking the onramps and widening the offramps to gang involvement. Housing might be a part of it, but it could also be work programs; it could be therapeutic interventions; it could be religion; it could be a whole host of different things that are done to keep people occupied, to change mindsets and to alter risks and threats to their livelihoods.

Given that prisons are operating as this vector of gang activity, (prison administrators) need to be doing something more than just business as usual, because that certainly hasn't put a dent in the activity or the violence behind bars. ...

You want to keep (prisoners) occupied, versus stewing and getting into trouble. It's like the saying, "Idle hands are the devil's workshop." And behind bars, there's a lot of idle hands. ...

Once people are released, one factor that can determine gang involvement is if they go back to a gang-active neighborhood. If they do, they are more likely to be [gang](#) active. So, there's a lot of practical relevance here that matters for parole officers and anyone involved with the supervision of people after their release.

## **Is there anything else from your research that you would like to share?**

I think that for a lot of people, when it comes to prisoners, they're sort of out of sight, out of mind. They may not have a lot of concern for people who are behind bars, in part because they believe that they've earned that prison sentence.

But when you really start thinking about the fact that (ex-prisoners) do return home—and we don't want them to go back to prison—it really starts reshaping the public's calculus with regard to the sort of humanity afforded to people in prisons.

And once you realize that they can be your neighbors, that they could go to your church and work similar jobs, for most people, it starts to give you a different meaning behind imprisonment. What are we willing and what aren't we willing to do? And just how much we care about what happens to these people in prisons?

**More information:** David C. Pyrooz, *The Residue of Imprisonment*:



Prisoner Reentry and Carceral Gang Spillover, *Justice Quarterly* (2023).  
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