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**GANGS BEHIND BARS: FACT OR FICTION?**

BY

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**ABSTRACT**

*The growth of street gangs in England has led to widespread public and governmental concern, as well as heightened academic interest (Pitts 2008). However, the extent to which such gangs have penetrated English prisons is a question which remains largely unexplored. This research aims to fill the gap existing in the current body of academic work. Through conducting a semi-ethnographic study of a large local prison in the North of England, this study compares the structuration of English prison gangs with their street counterparts. The study employs a qualitative methodology, principally drawing its conclusions from interviews conducted with prisoners. Using an inductive approach, the study’s findings are placed within the wider body of literature on criminal gangs and delinquent behaviour. The results indicate that a significant number of gangs have been imported from ‘the street’ into the sample-site prison. There is a clear continuation of street gang identities within the prison, leading its administration to acknowledge their existence, and to create strategies which moderate their influence on the prison environment.*

**INTRODUCTION**

The last decade has witnessed heightened levels of inter-gang, intra-gang, and general gang related violence; for example, there were 26 gang-related murders of young people in London in 2007 (Pitts 2008). Additionally, 20% of those arrested for the 2011 London riots were gang members, with gangs accounting for approximately 22% of serious violence in London, and 50% of shootings in London in that year (Ministry of Justice 2011). However, the problem of gang violence is not confined to London; gang activity has been noted in most of England’s major cities, with gang members being linked to the August 2011 riots in Birmingham, Manchester and Nottingham (The Centre for Social Justice 2012). The rise in gang-related violence is illustrated by an increase in the levels of arrest, charge and prosecution of gang members (Home Office 2011). Therefore, there are significant numbers of street gang members currently imprisoned.

The primary purpose of this research is to investigate how prevalent prison gangs are in a large local prison in the North of England. However, such an assessment will also involve asking questions regarding street gangs. This study, then, seeks to answer two principal questions:

1.) To what extent do gangs exist/operate within a large local prison in the North of England?

2.) How do prison gang identities interact with existing, pre-prison identities (namely, street gang affiliation)?

The contents of this dissertation are organised into four chapters. In Chapter 1, I conduct an in-depth literature review which documents the existing academic work on gangs and their structuration. I pay particular attention to: street gangs in Western society; the structure of gangs and the importance placed on trust; and prison gangs in England and the United States. Chapter 2 details this study’s methodology. I explain the overall design of the study, how its participants were chosen, how the qualitative data was analysed, and the limitations and ethical considerations which were borne in mind throughout its duration. Chapter 3 contains an analysis of the qualitative data gathered through conducting this study. As well as an inductive analysis of the data-set, this chapter also contains the study’s results, collected through carrying-out interviews and other fieldwork at an adult, ‘core local’, men’s prison (referred to throughout this dissertation as ‘Locktown Prison’, for the purposes of anonymity). Finally, Chapter 4 draws conclusions from the study’s findings. In doing so, I attempt to answer the question of whether, and under what circumstances, gangs operate within Locktown Prison.

This research does not intend to merely provide a narrative account of gangs in late modern English society. Rather, throughout this study I aim to provide explanations for this phenomenon, suggesting causal factors for the growth in street gang membership. I present the topic from the perspective of gang members themselves, ensuring that their ‘voices’ come through the research. The theoretical explanations presented are enhanced by the narrative accounts produced from the qualitative study. This dissertation includes interviews with current prisoners at Locktown Prison, as well as observation carried out during a week spent at the prison and on the streets in the local area. The data used in this research, then, is primary qualitative data. I conduct a detailed analysis of this data, adopting a grounded theory approach to identify the salient themes relevant to gang membership in the late modern prison.

It is important to state, from the outset, why this research pays detailed attention to the English *street* gang as well as the prisongang. Although the primary focus of this study is on prison gangs within Locktown Prison, the research also aims to analyse the interaction between prison and street gang identities. This is principally because existing research demonstrates that in England there is some ‘importation’ of gang structures from outside prison (Phillips 2008, 2012a). Whilst the existing research does not rigidly follow Irwin and Cressey’s (1962) importation perspective, there are clear points of intersection between gang identities in prison and on ‘the street’. Therefore, studying the prison gang in isolation would limit the findings of this research and its overall validity. Existing studies also indicate that London street gang members often alter their allegiances during periods of imprisonment (Pitts 2008; Phillips 2008; Phillips 2012a). This dissertation, however, directs its focus on street gangs in a Northern English city. Its organising principle is to ascertain whether gang members maintain their allegiances once imprisoned, whether gang loyalties shift and form new groupings within the prison environment, or if gang ties completely dissolve in an atomistic prison culture. A fundamental question to ask, then, is whether gangs in Locktown Prison primarily operate in accordance with the importation model, or if it is Sykes’ (1958) deprivation model which shapes prison gang identities.[[1]](#footnote-1)

***Definitions of Terms***

It is important to clarify what this research defines as a gang, whether in a street context or within prison. Gangs “refer to a range of criminal collectives ranging from delinquent peer groups, prison cliques to serious organised crime networks” (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2010:17), making it difficult to attain a singular description. Consequently, criminologists have defined gangs in various ways, taking into account numbers of members, facets of identity, and purposes of gang formation. Contemporary definitions range from describing gangs as delinquent groups predicated on pre-existing friendships/shared identities (Aldridge and Medina 2008), to definitions which centre on notions of collective offending (Ministry of Justice 2011). Thrasher (1927:45) ascribes this wide divergence in theoretical definitions to every gang exuding “its own peculiar character. It may vary in membership, type of leaders, mode of organization, interests and activities, and finally as to its status in the community.”

As well as being involved in criminal activity and originating from a particular locale, gang members ought to *self*-identify as being part of a gang (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2010; Hallsworth and Young 2004- own emphasis). Moreover, legislative bodies offer strict, formalistic definitions of what constitutes a gang. For example, Florida’s Statute 874 codifies a gang as: a group of three or more individuals, involved in criminal or delinquent activities, with “a common name or common identifying signs, colors, or symbols”(Florida Statute 874.03: Criminal Gang Definition). This definition is problematic, as it does not take into account geographical origin, which is a central feature of many criminal gangs. A far clearer operationalisation of the term ‘gang’ is provided by Densely (2012:302), drawing on Gambetta (2009) and Sanchez-Jankowski (1991):

*“Gangs…are self-formed associations of peers that have adopted a common name and other discernable, ‘conventional’ or ‘symbolic’ signals of membership (Gambetta 2009: xix). They are comprised of individuals who recognize each other as being ‘members’ of a ‘gang’ and who individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity. They are not fully open to the public and much of the information concerning their business remains confined within the group.”*

***Densley 2012***

Even this cannot be seen as a wholly comprehensive description, as Densley does not allude to the theme of conflict, something which is the defining feature of criminal gangs (Thrasher 1927 cited in Pitts 2008:13). However, the above definition provides the clearest guidance regarding the term ‘gang’ for the purposes of this research, both in the street and prison context. It should be noted that Densley’s definition merely serves to provide guidance, and does not have a direct bearing on this study’s findings. This is primarily because this study’s research was conducted inductively, drawing on the perspectives of gang members/prisoners themselves. Accordingly, the interview questions (Appendix A) offered participants the opportunity to articulate what the term ‘gang’ meant to them.

Before qualitative data was gathered for this study, it was noted that there are potential problems which arise when asking individuals to self-define as gang members. This is due to the inherently subjective nature of self-definition, which relies wholly upon the participant’s conceptualisation of whether his peer group is a ‘gang’. (Home Office 2006).[[2]](#footnote-2) For example, some gang members within contemporary English society use terms other than ‘gang’ to classify their peer group (Pitts 2008). Nevertheless, much of the information collected in this study shows that gang members in England ascribe to the wider notions identified in the above, theoretical definition. Adopting a self-definitional approach, then, does not appear to have adversely affected this study’s aims and objectives.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**The Study of Street Gangs**

Although the focus of this study is on English street gangs, much of the existing literature on gang affiliation and gang violence emanates from the United States. Such studies have identified gangs as being central to youth delinquency (Kantor and Bennett 1968; Klein 1971; Miller 1975; Thompson and Jason 1988), as a principal component of both inter and intra-racial violence (Dawkins 1989; Chin et al. 1992; Toy 1992a, 1992b), and as a central facet of organised criminal activity (Brestler 1981; Posner 1988; Fagan 1989; Klein et al. 1991). Academic studies of organised criminal gangs exist alongside biographical accounts of such groupings, both in Britain and the United States (e.g. Borrell and Cashinella 1975; Pritchard 2008; Cawthorne and Cawthorne 2009). There also exist numerous autobiographies produced by ex-gang members themselves (e.g. Weaver 2008; Smith 2005; Rollins 2011; Travis 2013). Although such first-hand accounts provide personal narratives of gang activity, academic studies subject the topic of gangs to a more penetrating and critical analysis.

Much of the existing literature makes a distinction between general group delinquency and organised gang activity.[[3]](#footnote-3) Whilst the former involves anti-social behaviour being committed by youths in the communities they inhabit (Bond-Taylor 2005), the latter is typified by hierarchical structures with a greater degree of formalisation (Gambetta 1996, 2009). This is not to say that there is a clear, consistent demarcation between the two principal ‘types’ of gangs. Indeed, there is a widening body of evidence which suggests that youth street gangs are engaging in drug dealing of a more sophisticated kind (Klein et al. 1997; Pitts 2008). Further, certain traditions - such as networks of Mafia gangs - actively recruit from youth street gangs into their organised criminal networks (Gambetta 1996). However, such organised criminal gangs are characterised by a number of specific features: a more systematic approach to their activities, more sophistication in the crime committed, and a greater degree of codification.[[4]](#footnote-4) In particular, their activities are often more serious and endemic in their nature (Saviano 2006, 2013).

This greater degree of organisation prompts a concerted effort from state authorities, illustrated by the formation of law enforcement units dedicated to gang violence.[[5]](#footnote-5) As well as a high degree of formalisation, organised criminal gangs are characterised by their primary purpose: wealth accumulation. This is in spite of the limited financial returns most low-level drug dealers receive (Levitt and Dubner 2005; Venkatesh 2008; Pitts 2008). This can be contrasted to more general gang-related delinquency, where anti-social behaviour is the principal manifestation of gang activity. Often, the thrill of engaging in such acts is the primary motivation for participation, characterised by Jack Katz (1988) as being one of the ‘seductions’ of crime.

A gang’s behaviour is typically concentrated in a particular geographical area (Van Gemert and Stuifbergen 2008; Bottoms and Wiles 2003), and police responses which focus on targeting these ‘hotspots’ of delinquency have a moderate deterrent effect (Sherman and Weisburd 1995; Braga 2001). Nevertheless, these suppression responses alone are not adequate in stemming the gang violence witnessed in urban communities (Jackson 1989; Mays 1997; Decker 2001). Consequently, recent gang prevention strategies have focused less on orthodox policing, and more on informal dispute resolution (Skogan et al. 2009). Whilst still focusing on violence hotspots, initiatives such as *Ceasefire Chicago* adopt a more holistic approach to counteracting gang violence. Although such programmes use non-state actors to resolve gang disputes, these initiatives have led to marked decreases in gang-related murders (Decker 2001; Skogan et al. 2009). The success of mediation in the United States had led to similar methods being implemented urban communities across England.[[6]](#footnote-6) Typically, there exist longstanding hostilities towards the police from such communities (Jefferson 1993; Bowling and Phillips 2007, 2012). Consequently, non-involvement of the police is a more effective method of dispute resolution in such communities. A further emerging approach has been to consider gang-related violence as a public health issue, particularly in relation to firearms offences (Prothrow-Stith 1995; Glynn 2011a.) Again, this deviates from the orthodox perspective which views gang-related offences as merely a law and order issue, to be counteracted with pro-active policing alone.

Gangs are often seen as products of socially isolated communities, typified by the migration of those who would otherwise provide supervision and inhibit violence within those communities (Taylor et al. 1984; Sampson and Groves 1989; Sampson and Wilson 1995). The consequence, then, is the emergence of ghettoes, characterised by particular social values such as the glamorisation of violence and encouragement of hyper-masculinity (Schur 1969; Prothrow-Stith 1991; Anderson 1999). Individuals from socially deprived areas are particularly receptive to such values, precisely because they have been left in isolated communities, without any means to succeed in modern society (Currie 1985; Wilson 1987; Wacquant 2004; Hanley 2007).[[7]](#footnote-7) The resulting void is filled by illicit activities, often promulgated by gangs and then internalised within parts of the community itself. Moreover, studies focused on street gangs have also concluded that an individual’s association with delinquent peers is the most significant predictor of subsequent gang membership (Vigil and Yun 1990; Hill et al. 1999; Brownfield 2006). This gang affiliation is, in turn, a predictor of violence/delinquency in itself (Thornberry 1998; Battin et al. 1998; Tracey 1981). The ages of those associated with such criminality has also received prolonged academic attention. In particular, the theoretical perspective of life-course criminology supports the view that there is a ‘core’ age-range during which the most criminal activity is committed (West and Farrington 1977; Farrington 1986; Wolfgang et al. 1987; Home Office 1988). It is also during this age range that an individual’s involvement with gang activity reaches its peak, including heightened levels of violence (Hagedorn 1988). Additionally, witnessing trauma during childhood has been identified as a predictor of gang membership during adolescence. This is especially the case for children brought-up in conflict zones, whose subsequent gang activity is characterised by extreme violence (Balasunderam 2009; Orjuela 2011; Densley 2012). This heightened involvement of youths in gang activity leads to the *youth* street gang being delineated as a specific subset of delinquent activity (Lasley 1992; Shelden et al. 2004/2013 – own emphasis).

One of the most comprehensive analyses of street gangs is Frederic Thrasher’s classic (1927) *The Gang*, which refers to the “multiple webs of influence and association” which have bearing upon street gangs (Dimitriadis 2006:1). Although Thrasher’s original text dates from the early twentieth-century, many of the characteristics attributed to gangs within the study are still relevant in late modern society. For example, the reluctance of gang members to divulge information to the police (Thrasher 1927:203) is still a pertinent feature of gang life, meaning that gang conflict continues to be outside the ambit of the rule of law (Dasgupta 2010; Densely 2012). Equally, the influence of the media on gang members’ activities (Thrasher 1927:108) continues to affect gang affiliated youths in the late modern society, possibly even more so than previously (Ro 1996; Kubrin 2005). There are, however, very few references made by Thrasher (1927) to drugs and firearms, which is indicative of the minimal role these played in street gangs of the early twentieth-century. This can be contrasted with the contemporary situation surrounding gangs, where drug dealing is central to many modern gangs’ activities (Joe 1993; La Rosa and Adrados 1993; Venkatesh 2008; Klein et al. 1997; Pincomb and Judiscak 1997). Furthermore, the role of firearms is a central facet of modern gang activity in both the United States and Great Britain (Sharkansky 1996; Davidson 1997; Klein et al. 1997; Skogan et al. 2009). This is indicative of the heightened levels of violence within contemporary street gangs (Cohen 1969; Freidman et al. 1975; Spergel 1984; Tracy 1988), as compared to the lower levels of serious violence within gangs of the early and mid-twentieth century (Thrasher 1927; Klein 1971; Short and Strodtbeck 1965). Thrasher’s study highlights how particular features of early-twentieth century America had a bearing on the activities of street gangs: taking part in the informal economy through scavenging for scrap metal, for example (Webster et al. 1919; Thrasher 1927). There has, then, clearly been a movement away from the misdemeanours and minor delinquency of the mid-twentieth century (Drake and Cayton 1945 in Venkatesh 2001). Instead, a more violent and indeed ‘corporate’ framework shapes the activities of many contemporary street gangs (Taylor 1990; Levitt and Venkatesh 2000; Densley 2011).

There has, however, been reluctance from some British academics to use the term ‘gang’ in relation to *all* groups engaged in delinquent activity. This is primarily because of the belief that gangs require a level of codification and formalisation – both of which are absent from purely delinquent groups. Further reluctance is borne out of the view that referring to ‘gangs’ adds a degree of glamorisation to what would otherwise be classed as merely anti-social behaviour (Hallsworth and Brotherton 2011; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2010). Such concerns are particularly heightened in relation to youth street gangs. There is a wide academic consensus that youth delinquency in twentieth-century Britain was typified by an absence of coherent, organised groupings (Scott 1956; McClintock 1963; Patrick 1973/2012; Newburn 2007). Although such groupings did engage in disruptive behaviour, delinquency and violence (Spencer 1964; Patrick 1973/2012), they were predominantly “loosely knit, amorphous gatherings of boys who joined and left at will” (Farrant 1965 in Patrick 1973/2012:143). For example, Downes (1966) presents an extensive study of youth delinquency in 1960s London. Again, the conclusion reached is that such sub-cultures of violence lacked the necessary structuration, organisation and codification to be described as proper gangs. However, late modernity has witnessed the emergence of far more criminal groupings which are closer to the model of organised criminality. This is particularly apparent with gangs which engage in drug dealing (Silverman 1994; Pearson and Hobbs 2001). Moreover, the fluid nature of organised criminality has resulted in such activities affecting society at various levels (Hobbs 2013). The end result, then, is a wider presence of criminal gangs in daily life.

**Gang Structures and the Importance of Trust**

In addition to literature surrounding the development of gangs, there has been extensive study into how they are structured. This has included a focus on youth street gangs (e.g. Pitts 2008; Densley 2012), the networks through which organised crime gangs function (e.g. Gambetta 1996, 2009), as well as prolonged study into prison gangs (e.g. Fong et al. 1996). Further studies have concluded that many gangs place an acute emphasis on the induction of potential gang members (Densely 2012), and that great importance is placed upon the containment/ transmission of information surrounding the gang’s daily activities (Ibid). This includes a concern with how information is gathered and disseminated for the purposes of crime commission, as well as an awareness of how evidence of illegal activities is later disposed. With the exception of purely delinquent groupings, such as networks of drug users, a high level of trust *between* members is central to the sustainability of a typical criminal gang (Gambetta 1988; Deuchar 2009- own emphasis).[[8]](#footnote-8) It is partly because of the importance placed on *intra*-gang relationships that social network analysis (SNA) is particularly relevant to the study of gang structuration. SNA has regularly been deployed as a methodology to investigate gangs, and is seen as a development from the more atomistic perspective of its preceding social theories (Everton 2012). SNA views groups as being composites of their individual members, allowing research to focus on the meso and macro levels, as well as the micro level (Densley 2012; Everton 2012). There is wide consensus, based on SNA, that the role of trust is as axiomatic to the street gang as it is to organised crime gangs and terrorist networks (Carrington 2011; van der Huist 2011; Densley 2012). Just as trust is a central component in developing social capital between individuals in a *pro*-social setting (Dasgupta 2010- own emphasis), trust is also essential for individuals who want to progress in *anti*-social groupings. In fact, it can be argued that unlike legitimate activities - where trust is predicated on notions of personal integrity and internalised, pro-social norms (Ibid) – criminal networks are more likely to attract those who are less trustworthy and reliable (Densley 2012). Accordingly, members of ‘dark networks’ – such as youth street gangs, terrorist groups, and organised crime syndicates - eschew the usual methods of enforcing trust for more violent alternatives (Hobbs 1995a).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Sean Everton (2012) conducts a detailed analysis of how these ‘dark networks’ have evolved, and underscores the centrality of trust in ensuring an illegal group’s survival. This is even more apparent in organised crime syndicates, where sustainability is dependent upon the recruitment of loyal individuals (Densely 2012) i.e. those who will not divulge information even after arrest. Moreover, a gang’s structural framework does not remain static throughout time. In fact, changes are precipitated both from within the network, as well as through influences from outside of the network (Snijders et al. 2010; Everton 2012). Further, a differentiation can be drawn between networks which are classed as being ‘alive’ and those which are classed as being ‘alive and free’ (Everton 2012). In the latter, arrest/imprisonment is considered as a point of departure from the group. However, as existing literature shows, many street gangs continue their activities within prison (Jacobs 1974, 1977; Carroll 1974; Fong et al. 1996). In fact, imprisonment may serve to heightened gang activity in some contexts (Knox 2005). Such gangs, therefore, can clearly be categorised as ‘alive networks’, as arrest/imprisonment does not preclude gang activity. On the contrary, in many cases imprisonment does little to alter the gang’s primary characteristics. In such instances, “the inmate organisation is best understood as an extension of an identical organisation imported from the streets” (Jacobs 1974: 397-398).

Not only are there links between gang members themselves, but there are also links between different gangs. This can range from a temporary truces existing amongst rival gangs, to situations where smaller gangs affiliate themselves with their larger counterparts (Sherman 1970; Aldridge 2010). Moreover, it should also be remembered that delinquent peer groups and organised crime often work in unison, especially regarding the supply of drugs (Pitts 2008).[[10]](#footnote-10) This leads to the manifestation of organised criminality at lower levels than academics and authorities usually envisage (Stelfox 2002). Many existing studies not only analyse how criminal networks are structured, but investigate how these structures can be disrupted (e.g. Sageman 2004; Everton 2012). Such literature emphasises that police and other law enforcement ought to shape their responses with the structure of gangs in mind. Although a closed network is especially difficult to *penetrate*, it is the more diffuse network formation which poses the most formidable resistance – a structure which is spread out across a geographical area, facilitating collective action (Granovetter 1973; Borgatti et al. 2009). Additionally, a network’s members being linked by weak ties leads to new information being more regularly shared (Burt 1992; Borgatti et al. 2009). However, a network characterised by strong ties can lead to its members being exposed to the same information multiple times (Gambetta 1996). Therefore, although networks comprised of weak links are less durable, they can simultaneously lead to greater efficacy. Consequently, such networks also lead to greater economic advancement for its members, especially in the short term (Gambetta 1996; Dasgupta 2010).

One of the most relevant dimensions of network analysis, in relation to gangs, is the role played by leaders. Traditional street gangs are characterised by loose leadership and an informal, networked structure (Sullivan and Bunker 2007). This can be contrasted to organised crime gangs, which are typified by a more centralised leadership (Ibid). Certain U.S. prison gangs, for example, are structured so as to have a ‘chairman’ or ‘president’ with ultimate control over the gang’s activities (Camp and Camp 1985; Buentello 1986; Fong et al. 1996).[[11]](#footnote-11) An individual’s power within such a network is the inevitable corollary of their centrality to the group (Bavelas 1948). However, somewhat paradoxically, removing such key actors does not necessarily have a disruptive effect on the organisation as a whole (Everton 2012). This is especially the case if high levels of trust exist between all of the gang’s members.[[12]](#footnote-12) Accordingly, attempting to preclude an organised gang from operating requires a more nuanced approach than merely targeting its central figures.

**Prison Gangs**

Throughout the twentieth-century, British studies noted that organised criminals operated in pre-existing ‘friendship groups’ when imprisoned (e.g. Hobbs 1995a). However, the presence of structured English prison gangs has only become apparent in the new millennium (Wood and Alder 2001; Wood 2006; Wood et al. 2009; Phillips 2008, 2012a). On the other hand, prison gangs have existed in the United States for far longer, reflected by the greater amount of American literature on the subject (e.g. Carroll 1974; Marquant and Crouch 1985; Moore 1978; Irwin 1980). Much of this research corroborates the view that American prison gangs are cohesive structures, imported from the streets and operating along rigid lines of demarcation (Jacobs 1974, 1977, 1979; Ussem and Kimball 1996; Wacquant 2009). An historical narrative does much to explain the current composition of American prison gangs: the racial history of the United States, organised criminality and migration all shape the gangs which operate within the American penitentiary system (Carroll 1974; Jacobs 1977, 1979). One of the most authoritative sources on gangs in prisonis James Jacob’s *Statesville* (1977), where there is a clear description of gangs in Stateville Correctional Center, Illinois. Developing his previous study (1974) on gangs behind bars, Jacobs’ ethnographic analysis documents the influence of gangs operating within Stateville. Gang violence is shown to coexist with the political and racial ideologies of Black Nationalism (Jacobs 1977, pp. 155-164), the National of Islam (Ibid, Chapter 3), and Hispanic separatism (Ibid).

Nevertheless, there are multiple academic definitions as to what constitutes a ‘prison gang’. For example, Wood (2006:3) defines a prison gang as being “a group of three or more prisoners whose negative behaviour has an adverse impact on the prison that holds them”. Alternatively, under Fong and Vogel’s (1991) definition, a ‘prison gang’ is held as being distinct from a prison ‘predator group’, requiring a number of set characteristics: a constitution and formal rules; life membership; gang tattoos; and hierarchical leadership. Using such a definition would lead to there being a far lower level of documented prison gangs, as not every prison gang (especially within England) fulfills all the above criteria. Conversely, Wood’s (2006) theoretical framework is too expansive, and would incorporate various prison cliques and protection groups which Fong and Vogel (1991) view as not meeting the required threshold of a codified, formalised prison gang.[[13]](#footnote-13)

American prison gang members commit a disproportionate number of in-prison offences (Camp and Camp 1988; Pollock 2005; Trulson and Marquant 2005), although such offences are predominantly not gang related (Trulson and Marquant 2005). Prison gang members in England are also responsible for a higher number of rule violations than non-gang affiliated prisoners (Wood and Alder 2001; Wood 2006). Furthermore, prison gang members play a dominant role in racial violence within the American penitentiary system (Carroll 1974; Jacobs 1979; Trulson and Marquant 2005), a problem which has worsened with the entrenched racial segregation of modern prison gangs (Knox 2005). Such racial violence has partly been attributed to a power vacuum left by administrative changes to the American penal system in the twentieth-century (Trulson and Marquant 2005). Moreover, the established presence of African-American and Hispanic gangs led to the *reactive* formation of White prison gangs throughout the twentieth-century (Knox 1994, 2005- own emphasis). Although there has not been a direct replication of this in England’s prisons, parts of England have witnessed street gangs forming in direct response to the racial hostilities particular communities feel (Kennedy 2004). Further, the period of late modernity has witnessed the emergence of secret racial groupings in English prisons, including prisoners aligning themselves to extreme nationalist organisations (Wood 2006). This is indicative of the increasingly levels of cultural conflicts within the late modern prison, often denoted by the emergence of religious fault lines (Liebling et al. 2011; Earle and Phillips 2013). Nevertheless, English prisoners who overtly subscribe to white nationalism have often been segregated for their own protection (Phillips 2008). Therefore, although there are often racial undertones to the power dynamics within English prisons (Phillips 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Liebling et al. 2011), there are no equivalents to the segregated, race-based gangs of the United States.

Some prisoners in England are reluctant to subscribe to the notion that they are members of prison gangs (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2010; Liebling et al. 2011). This reluctance is most apparent regarding religious groupings, where prisoners have expressed incredulity at prison authorities labelling these associations as gangs (Liebling et al. 2011). However, this perspective is highly contested, as religion/religious identity is often misused and manipulated in prison. It is strategically deployed to form groups which operate “on the principles of outside gangs… (providing) deep networks and protective features…easy to enter but difficult to exit” (Ibid: 67). Such groups exert collective influence, utilising power to achieve favourable conditions for their members (Ibid). For example, non-Muslim prisoners are often threatened by the solidarity groups of Muslim prisoners show (Phillips 2008; Phillips 2012a; Earle and Phillips 2013). Such sentiments are indicative of the anxieties felt by non-dominant prisoners, especially as regards larger gangs. In particular, Chicago witnessed the emergence of ‘supergangs’ between 1956 and 1970, whereby the most dominant street gangs annexed smaller counterparts (Sherman 1970; Short 1974; Klein 1971; Jacobs 1977); the resulting enlarged gangs were eventually imported into Stateville Penitentiary, and functioned as the most dominant prison gangs in that institution (Jacobs 1974; Jacobs 1977).

Whilst Jacobs (1974, 1977) documents that imprisoned Chicago gang members must abide by written codes and rules, existing studies portray contemporary English prison gangs as being far less structured. Unlike the deliberate cessation of hostilities between rival Chicago gangs once in prison (Jacobs 1974), young English gang members contend that conflicts often continue to ferment during periods of imprisonment (Phillips 2008, 2012a). This is, perhaps, indicative of the more atomistic culture of the late modern prison (Crewe 2009), as well as the absence of gang ‘generals’ as existed in American inmate population of the twentieth-century (Jacobs 1977; Fong et al. 1996). However, being in prison also leads to the dissolution of some street gang loyalties. Rather than rivalries being predicated on specific ‘postcodes’ or housing estates, prisoners pledge allegiance to more general areas of origin (Pitts 2008). However, not only does imprisonment alter pre-existing gang formations, but such groupings shift from prison to prison. Therefore, once gang members are distant from their hometown, gangs operate under even wider rubrics of geographical origin. For example, an ex-young offender participating in an ethnographic study (Pitts 2008: 113) contends that “if they transfer you…up north, it’s London against Locktown or Liverpool.” Aligning oneself to such gangs is less to do with underlying ideology, and more to do with being part of a group large enough to exert a protective influence throughout the prison; alignment to such expansive groupings has long been a means of facilitating protection from violence within the prison (Carroll 1974).

The majority of American prison gangs are characterised by centralised leadership, more organised than street gangs but less codified than international crime syndicates (Sullivan and Bunker 2007). Existing research indicates that prison gangs in the Unites States also vary in their formations: they range from ‘paramilitary’ structures, hierarchical frameworks, to ‘steering committee’ structures (Fong et al. 1996). The last of these can be classified as being a more decentralised, ‘chain’ formation (Borgatti et al. 2009), similar to committees which oversea legitimate organisations such as businesses or recreational bodies. A steering committee structure ensures that there is greater parity between gang members, giving the appearance of a more egalitarian network (Fong et al. 1996). The very presence of such established, codified networks suggests the greater level of professionalism within American prison gangs as compared to their English equivalents. Whereas earlier studies differentiated between security threat groups and prison gangs (e.g. Fong and Vogel 1995), more recent research no longer makes this distinction (e.g. Fong et al. 1996). The earlier distinction was made due to the lack of internal structures within security threat groups (Fong and Vogel 1995). However, over time it has been concluded that security threat groups have evolved to become near equivalents of the archetypal prison gang (Fong et al. 1996). Furthermore, the power exerted by a prison gang is not always proportionate to its size (Camp and Camp 1985). For example, the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang comprises of approximately 0.1% of the American federal prison population, but is responsible for approximately 20% of murders within the American penitentiary system (Holthouse 2005).

Having reviewed much of the relevant literature, this study now intends to present a detailed explanation of the methodological approach which was adopted.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Design**

This study was driven by an inductive analysis, conducted within an exploratory framework. It was based upon a qualitative methodology, whereby prisoners with knowledge of gang activity participated in series of long, semi-structured interviews. This research, then, primarily sought to present prisoners’ perspectives on the subject of study. Although responses from qualitative interviews formed a large part of the study’s results, these were supplemented with observations made during a week spent at Locktown Prison, as well as during a preliminary day-visit. It was decided that a qualitative approach would be best suited for this project, as such an approach enables the researcher to gain a deep understanding of individuals who are on the margins of society (Noaks and Wincup 2004; Brewer 2000). This approach is particularly suited to researching prisoners and gang members (Noaks and Wincup 2004).

The overall design of this research was a semi-ethnographic study: long participant-interviews were combined with general observations of the prison environment, informal conversations with prison officers, and discussions with members of the prison administration. As well as conducting fieldwork within the prison, I also spent a day visiting the gang-affected local areas, escorted by a prison officer; this was to help contextualise the ‘gang problem’ within Locktown Prison. Subsequently, I adopted a grounded theory approach to analyse the data. Such a methodology allows the researcher to attach thematic categories to the qualitative data (Berg 2009), allowing for a detailed and comprehensive analysis of the data gathered.

The main findings of this research were produced from long-interviews conducted with 5 prisoners at Locktown Prison, over a one-week period; participants were selected through purposive sampling. Each interview last approximately one hour, with each interviewee being presented with the same set of initial questions (Appendix A), which formed the framework for each semi-structured interview. Any answers which introduced new themes led to such areas of conversation being further explored through supplementary questions. The semi-structured format facilitated this, allowing for additional questions to be asked, and the subsequent answers to be included in the study’s findings. A semi-structured research design ensures that each interviewee is provided with a chance to articulate their experiences through their own ‘voice’ (Marshall and Rossman 1999; Berg et al 2004). This allows for individuals to deliver their personal narratives of life-events (Edgar, O’Donnell and Martin, 2003). However, a semi-structured format also ensures that participants’ responses are still contained within a pre-set, overarching framework. This study’s research design intended to reflect its overall tone, which followed a model whereby interviewees are treated as more than merely passive subjects of research, and are encouraged to contribute as active participants (Freire 1970; Glynn 2011b).

During the week of fieldwork at Locktown Prison, I also adopted the role of observer-participant. This supplemented the information gathered from participant interviews, increasing the validity of the research through using multiple methods of data collection (Golafshani 2003).[[14]](#footnote-14) It should be noted that the researcher’s role as observer-participant is distinct from his role as a participant-observer (Junker 1960). This is principally because the observer-participant maintains a greater degree of detachment and distance from the subjects of the research. Participant observation can be useful in certain scenarios, such as researching the dynamics of public disorder (Williams et al. 1985), or investigating gangs in daily society (Whyte 1943; Wolcott 1995; Venkatesh 2000; Bachman and Schutt 2011). However, it poses several problems in a prison environment. Chief amongst these are the scepticism the researcher faces from the prisoner population (Giallambardo 1966; Jacobs 1977), and the researcher’s difficulty in shaping a legitimate, independent research identity (Jacobs 1997). With these potential problems borne in mind, it was decided that adopting the role of observer-participant (rather than participant-observer) would avoid such difficulties from arising.

**Sampling**

This study’s participants were all drawn from Locktown Prison, and I utilised purposive sampling of prisoners who were familiar with the workings of gangs. This method of sampling increases a study’s validity through ensuring that participants are knowledgeable about the topic being investigated (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Bachman and Schutt 2011).[[15]](#footnote-15) Moreover, previous research indicates that only a select number of offenders are privy to information about the internal activities of gangs (Bachman and Schutt 2011). The secrecy of gang members is heightened within the context of a prison, where gangs are particularly impenetrable to outsiders (Fong, Vogel and Buentello 1996; Wood 2006). Purposive sampling, then, was the most appropriate method for initially selecting participants. First, the information sheet (Appendix B) was sent to the prison administration. Subsequently, prison officers delivered copies of the information sheet around prison wings which housed high numbers of prisoners involved in/knowledgeable about gang activity. Interested individuals then approached their wing-officer, expressing an intention to take part in the study. Initial interest was expressed by approximately 12 prisoners who were highly knowledgeable of gang activity; of these individuals, 5 eventually offered to participate.

All of this study’s participants were drawn from Locktown Prison, a ‘core local’ high-security men’s prison in the North of England. The rationale behind sampling from this site was, in part, due to the high turnover of prisoners in ‘core local’ prisons, especially amongst prisoners held on remand. This leads to a high level of interaction between such prisons and the outside world, which was beneficial to this project’s aims and purposes. Moreover, Locktown Prison is a high-security prison; prisons of this category have reported high levels of gang activity (Phillips 2012a; HMIP report 2011). This gang activity is reflected in the administrative processes of the prison, as well as being identified by individual prisoners and staff (HMIP 2010; HMIP report 2011). A further reason that the sample was drawn from Locktown Prison related to the prison’s particular geographical location, which presented unique benefits to the study’s objectives. First, there is an established presence of criminal gangs in the city where fieldwork took place (Bullock and Tilley 2001; Medina, Aldridge and Ralphs 2011). This stems from the city’s historic problems with gang activity, which can be traced back to the late Victorian era (Davies 1998; Haslam 1999, 2009). Moreover, the city’s contemporary gang problems are illustrated by a high incidence of gang-related bullying at the prison: 6% of prisoners at Locktown Prison reported being victimised by fellow prisoners due to gang-related issues (HMIP 2011), one of the highest amongst England’s prisons. It was, therefore, decided that Locktown Prison would prove to be an appropriate site from which to draw this study’s sample. Moreover, sampling from a prison has added benefits, as “it is easier to meet motivated and interested participants in prison; here they…have more time to think about their past, and present more cohesive and meaningful interpretations of their lives” (Sandberg 2010: 450).

**Analysis**

Once interviews were conducted and the data transcribed, it was subjected to an analysis stemming from the grounded theory approach. This was held to be the most suitable methodology for analysing the data, as a thematic analysis is appropriate when the researcher wishes to inductively develop categories and ground these in the data (Berg 1989). Principally, this research was driven by a method which is outlined by Strauss (1987): the research question is initially identified, followed by the establishment of grounded categories, a systematic sorting of the data, and an eventual identification of a pattern (Strauss 1987; Berg 1989). The presence/lack of patterns ought then to be analysed in relation to the existing academic literature (Berg 1989). Such was the approach followed during this study, with a particular focus placed on continuously refining the relevant concepts so that a theory emerged (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Bachman and Schutt 2011). Furthermore, the data were subjected to coding after it was collected. The data was analysed minutely (Berg 1989; Strauss 1990) and the coding process was frequently interrupted to write theoretical notes, where appropriate (Berg 1989; Strauss 1987; Glassner et al. 1988). Coding the data eventually led to the emergence of a number of initial categories, viz. words which were used most frequently by participants (Berg 1989). Primarily, this portion of the analysis took account of the frequency and regularity with which specific content was featured in the answers of respondents (Noaks and Wincup 2004).

Although the qualitative researcher ought to measure the regularity with which key terms are mentioned (May 2001), it is also important for the researcher to “extend their analysis beyond this to consider meanings and understandings” (Noaks and Wincup 2004: 130). Accordingly, a more panoramic view was adopted to arrive at *final* categories. These were developed from, but not replicates of, the initial categories. In accordance with Strauss’ (1987) methodology for coding data, I had begun by conducting a process of open coding. This was then refined, so as to lead to the emergence of axial codes and “to build up a dense texture of relationships around the ‘axis’ of the category being focused upon” (Ibid: 64). Finally, these codes were further distilled through the process of selective coding, ensuring that “all other subordinate categories and subcategories… (became) systematically linked with the core” (Ibid: 69). The final ‘core’ categories to emerge from this study, then, stemmed from the initial categories, but were linked to the wider themes to emerge from the study. Specifically, these categories were: in-prison/pre-prison identity; familial background; territorialism; penal power and loss/absence of social capital. Arriving at these core categories was the result of acutely interpreting the data, analysing the results and placing them within the framework of the study (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; May 2001; Noaks and Wincup 2004). A grounded theory approach ensures that categories are built from ‘the bottom up’, combing the primary data so as to allow the emergence of themes (Glasser and Straus 1967; Straus 1987).

It is also worth mentioning why content analysis was chosen as this study’s sole method of analysis. Some literature argues that it is desirable to synthesise content analysis with discourse analysis (e.g. Markoff et al. 1974; Roberts 1989; Wilson 1993). However, most studies argue that incompatible differences exist between the two (e.g. Hopf 2004; Starks and Trinidad 2007). One of the principal differences between the two modes of analysis is illustrated by the primacy discourse analysis places upon linguistics – how language is used to construct meaning in the world (Herrera and Braumoeller 2004; Laffey and Weldes 2004; Crawford 2004). This can be contrasted to the emphasis grounded theory places on developing “explanatory theories of basic social processes studied in context” (Starks and Trinidad 2007:1). In light of this study’s exploratory nature, grounded theory was deemed as being able to provide the rigour needed in such a scenario (Jones and Alony 2011). Further, grounded theory affords the researcher a greater degree of autonomy and freedom when analysing the data (Glaser 1978, 1998; Bryant 2002; Jones and Alony 2011); this was also an aspect which benefited this study, and prevented the need for a supplementary form of analysis.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Ethical Considerations**

To ensure that this research was carried out within ethical parameters, a number of principles were followed. First, it was borne in mind that the study had to be approached with additional sensitivity. This was because the study focused on participants’ own experiences around gang activity and gang violence; the distress elicited from such discussions can affect both interviewer and participant (Lee 1993). Accordingly, several precautions were taken to attenuate harm to research participants. Prior to commencement of the study proper, ethical approval was sought from the Ethics Committee at Cambridge University’s Institute of Criminology. This was supplemented by seeking ethical approval from the National Offenders Management Service (NOMS). Once clearance was gained from both bodies, Locktown Prison was sent the Information Sheet (Appendix B). Copies of this sheet were passed around the prison’s wings on the first day of the fieldwork. To respect prisoners’ confidentiality and data protection laws, I did not have any information on prisoners at this stage. Instead, prisoners were asked to approach their wing-officer if they wanted to participate in the study. Written, informed consent was obtained from each prisoner who wanted to participate (Appendix C), preceded by each individual being given full written disclosure of what the research would involve (Appendix B). This ensured that the research would comport with a further ethical requirement: that participants ought to be explicitly informed of the purposes and methodology of research, so as not to be deceived (Farrimond 2013). From the outset, participants were made aware of their right not to answer any question(s) and/or to withdraw from the study without providing any explanation. Moreover, participants’ anonymities were maintained when writing-up the study’s results. This was principally through the use of a random-name generator, non-disclosure of gang names/areas, and the study omitting any information which could identify a particular participant. Participants were also given an overview of the study, ensuring that they understood what it was about and why they had been approached (Noaks and Wincup 2004: 83).

Both Venkatesh (2008) and Hamm (1996) identify that one particular ethical issue which may arise when researching gangs is the researcher’s exposure to illegal and violent activity. This can range from acts of violence being carried-out in front of the researcher (Venkatesh 2008), to the researcher being asked to participate in violent and/or illegal activities (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Hamm 1996). As most of these concerns have primarily been identified in relation to street gangs, such problems were attenuated by this study being carried out within a prison. Moreover, as Locktown Prison acknowledges the existence of prison gangs, it was not unethical *per se* if participants referred to the presence of active gangs within the prison. Finally, it should be noted that attention to ethics is all the more important when the participants in question are from socially or economically deprived backgrounds. As a significant number of prisoners in England and Wales are from such demographics,[[17]](#footnote-17) ethical concerns remained at the forefront of this study. For example, after the research was completed, participants were given the chance to raise any of their own concerns about the process.

**Limitations**

Researching individuals and groups who are ‘active’ in criminality poses several methodological challenges and limitations (Hobbs 1995a).[[18]](#footnote-18) These concerns are heightened when research participants are prisoners being interviewed in a prison environment (Liebling 1999), as well as when participants are involved in gang activity (Camp and Camp 1985; Wood 2006). One reason for this is because gang members are frequently reluctant to reveal information regarding their gang. This can be due to a multitude of reasons: a fear of compromising the gang ‘code’ of not revealing confidential information (Camp and Camp 1985); not wanting to incriminate oneself/fellow gang members (Wood 2006); and fears of reprisals from fellow/rival gang members. [[19]](#footnote-19) Due to these potential limitations, this study did not solely ask prisoners about their personal involvement in gangs. Rather, the focus was also on their general observations of gangs, both within the prison environment and on ‘the street’. It was hoped that this method would ensure greater open-ness, and that the subsequent transparency would produce more valid data.

The sequence of the interview schedule (Appendix A) was developed so that it began with generic questions; questions which are more general in their content lead to a better rapport building between interviewer and participant (Grinnel and Unrau 2005; Trochim 2005; Berg 2009). Questions concerning participants’ personal involvement with gangs were deliberately sequestered from the rest of the interview schedule, and the confidentiality/anonymity offered to participants was reaffirmed (Appendix B). Further, all interviews were carried out in private. It was hoped that the combined effect of these measures would help to establish a level of trust with participants; moreover, such methods have previously secured information from prisoners (e.g. Wood 2006; Phillips 2012a). Throughout the research process, it was borne in mind that establishing trust with participants would prove to be problematic. This is often the case when respondents are drawn from a ‘fringe’ community (Berg et al. 2004). Therefore, my role as observer-participant, walking the wings of the prison and interacting with prisoners in *their* environment, sought to build a greater level of trust than would have been the case had the study solely been comprised of interviews. Prisoner officers also suggested that conducting interviews within the prison would reassure prisoners as to my identity as an independent, unbiased researcher. This would have been less likely if the interviews had been conducted in the prison’s external, legal-visiting area (prison officer, pers. comm.).[[20]](#footnote-20)

A more recent concern to have emerged is the reluctance of street gang members to partake in academic research, because such studies are often perceived as being exploitative (Aldridge, Medina and Ralphs 2008). This concern primarily stems from gang members believing that academic studies do little to benefit their communities (Ibid). Again, it was hoped that establishing trust with participants would reduce the likelihood of such problems arising. As well as the methodological techniques deployed, the questions themselves were non-judgemental in their tone; the interview schedule contained enough ‘breath’ to allow participants to answer freely on their personal experiences. It was hoped that employing this methodology would engender rapport, attenuating the hostilities which may arise when prisoners are confronted with an external, academic researcher (Jacobs 1977). Such hostilities are heightened if the researcher appears to be from a cultural/ social background which is distinct and separate from participants (Jacobs 1977; Berg et al. 1994; Hobbs 1995a; Phillips and Earle 2010). These potential limitations were borne in mind throughout the research process, which was conducted in such a way as to militate against these problems arising.

It should also be noted that participants may express their reluctance to fully engage with the researcher either implicitly or explicitly (Walkerdine et al. 2001). Similarly, the researcher might himself be affected by his pre-conceptions about participants (Walkerdine et al. 2001; Bennett 1981; Berg et al. 1994), “complicated by the baggage, in his mind” (Phillips and Earle 2010: 373). Alternatively, researchers might be affected by their sympathies towards participants, becoming overly partial and sympathetic (Liebling 2001; Kelley 2011). Accordingly, this study was shaped to minimise the severity of the above problems, both in the formulation of the methodology and in how the study was carried out in practice. For example, participants were not asked about the crime for which they had been sentenced/ remanded, the length of their sentence, or their offending histories.

**RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**[[21]](#footnote-21)

The data gathered from long interviews were fully, manually transcribed. Thereafter, I utilised a grounded-theory approach to analyse the data. This led to the emergence of the following, final ‘core’ categories: Pre-Prison/In-Prison Identity; Familial Background; Territorialism; Penal Power; Loss/Absence of Social Capital.

**Pre-Prison/In-Prison Identity**

This was the most substantial category to emerge, encompassing an extensive portion of prisoners’ life experiences. Prisoners generally placed an acute focus on their pre-prison identities, where gangs often played a central role. In order to fully understand these identities, they were asked as to how they conceptualised a ‘gang’ and whether they considered themselves to be gang members. Prisoners showed a reticence in labelling all group interactions as being gang-related. Moreover, the environments and time periods in which they grew up had a profound effect on whether they self-identified as gang members:

**Martin:** A gang could just be a group of young lads hanging about on the street corner at night. But gangs can also be like businessmen. In the ’80s, you had groups of fellas – the old gangs. They owned their own businesses, but they didn’t agree with burglaries and stuff. They was respected as gangs, you know? They got collateral and families got looked after. These were the fellas I grew up with. **Interviewer:** And would you say you were in any of their gangs? **Martin:** Nah, nah, not me. But I grew up on the same estates as these guys, went to borstal with ’em. **Interviewer:** So you were around them, but you didn’t join their gangs? **Martin:** Good question. Umm…you got me thinking now. Why didn’t I join? I’ve never thought about it before, tell you the truth.

Gangs are all about money, drugs, things like that. One person gets killed, so their mates have to go and kill back for revenge – to fight back. Where I grew up, when it came to gangs everything was out in the open. **(Colin)**

**Phil:** I grew up a council estate, me, and there were four estates. You had to be like a ninja to get from one estate to the other. If you got caught on any of the other estates, you got a severe beating. There were fights with the other estates on Saturdays. A kid got threw off a bridge once. And one lad was caught nicking bonfire wood off another estate, so he got tied to a tree and bull-whipped. It was pretty severe, growing up. **Interviewer:** So did you see yourself as a gang member? **Phil:** Not really, no. We also used to do stuff like fight other schools – Catholics against Protestants. It’s a rivalry that goes back hundreds of years. And then the football violence come into it – sticking nails in golf balls, chucking ’em into the crowd, joining in with the older kids.

In Phil’s account, then, violent group delinquency was not categorised as being gang activity *per se*. Moreover, there was a sectarian dimension to Phil’s pre-prison identity, as well a role played by football hooliganism. These are aspects of gang violence which past research has also highlighted (e.g. Sinclair et al. 2004; Deuchar and Holligan 2008). Martin’s response, however, illustrated that street gangs can clearly be differentiated from organised crime gangs (cf. Orvis 1996). As regards these street gangs, the importance of “postcodes” and a prisoner’s “estate” was often a central component in his pre-prison identity, at times forming the basis for his gang affiliation. This mirrors the theoretical importance placed on deprived community housing. Such arguments state that council housing has been shaped by a concentration of lone-parent, poor-income households (Page 1993; Adonis and Pollard 1998), isolated from wider society and segregated from its economic prosperity and social norms (Schur 1969; McGahey 1986; Pitts 2008). Consequently, it is argued, such areas witness high concentrations of gang activities amongst deprived persons (Miller and Cohen 1996). However, prisoners thought it was inaccurate to label all delinquent-groupings as ‘gangs’[[22]](#footnote-22):

The media talk rubbish. They don’t know what goes on, what happens in this jail. They get it all wrong. When it comes to gangs, there’s always more hype. Like, my Co-D’s (Co-Defendants) don’t even know each other, but they (the media) say my Co-D’s are in a gang – they say it’s gang-related. **(Colin)**

It’s the streets that make you, yeh? Gangs are just a group of lads at the beginning. So, some people in gangs wouldn’t even think of themselves as being a gang. **(Bradley)**

Even prisoners who were deeply involved in gang-activity on ‘the street’ were hesitant to self-identify as being gang members:

**Colin:** It’s not a gang thing. It’s just groups of lads who stick together. **Interviewer:** So would you class yourself as being a gang member? **Colin:** Nah, nah. I’m more of a businessman. You see, when you say gang, I think hand signs, red bandanas, dogs. We didn’t have none of that. Actually, I started off legitimate, doing good things: just chilling out, playing football and stuff. But then I was like hanging around with 32 year olds when I was 24. So, yeh, not a gang.

Despite Colin’s hesitation in categorising his *own* pre-prison identity as being a ‘gang member’, his responses were far more definitive when asked about the strength of gang identities amongst certain segments of the prison population, something corroborated by responses of other prisoners:

There’s loads of gang members in here. Alarm bells always going off, the wings getting locked down ’cos of the gang members fighting. Visits are a clash point as well. The older ones are calmer, but…the top jail’s (Supergang 1) and the bottom jail’s (Supergang 2). It’s wing segregation – they (Supergangs 1 & 2) don’t mix. **(Colin)**

Prisoners from (Supergangs 1 & 2) are kept apart – the wings don’t mix. You’re in a confined space and the young lads are cheeky, so it’s going to blow up. But it’s not just about gangs – it’s about personal problems, too. Lads who’ve got issues from the outside need to be kept separate, and it’s difficult to keep personal problems apart. **(Bradley)**

Bradley’s response indicated that the role of gangs within English prisons is a more nuanced than in the American penitentiary system. Whereas American research identifies gang activity as being thedefining feature of the prison existence, gang affiliation is more of an undercurrent at Locktown Prison. Whilst Colin, for example, gave clear indications of some serious gang conflict in the prison, the lives of all (or indeed most) prisoners were not defined by gang membership. Rather, all of the prison’s gangs were solely comprised of individuals who were gang affiliated prior to imprisonment. Locktown’s gangs, then, do not generally expand their pool of members once within Locktown Prison.[[23]](#footnote-23) Additionally, there were no prisoners who spoke of new prison gangs being created within prison. Once imported into the prison, gangs served to provide networks of protection for their members. Both ‘supergangs’ were equally dominant outside of prison as they were inside, with their ‘in-prison’ identity being an accurate reflection of their dominance on ‘the street’:

**Martin:** ’Course I know about (Supergang 1) and (Supergang 2). Outside, it’s all to do with profit and making your name. The trouble’s never ending. These young kids do stuff for the gangs, and you’ve got 14 year olds, 15 year olds looking up to the older gang members. In the last 15 or 20 years it’s become all about the drugs and guns. **Interviewer:** And what about inside prison? **Martin:** With (Supergangs 1 & 2) it’s all about drugs, fights, grassing. You don’t grass on your own – not on your own doorstep.

Similarly, ‘in-prison’ relationships between these two ‘supergangs’ and their smaller counterparts were reflective of the situation on the streets of Locktown. This conformity to street gang affiliation comports with Jacobs’ studies (1974, 1977) of Chicago’s street gangs. In Jacobs’ research, the imprisonment of gang members in Stateville Penitentiary was seen as “almost a homecoming” whereby “the gang member from the street has no trouble whatsoever in adjusting to the new environment” (Jacobs 1974:399). Prisoners spoke of a similar convergence in the pre-prison/prison identities of gang members. However, unlike American prisons, there was interplay between formal gangs and informal groupings. Colin referred to this by simply stating: “we’re mates – we stick together”. This reasserted the primacy of certain collectives within the prison, creating difficulties for lone prisoners:

They (the gangs) know who’s vulnerable - who can be bullied, intimidated. If you’re coming in here on your own, they’ll be waiting at the gates. They sniff you out. **(Colin)**

Mirroring previous studies in England, there was some continuation of street rivalries within prison walls (e.g. Joint Justice Commission 2010; Phillips 2008). This fragmentation of convict solidarity is also reflected in the contemporary American prison system. In the past, prison gang leaders would enforce a strict cessation of hostilities amongst imprisoned gang members (Jacobs 1974). However, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of a ‘Pepsi generation’: a cohort of prisoners who no longer deferred to older gang members in prison, and who perpetuated street rivalries during imprisonment (Hunt et al. 1993). The result was a changed prison landscape in the United States, whereby racial solidarity alone no longer led to harmonious relations. This was illustrated most clearly an increase in the number of prison assaults between the Bloods and the Crips, both African-American street gangs (Ibid). Developing the terminology used by Hunt et al. (1993), this study’s respondents referred to British prisoners who were part of a ‘post-Pepsi generation’: holding even less loyalty to vertical gang leadership than before. This state of affairs was shown by street-based disputes continuing to ferment within Locktown Prison itself:

It’s all about issues from the outside coming in here – revenge. They (rival gang members) don’t mix. Like, say there’s one of (Supergang 1) and ten of (Supergang 2), that one won’t go into that wing. **(Colin)**

**Martin:** You can’t have (Supergang 1) and (Supergang 2) on the same wings – they kick off. **Interviewer:** And does the prison know about this? **Martin:** ’Course they do. They know of it, officers know of it, and they keep ’em separate. Otherwise they’ll fight. Look, the gangs have morphed into different things, and they’ve changed how they operate. A lot of it is to do with drugs. In the ’80s, I’d never even heard of heroin and crack cocaine. Now you got dealers in prison…certain groups control the wing – muscles and distribution.[[24]](#footnote-24) Years ago, if you had trouble you sorted it out with your fists. Now, the young ones from (Supergangs 1 & 2) are all about knives, drugs and guns.

The relative absence of younger prisoners from this study’s sample[[25]](#footnote-25) meant that there were limited first-hand accounts of contemporary *youth* gangs. However, there were certain points on which all respondents concurred. For example, no respondents referred to the presence of formalised ‘gang codes’ or written edicts from senior gang-members (cf. Jacobs 1974, 1977). Although Colin and Kevin both referred to “elders” mediating disputes, this was more in reference to their respective communities rather than criminal gangs. Nevertheless, both the ‘pre-prison’ and ‘in-prison’ identities of certain individuals were clearly more powerful than others. This was illustrated by prisoners’ answers, as well as issues they were reluctant to discuss:

Like I said, I grew up with (name of gang leader) and he was a decent fella. Went to borstal with him an’ all. I’ve never got no trouble from him. If you’re good to him he looks after you, and…actually I don’t want to say no more about him. But, put it this way, the old gangsters had time for you. And even though they’re all retired now, they’re still handy (violent). They could do you some damage inside here, or get it done to you, and…actually, that’s it. I don’t want to say no more, if that’s alright. **(Martin)**

There’s only so much I can say about (the gang leaders). There’s certain things I just can’t talk about. But, put it this way, people think we (Foreign Gang 1) are silly people. But we’re not silly people. If you fuck with us, we’ll fuck with you. And we’ve got a bigger crew than you. If you leave us alone, we’ll leave you alone. It’s all about family. You’ve got to do it – you’re family. **(Kevin)**

‘Foreign Gang 1’ solely contained members from one particular country, creating a cohesive structure due to shared ethnic and cultural background. This strengthened their ‘in-prison’ identity, and enhanced the protective features of their network. However, intra-gang familial ties were the overriding feature of ‘Foreign Gang 1’. This can be contrasted to research which concludes that certain immigrant gangs are solely united through their shared cultural background (Montero 1979; Chin 1990).

**Familial Background**

This research also found there to be varying levels of familial involvement across the prison’s different gangs. Rather than the family-oriented ‘clan’ structures of the Mafia (Saviano 2006; Cawthorne and Cawthorne 2009), there was only a sporadic presence of family ties within Locktown gangs. Although some street gangs did form allegiances with a dwindling number of ‘crime families’, much the city’s gang activity was devoid of this familial dimension, something reflected by prisoners’ answers:

I had loads of brothers, loads of cousins. One of me brothers was an enforcer for (a gang). Me other older brothers were with (another gang). So I got earache (hassled) for not joining their gangs. **(Phil)**

When we were young, me and me brothers never joined a gang. Yeh, I started wagging from school (playing truant) and two of me brothers started getting into trouble. But, at that time, we didn’t join a gang – no. **(Bradley)**

However, the general absence of familial involvement in gangs did not mean that prisoners disassociated their family members from their life-course leading to criminality:

**Bradley:** I was dead scared of him (Dad) when he was around. I was terrified of me dad. Before me dad left, I used to idolize him. But after me mam and dad split-up, the only way I could see Dad was by going to the pub. So I started going to the pub, to borrow money off him. And all the other young lads in the pub, outside the pub, we were all there to visit our dads. So I started hanging round with them, and we influenced each other. **Interviewer:** So would you say there’s a link between your dad’s behaviour and the things you eventually did? **Bradley:** I think if you have your mam *and* your dad, they’re there all your life. If me dad was around, I could have been properly disciplined. With me mam, I was more interested in mothering her, if you know what I mean.

Bradley’s personal narrative showed that although his father did not introduce him to gang activity *per se*, his father’s absence played a significant role in his introduction to delinquent behavior. The father’s position within a nuclear family is often described as being ‘instrumental’, occupying a relatively powerful position as compared to other family members (Parson and Bales 1955; Elmer 2008). Although Bradley clearly did not grow-up in a nuclear family, his father still appears to have exerted a profound effect on his subsequent behaviour. Moreover, he referred to infrequent contact between him and his father. This absence of the father from daily life is a feature often identified in delinquency literature, referred to as a ‘father deficit’ which leads to ‘father hunger’ (Katz et al. 1999; Kruk 2008; Glynn 2011). Such an absence clearly affected Bradley’s childhood, and possibly affected his subsequent life course. Many other respondents gave similar accounts of the detrimental effect missing family members had on their childhoods. Reflecting Cohen’s (1955) analysis of delinquent subcultures, father absenteeism was seen as leaving a gap with street gangs could subsequently exploit:

If your Dad’s a wrong ’un (bad person) and you’re a weakling, you’re obviously gonna be a target for these gangs. **(Phil)**

In particular, certain family members were identified as being central in introducing respondents to criminal behaviour, shaping their involvement in gang-related delinquency. In particular, ‘Foreign Gang 1’ contained far more of a familial element than the others gangs at the prison:

It starts from a young age. You’re listening to your dad when you’re about five years old. When you’re older, there’s questioning and explaining. Like, my dad showed me how to work out if a house was good enough to rob. I’d go out with him, and then we’d share it out. You’ve always got family backup, but you also hold a grudge for generations. If there wasn’t so many grudges, then we’d be one hell of a fucking gang. **(Kevin)**

‘Foreign Gang 1’ was a rare example of deep familial gang involvement, mirroring the structuration of Italian crime families (Saviano 2006) and the intergenerational component of some Glasgow gangs (Deuchar 2009). Generally, however, familial involvement in Locktown gangs was shown to be not as extensive. A contrast can also be drawn with Densley’s (2012) account of London gangs, where older gang members vouch for the credibility of younger siblings or cousins, for example. Nevertheless, prisoners’ responses still illustrated how family members’ involvement in delinquency led to the formation of informal support networks:

Once you’re out and about, you end up getting to know who’s who - cousins and whatever else. So, yeh, I suppose you could say there’s a family element to it all. **(Colin)**

For other prisoners, however, family was superseded by loyalties to gang areas and other factors which were taken into consideration:

When I was a kid, all the different families fought. Me dad was away all the time, and two of me older brothers were with (a gang), but I didn’t join ’em – nah. For me it was more about areas, football teams. You had separate gyms depending on which area you were from. And if anyone caught you wearing a different team’s football shirt, you got levelled (attacked). **(Phil)**

Each prisoner, then, placed a different degree of importance upon the family in relation to gang activity. This divergence in responses reflects Thrasher’s (1927) assessment that family influence varies from one gang to another: whereas family bonds were central to the certain American gangs of the early twentieth-century, there was a marked absence of family involvement in other gangland groups.

**Territorialism**

Prisoners’ responses also indicated that Locktown gangs do not dissolve their gang loyalties whilst in prison.[[26]](#footnote-26) In London’s prisons, gangs appear to form on the basis of expediency: creating groups which are large enough to exert a palpable influence on the prison environment, something not possible by aligning oneself to a small, ‘postcode’ based London groupings (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection; Phillips 2012a, 2012b). However, the identities of gang members in Locktown appear to be less fluid, with affiliations based on longstanding animosities:

In here, you’re either (Supergang 1), (Supergang 2) or you got your group of mates. End of. In London jails it’s different. **(Colin)**

Several respondents identified this chasm between London’s gangs and Locktown’s gangs – namely, that imprisonment led to an alternation of loyalties in the former but not in the latter. However, respondents were unable to provide reasons as to why this difference existed, unable to attribute the more durable and tribal nature of gang affiliation in Locktown to any specific factors.[[27]](#footnote-27) On the contrary, one prisoner considered street territorialism to have been superseded by the drug-market: whereas previous there was a loyalty based on one’s area, this had now been supplanted by the primacy held by heroin on ‘the street’. However, even the gang loyalties of the past were not predicated on conventional notions of morality. Rather, the trust/loyalty within older gangs was characterised by consistently supporting one’s fellow criminals in the commission of crime (Hobbs 1995a):

**Phil:** Gangs have always boiled down to drugs. When we were 15/16 the weed started it, but there wasn’t as much rivalry; ’cos weed’s not 25 quid a piece. **Interviewer:** Unlike heroin, you mean? **Phil:** Exactly, yeh. Before, if you hit one lad from (Area 1), all of (Area 1) would jump on you. Now, the gang thing’s going out. Heroin killed it – the loyalty. Before, you’d be out on the graft (robbing) with your gang, and you’d share it all out. Now, it’s all about ‘I’m alright Jack’. There’s no loyalty in it anymore. Before, you stuck together. Now you’ll get robbed by the same lads you slept on the sofa with.

Participants also placed significant importance on their housing estates and home areas. These were presented as crucibles of deprivation and conflict, reflecting Carroll’s (1974:228-229) view that “life in the…ghetto is functional for survival in the walled ghetto of the prison…The adaptiveness of…ghetto subculture to the prison is...evident in the social organisation of prisoners.” Consequently, territorialism ran in tandem with a sense that gang members’ experiences of imprisonment were not far removed from their pre-prison lives. This included associating with similar groups of people: “you’re guaranteed to know someone in here…it’s just like being back on the estate” (Phil).

Respondents’ attachments to their housing estates were indicative of the rigid, spatial segregation of contemporary society – the socially disadvantaged being left in particular geographic regions which are subsequently characterised by violence and conflict (Rock 2002).[[28]](#footnote-28) Most of Locktown’s gangs are named after the areas from which they originate, with geographical conflict being the foundation to the existence of such gangs.It is this concept of placeupon which street gangs operate - notions of territory predicate much gang activity and gang violence (Kintrea et al. 2008; Deuchar 2009). Environmental criminology defines place as being “a geographical location, with fairly definite boundaries, within which people may meet, engage in various activities etc.” (Bottoms and Wiles, 2003:620). Consequently, respondents underscored the importance given to territory, areas, specific housing estates, or even streets/roads from which they emanated:

Gangs are all about postcodes – areas. I got dragged into it. I used to play football in (Area 2) when I was a kid, and then we moved to (Area 3). So when I’m in (Wing Y), it’s chilled out, ’cos it’s all lads from (Area 3), and we’re all equal. **(Colin)**

**Penal Power**

Refraining from conflict with the prison’s gangs was seen as axiomatic to survival at Locktown Prison: “the gangs can do whatever they want” (Colin). As well as providing a defensive support network, Locktown’s prison gangs were also responsible for instigating attacks:

When I was on (a prison wing), our group was made up of about 35/40 lads. But we stuck together. So if any dickhead comes out, we sort it out. Later, us lads got with (Gang E). Then a couple of racists come onto our wing. They soon got filled in (attacked), and it was sorted out. **(Colin)**

This study’s sample did not include any first-time offenders or vulnerable prisoners. Therefore, the prisoners in this study had not resorted to forming ‘defensive friendship groups’, viz. small numbers of prisoners who group together for their own protection, and loosely know each other from outside of prison (Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2010). Further, the situation in Locktown Prison was illustrative of the more structured, entrenched nature of gang identity within the city. Moreover, gang allegiances are perhaps more developed in an adult prison than would be the case in a young offenders’ institution. [[29]](#footnote-29) Much of the gang activity participants alluded to was characterised by brute strength and violence. For example, Colin stated: “nonces (child abusers) and racists get filled in (attacked) ASAP. We don’t like child killers, racists, men who’ve hurt women.” [[30]](#footnote-30) Penal power was, therefore, deployed to demonstrate which prisoners were ‘undesirables’ and what sort of prisoner behaviour was undesirable. As regards the latter, the issue of ‘respect’ was a significant component in the power-relations between prison gang members. In particular, older prisoners analysed the ‘new’ generations of gang members:

A lot of these young gang members don’t have no respect. Like when you’re working in the kitchen, they’ll kiss their teeth at you if there’s lumps in the gravy. So I’ll confront them and ask, “You got a problem?” And then they’ll say, “Nah, nah, it’s not you – it’s the kitchen chefs”. You gotta remind these little shitbags who you are. **(Colin)**

**Martin:** The youngsters of (Supergangs 1 & 2) have no respect for human life: ‘I want it, I’ll take it’. People latch onto the gangs now, but it’s just kids running around with guns – they’ve changed how they operate. **Interviewer:** So how did prison gangs operate in the past? **Martin:** Like I said, the old gangs had a lot of respect. They had a different way of working, they had time for you. Know what I mean? Even in here, they looked after their own. So the old cons in here still have a lot of respect.

As regards the racial component to penal power, this was a complex theme. It should be noted that there was limited segregation based along racial lines, something reflected in the general dynamics of the prison,[[31]](#footnote-31) and supported by the responses given during interviews. Most participants in this study originated from racially diverse areas of Locktown, which was identified as being one reason why there was this lack of race-based segregation (prison officer, pers. comm.) This is fundamentally different to the composition of American prison gangs, where there is a rigid enforcement of - and rigid adherence to - racial segregation within prisons (Knox 2005; Jacobs 1977; Fleisher and Decker 2001). In particular, Carroll (1974: 156-171) documents how prisoners’ experiences began to be shaped by nascent racial hostilities and a climate of mutual suspicion in the American penitentiary of the mid/late-twentieth century. Nevertheless, cultural solidarity was an important part of how certain gangs deployed their penal power. This was particularly apparent with ‘Foreign Gang 1’:

There’s another one of ours (member of Foreign Gang 1) on my wing. Only a timid lad, he is. So I keep a closer eye on him. I won’t let anyone pick on one of me own. No one fucks with us - we’re heavy (powerful). It’s only a phone call to (City A) or (City B) and there’re all up here. We’d do the same. You gotta do it…you’re family. **(Kevin)**

Notwithstanding the cohesive identity of ‘Foreign Gang 1’, there was a general absence of racial schisms at Locktown Prison: “when it comes to the gangs, it’s not a racial thing” (Bradley). This did not, however, totally discount a racial subtext to prison gangs:

Most of the gangs are black lads kissing their teeth, wearing their pants down low. I don’t like it. Then you get the occasional white lad in their gang, trying to talk black. It just sounds stupid. **(Colin)**

You see, when you say gangs, I think of black lads, really. **(Bradley)**

Further, a more panoramic view led to race taking more of a central role as regards power both in the prison and on ‘the street’:

In the ’80s, blacks and whites would get on. Like, we’d go to the same nightclubs and stuff. Tell you the truth, the drugs changed it all. Blacks and whites don’t get on as much, now. It’s the drug deals through the gangs that done it. **(Martin)**

Martin did not identify why drugs impacted race relations, but was emphatic in stating that there was interplay between the ethnic identities of both ‘supergangs’ and the drug market. Such views were not often expressed during this study, and might have linked to the ethnicities of those prisoners who were interviewed. Moreover, some participants identified the emergence of other cultural divisions forming. For example, Colin stated that whilst interracial relations were not problematic, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims were a point of contention, especially in one part of the prison:

**Colin:** The Muslim guys on (Wing X) are good people, yeh? But they’re extreme people. They’re older people, and they’ll tell you not to play pool, take your TV, take your PlayStation. **Interviewer:** And what happens if they take someone’s stuff? **Colin:** What can you do? They’re proper big people. They’re in their cells all day, doing bench-presses, sit-ups, that sort of thing. If you’re Muslim they’ll make you pray at this exact time. They’ll tell you to stop playing pool when they’re about to pray. And they’re very exact…they’ll only eat by sitting on the floor. They’ll say, “Brother, you must eat sitting down. You must drink sitting down. Don’t drink stood up, Brother”.

The emergence of Muslim identities led to elements of bullying and coercion, limiting the chance of peaceful co-existence between Muslim and non-Muslims prisoners. However, the emergence of these faith identities could also lead to there being lower levels of *racial* divisions. This materialised through prisoners of various ethnicities (and indeed rival gang factions) being united under the overarching framework of Islam:

**Colin:** Like, when lifers go to dispersals, a lot of them become Muslim. If a rival gang member’s in the same prison as him, and he’s also become Muslim, he won’t fight no more – he’s changed his ways. Asian lads, black lads, white lads, it don’t matter…all go Muslim prayers together. **Interviewer:** And how many lads do you know who’ve converted? **Colin:** When I was at (a prison), at one point, out of about 35 or 40 lads I knew, half become Muslim. **Interviewer:** And how about in this prison? **Colin:** Yeh, it goes on here. You got white lads becoming Muslim, black lads becoming Muslim. Especially on (Wing X), like I was saying before.

A prisoner’s faith identity, then, was identified as a rapidly developing aspect of penal power. In particular, the interaction between faith and gang affiliation indicated a gradual redistribution of power within Locktown Prison. This was facilitated by coercive measures as well as more subtle acts: “when you first come in, the Muslim lads will have left you £40 or £45 worth of canteen (food) in your cell. And you can’t give it back. So, you feel like you owe them something” (Colin). However, the prison’s gangs also utilised their power in more explicit, conventional ways: “outside, gangs are about (your gang’s) name, money. In here, it’s about protection. That’s our mentality. Gangs are different types of people – that’s jail life” (Colin).

Existing literature links the power of prison gangs to higher incidences of bullying and victimisation amongst prisoners (Fong et al. 1996).[[32]](#footnote-32) It has also been identified that prison gang members are themselvesat a higher risk of victimisation (Ireland and Power 2012). However, interviews with prisoners did not reveal high levels of bullying; this applied to both gang affiliated and non-gang affiliated prisoners:

I just keep me-self to me-self. There’s an easy way to do prison and a hard way to do prison. I’m a listener and a helper. I don’t get no hassle from the other lads. **(Martin)**

If you’re asking me if I’ve been affected by bullying, I’d say nah. I do my own thing. And like I said, I’ve got my group of mates and (Gang E), so…you know? **(Colin)**

However, this is one aspect of the study’s findings which can be compared with existing evidence, much of which contradicts respondents’ testimonies. First, when being reported on an anonymous basis, a high incidence of gang-related bullying is apparent at Locktown Prison (HMIP 2010).[[33]](#footnote-33)  Second, the prison’s internal mechanisms show a concern with gang-related conflict. For example, gang members are distributed on the prison’s wings in a way which reduces the chance of large scale disturbances (prison officer, pers. comm.).Therefore, one ought to question the validity of participants’ responses regarding bullying.

Hyper-masculinity and its projection could be one reason behind the reluctance of prisoners to candidly discuss victimisation. Such notions of physical prowess and strength are axiomatic to the ‘criminal world’ (Cohen 1955; Hobbs 1995a; Jefferson and Carlen 1996), and are particularly acute for gang members (Levi 1994; Levi and Maguire 2003). This notion of hyper-masculinity was reflected in the daily interactions at the prison – how prisoners walked, communicated with one another, and how prisoners communicated with prison officers (fieldwork notes). This importance of physicality has often been ignored in sociology (Shilling 1991). However, the human body conveys its own form of social capital, with social status and achievement both being conveyed through physical appearance (Chang 2006). This ‘body capital’ – which Wacquant (2005, 2006, 2011) refers to as ‘carnal sociology’- played an important role in shaping prison life at Locktown Prison. For example, Colin referred to Muslim prisoners in a particular wing being “proper big people… in their cells all day, doing bench-presses, sit ups”. This enabled them to physically challenge prisoners whom they viewed as being ‘disrespectful’ to their faith.

**Loss/Absence of Social Capital**

This study’s participants were invariably from areas where there was a lack of social capital, and an absence of pro-social communities. Gang affiliation, then, was identified as providing gang members with a collective identity, something displaced in Western societies during the period of modernity (Jacques 1998, 2009):

Gangs give you a cause - it’s something to be a part of. Even in here you’ve got loads of weak people, little people. But then you got the gang, with their ‘generals’ and their ‘privates’. There’s a pull to it. **(Bradley)**

Street gangs were also viewed as exploiting the lack of purpose felt by many disadvantaged youths. In particular, gang leaders were seen as deceiving younger gang members by not informing of them of the realities of gang-life:

To be honest, I blame a lot of it on the rap culture - for glamourising it. It’s a power thing. And it’s worse now, ’cos the kids have got guns. I was just laying out a chessboard, and it’s got me thinking: the youngsters are like the pawns – they’re completely expendable. You’ve got your gangsters in your cars, and the young ones on their pushbikes, with guns. All the shit’s put on the foot soldiers. (**Phil)**

Because of the environment some children are brought up in, gangs are able to “pull” them in, as Bradley stated. For example, father absenteeism and the involvement of parents in delinquent activities have been identified as principle features of ‘street families’ (Anderson 1999). Such families are denoted by their social disorganisation, self-destructive behaviour and an inability to inculcate pro-social values in their children (Wilson 1996; Anderson 1999; Kelley 2010). Furthermore, gang members’ home areas were inevitable socially and economically deprived, reflecting theoretical references to ‘the ghetto’ in existing academic literature (e.g. Anderson 1972; Wacquant 1998). Prisoners’ socio-economic backgrounds, then, were reflective of the class divisions and economic inequalities in contemporary England. Consequently, the absence of social capital left a void which street gangs sought to fill, focusing on “making a profit, and making your name” (Martin).

Social capital is one characteristic of economically prosperous areas, whose residents benefit from its presence (Putnam 2007). As a concept, it refers to the benefits individuals can receive through informal social networks, organisations and the accumulation of trust (Putnam 1993; Dasgupta 2005). Crucial to this concept is the pro-social disposition of such networks (Dasgupta 2005). However, respondents in this study felt an acute sense of being far removed from these pro-social parts of society. In effect, gang affiliation was viewed as offering an alternative path to progress through society. Materialism was seen as being an integral part of such progress, and gang activity was held as providing the only means to achieve such material goods:

I was an entrepreneur. I could sell on that estate, stood at the back. I’d rob the cider trucks, sell clothes, swap things. It was more about the money than the gangs. You start at the bottom. You’re living in a shithole, looking up to the bigman who’s rolling about in a Mercedes and you think to yourself, ‘I want some of that’. **(Phil)**

People around me had nice trainers, what I didn’t have. The older lads had nice cars, girls, you see it all on Facebook now, don’t you? It’s the pull of money. **(Bradley)**

Delinquent groupings were presented as alternatives to pro-social networks, allowing the individual a means to get “what I didn’t have” (Bradley). Gangs were also able to capitalise on the absence of positive social capital in certain areas. In essence, formal state organisations are expected to provide goods and services to the general public (Wacquant 1998). Through the provision of such facilities, trust is built with the mass population, creating ‘state social capital’ (Ibid). In the alternative, a lack of services such as adequate education, housing and healthcare can lead to the erosion of trust between the public and government. Wacquant (1998:25) terms this as ‘negative social capital’, disproportionately affecting society’s most marginalised citizens. This study’s participants presented myriad examples of the state ‘retreating’ from their areas, which led to a state of lawlessness:

My area was notorious. The taxis wouldn’t go there, the buses wouldn’t either. If you got caught in a rival estate, even the dibble (police) wouldn’t go in. So eventually it becomes you against them…you versus the police. Even the local chippy had its counter covered in metal guards, and just a little hatch to get your chips. So that’s what I grew up in, you know? **(Phil)**

Such feelings of social disenfranchisement led to individuals believing they had no stake in society (Morell et al. 2011), a perception often heightened in the value-obsessed period of late modernity (Bauman 2000). In such times, more emphasis is placed upon the end results of activities rather than the means through which these results are pursued (Ibid)[[34]](#footnote-34):

We (Foreign Gang 1) was all about scams: distracting people as you rob them, conning people, charging someone £300 for a £30 job. We could buy and sell a lot of the other communities. **(Kevin)**

Although many prisoners articulated their involvement in crime commission, such activities were often characterised by their chaotic nature. Whereas a career criminal “steals professionally (and)…devotes his entire working time and energy to larceny” (Sutherland 1937:3), respondents in this study had varying levels of precision in the commission of their criminal activities. For example, Martin stated: “back in the day it was about things like football hooliganism. It was a bit of fun, having a scrap, you know?” Some participants, then, placed importance on their bonds with fellow gang members, violence and the spontaneity of crime. For others, however, there was a different focus: “we wasn’t really interested in the gang stuff. We was scammers – con artists” (Kevin). Moreover, accentuated levels of negative social capital were predicted as having the potential to significantly worsen gang activity:

Now they (the government) start cutting benefits: no crisis loans, no budgeting loans, discharge grant’s gone down, cutbacks in housing. Soon, gangs won’t be stealing to feed drug habits, they’ll be stealing food. It’ll be us against the police – riots everywhere. It’ll go off big time, mate. **(Phil)**

**CONCLUSION**

This study shows that prison gangs are clearly in existence within Locktown Prison. These gangs are established, organised entities which resemble existing academic definitions of how gangs are structured. The deepest rivalry in the prison exists between ‘Supergang 1’ and ‘Supergang 2’, both of whom have a number of affiliates (see Appendix D). However, their presence within prison walls is characterised by an uneasy co-existence: neither a complete cessations of hostilities nor daily, concerted antagonism. This is not so much because gang members actively desire to function within wide, ideological frameworks. Rather, it is a result of expediency and the administrative processes of Locktown Prison. Although the prison segregates rival gang members at times (cf. HM Inspector of Prisoners 2011), there are also instances of rivals having to share the same prison wing. Therefore, Locktown Prison does not operate under Glantz’s ‘inmate control model’, where certain gang members ‘run’ particular wings.[[35]](#footnote-35) Although gang members are asked to declare their affiliations immediately upon entering the prison (HM Inspector of Prisons 2011), Locktown Prison often adopts the opposite strategy of the American penitentiary system, where “gangs are able to control institutions” (Elsner 2006:1). Accordingly, there is fluctuation between a precarious truce and sporadic outbursts of inter-gang violence. There are also a number of smaller gangs operating within the prison (see Appendix D), with ‘Gang E’ being the most powerful of these. Although the smaller prison gangs are rivals of the two ‘supergangs’, there is generally an absence of conflict between them.

In conclusion, drawing from the detailed literature review and critical analysis of the primary data gathered, I draw three principal findings from this study:

**1.) The period of late modernity has witnessed the development and solidification of gang culture in England.** This can be attributed to several factors, depending upon the theoretical perspective adopted. However, certain reasons continuously arise as being responsible for gang affiliation. For example, gang activity is often viewed as being a means of achieving financial success, something gang members believe to be unattainable through legitimate means (Cloward and Ohlin 1980; Simons and Gray 1997; Pitts 2008). This quest for economic prosperity is exacerbated due to consumerism playing a heightened role in late modern society (Bauman 2000; Bauman and Lyon 2013). Changing social mores and less traditional family structures are also contributory factors to the emergence of street gangs (West 1963; Glynn 2010, 2011b). Thereafter, gang members’ identities are primarily developed through criminality, delinquency and defending their ‘territory’; such actions usually involve extreme violence (Freidman et al 1975; Miller 1982; Klein and Maxson 1987; Curry and Spergel 1997; Pearson and Hobbs 2001). Much of the existing literature also contends that gangs within England are less violent and less structured than their American counterparts (Klein, Weerman et al. 2006; Winfree, Weitekamp et al. 2007; Aldridge 2010). Although there is some truth to such an assessment, this study’s results indicate that the passage of time has led to changes in the activities and composition of England’s gangs; contemporary criminal gangs exist in structured forms, characterised by entrenched gang identities and longstanding conflicts. In this regard, at least, the study’s results show that criminal gangs are far more established and powerful than some of the existing literature contends (e.g. Hallsworth and Silverstone 2009; Hallsworth and Brotherton 2011; Newburn 2011; Glynn 2011a; Briggs 2012).

**2.) Prison gangs clearly exist in the large local prison from which this study’s sample is drawn**. As of April 2013, 32 of the prison’s 1238 inmates are officially classified as being gang affiliated. However, this figure is likely to be an underestimation as it only includes prisoners who have declared their gang affiliation to the prison administration (prison officer, pers. comm.). Nevertheless, prison gangs within Locktown Prison facilitate a continuation of street gang identities, and provide protection against other groups of prisoners. There is also an added dimension of status conferred upon prison gang members as opposed to non-gang affiliated prisoners. The gangs studied were not explicitly organised along racial lines, although they did reflect the racial makeup of prisoners’ home areas. This led to high levels of incidentalracial homogeneity, rather than a concerted effort on the prisoner’s part to exclusively mix with his own racial group.[[36]](#footnote-36) Additionally, there was a general absence of political ideology, activism or collective resistance from gangs at Locktown Prison. Although there was an informal hierarchy - contingent on age, criminal status on ‘the street’ and type of crime committed - there were no codified, hierarchical structures to the prison gangs at Locktown Prison.

**3.) Prison gangs in Locktown Prison are fundamentally the same to their street counterparts.** Rather than gang identities being shaped through the deprivations of imprisonment (Sykes 1958), Locktown street gangs are essentially supplanted into the prison. The prison subculture, then, is characterised by a continuation of street-based loyalties, functioning within the parameters of Irwin and Creesy’s (1960) importation model. The experiences of Locktown gang members on ‘the street’ closely reflect their carceral experiences, mirroring Clemmer’s (1958) assessment of prison being a microcosm of society. Consequently, gangs which provide protection and solidarity on ‘the street’ serve a similar purpose behind the walls of prison – well established, organised entities whose members are willing to utilise violence to enforce their collective identities.

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Overall, this study illustrates that there are many reasons which drive individuals to join gangs. As well as motivations to acquire protection and other financial/material benefits, participants also hoped that gang affiliation would provide a durable sense of identity. This importance of collective identity has long been apparent in delinquent sub-cultures, most clearly typified by the street gang (Cohen 1955). Inevitably, the sequestered nature of prison also had an effect on the development of gang identities and inter/intra-gang relationships. In particular, ‘survival’ was a principal reason for participants to maintain their street gang affiliations in prison. However, many of the reasons which motivated individuals to become streetgang members continued to be relevant within prison. Prisoners’ responses were indicative of the *need* many felt to become part of a gang. At times, this was due to self-interest: acquiring wealth, status and protection - the last of these three most acutely applying in a prison setting. However, there were also deeper, phenomenological factors behind gang affiliation: the ontological insecurity individuals feel in the period of late modernity (Giddens 1991; Young 1999, 2001); the need to belong to a ‘family’ of some sort; and using the gang to provide a narrative to an individual’s life. In the period of late modernity, gang violence continues to be a serious problem within both English society as well as England’s prisons. Perhaps these problems have been exacerbated by contemporary society, where “the love of one’s own, the sticking to one’s kind, the pride of being so stuck…no more stand condemned” (Bauman 1998: 30).

However, it is implausibly myopic to subscribe to Pitts’ (2008) notion that modern gang members are merely ‘reluctant gangsters’, wholly coerced into gang affiliation through circumstance. Undoubtedly, there is some truth to the ‘structural’ arguments which contend that factors such as criminogenic environment, economic deprivation and lack of opportunity lead to youths joining gangs (Wacquant 1998, 2000, 2004). However, this research supports the view that individuals often activelypursue affiliation to a gang, seeking to attain wealth through their gang activities and developing a durable identity within their gang. The actions undertaken as a gang member, whilst anti-social to the wider world, are viewed favourably by other gang members: a system of alternate norms and codes of behaviour. The results of this study add weight to the argument that, regardless of the strength of social structures, individuals ought not to be seen as merely victims of these structural forces (Bauman 2001; Bauman and Lyon 2013).

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1. The deprivation model states that prisons act as ‘total institutions’, affecting prisoner identities through depriving them of liberty, security, autonomy, goods and services, and heterosexual relationships (Sykes 1958). The importation model, however, posits that prisoners’ experiences are primarily shaped through characteristics that are brought into the prison. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Moreover, interviewing research participants inevitably leads to a degree of bias, as the qualitative data gathered is shaped through both the perceptions and *misperceptions* of these participants (Dean and Whyte 1958; Sandberg 2010- own emphasis). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. But see also Wolfgang and Ferracuti 1967; Kennedy and Baron 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. But see also Chambliss 1978; Zhang and Chin 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For example, English police forces have created *Operation Trident* in London, *Operation Excalibur* in Manchester and *Operation Matrix* in Liverpool. To supplement such initiatives, the Serious Organised Crime and Police Act 2005 established a specific governmental public body to tackle organised crime. Similarly, the Proceeds of Organised Crime Act 2002 was enacted to enable the confiscation of the proceeds of crime. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The most notable example of such a scheme is the *West Midlands Mediation and Transformation Service*, which aims to reduce the number of gang-related shootings across Birmingham through informal mediation. It is worth noting, however, that governmental responses to gang-related crime still predominantly focus on orthodox policing measures. For example, the nationwide *Tackling Gangs Action Programme* involved high-visibility policing, covert surveillance of gang affiliated individuals, and increased police patrols (Home Office 2008; Dawson 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. But see also Agnew’s (1985: 152) contention that delinquency is not class-specific: in addition to delinquent behaviour being apparent amongst those from more deprived backgrounds, Agnew contends that it can also be found amongst individuals from a more prosperous socio-economic demographic. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This trust amongst gang members can be contrasted with the lack of trust many gangs feel towards the wider community, often borne out of social distance from these communities (Putnam 2000; Deuchar 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dasgupta (2010:11-12) identifies a range of ‘pro-social dispositions’ which ensure that individuals in daily society do not renege on promises. Examples include “shunning people who break agreements” so that an individual “feels shame or guilt in violating the norm, and this prevents her from doing so.” This can be directly contrasted with criminal networks, where individuals keep to their end of the bargain *not* due to a fear of being shamed or shunned, but due to a fear of violent repercussions (Hobbs 1995a; Gambetta 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Aldridge’s (2010:2) contention that a nexus existing between youth gangs and organised crime is so rare that it is “the exception rather than the rule, even in US-based research.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Fong et al. (1996) particularly identify two American prison gangs (the Texas Syndicate and the Mexican Mafia) as operating along such lines, whereby the gang leader has supreme primacy over its more junior and subordinate members. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Just as trust in conventional societies can be attributed to a range of structural and cultural factors (Karstedt 2001), its development within criminal gangs is also a nuanced process. In particular, it is affected by concerns around the credibility and motives of individuals professing to be trustworthy (Gambetta 1988, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the purposes of this research – and for the sake of clarity and consistency – a prison gang was defined within the same parameters as Densley’s (2012: 302) definition of a gang, with some alterations (as italicised): “self-formed associations of peers (*viz. prisoners*) that have adopted a common name and other discernable conventional or symbolic signals of membership…comprised of individuals who recognise each other as being members of a gang and who individually or collectively engage in or have engaged in a pattern of criminal activity (*within a particular prison or several prisons*). They are not fully open to the public (*or prison staff*) and much of the information concerning their business remains confined within the group.” [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A semi-ethnographic methodology was deployed due to the shortcomings which have been identified in *solely* interviewing prisoners, or *solely* carrying out observations of a prison. As regards the former, prisoners may attempt to rationalise their behaviour, diminishing the validity of their interviews (Wright and Decker 1994; Jacobs 2000; Sandberg 2010). Prisoners may also attempt to ensure that their responses are tailored to wider concerns around ‘impression management’ (Sandberg 2010; Copes and Hochstetler 2010). As regards observations conducted in a prison, Sandberg (2010: 454) contends that “researchers do not see phenomena objectively during observation, but structure them according to the interpretive schemes and discursive repertoires they already possess”. To militate against these validity concerns disproportionately affecting the study, I employed a methodology which combined interviews with observations. This methodology has previously been used in the study of gangs, with success (e.g. Decker and Van Winkle 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Although non-probability sampling reduces a study’s generalisability (King et al. 1994; Bachman and Schutt 2011), it is exactly the method needed when investigating a limited, defined group (Weisburd et al. 1991; Bachman and Schutt 2011).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Although content analysis was used throughout this study, it was borne in mind that to understand the ‘phonetics of crime’ one has to take into account the particular semantics, syntax and diction of the speaker (Fleisher 1993; Hobbs 1995a). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For example, in a recent study 29% of surveyed prisoners had been abused during childhood, 41% had witnessed familial violence as a child, and 24% had been in care at least once during their childhoods. (Ministry of Justice, March 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. It can, of course, be argued that prisoners *qua* prisoners are not ‘active’ in criminality; rather, they are individuals detained after having committed a criminal act. However, the existing literature on prisoner behaviour indicates a high level of misconduct amongst prisoners, particularly those who are gang affiliated (Camp and Camp 1988; Shelden 1991; Griffin and Hepburn 2006, 2013). Consequently, it is correct to classify many prisoners – especially those who are gang members – as being ‘active’ in criminality. This can range from engaging in the prison’s black market to committing acts of violence against other prisoners and prison guards (Wood and Alder 2001; Wood 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Such concerns have led to some researchers conducting covert participant observation when studying criminal gangs (e.g. Patrick 1973/2012; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Hobbs 1995a). However, this methodology clearly cannot be utilised in a prison setting. Moreover, its shortcomings have also been identified in subsequent literature. These include concerns around the researcher’s personal safety, as well as the ethical implications of adopting the role of covert participant observer (Erikson 1967; Hamm 1996; Bachman and Schutt 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Spending time in the prison environment also familiarised me with prisoners’ language, which is required for a comprehensive criminological analysis (see also n.18). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. For the purposes of anonymity, the two main prison gangs in City Prison have been referred to as ‘Supergang 1’and ‘Supergang 2’, throughout. There was also one gang comprised solely of foreign nationals, referred to herein as ‘Foreign Gang 1’. It should be noted that all anonymised gangs had street names which continued to be used within the prison. Further, all prisoners are referred to by pseudonyms throughout the Results and Analysis. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The utility of labelling particular subcultures as ‘deviant’ has been questioned (e.g. Schur 1971; Bench and Allen 2003). Some respondents in this study reflected the view that labelling can sometimes have a consequentialist effect upon deviant behaviour (Tannenbaum 1938; Lemert 1972; Newburn 2007). However, once individuals are labelled as being part of a deviant subculture, their group identity can often be strengthened. For example, gangs may develop defensive mechanisms to protect their members from police scrutiny (Rubington 1968 in Schur 1971). They many also develop internal control functions to ensure the group’s durability (Ibid). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Due to time constraints and purposive sampling, this study’s results cannot be generalised to the entire prison population at the sample site. However, all respondents in this study referred to gang members aligning themselves with their street gangs whilst in prison. Although this does not discount the possibility of other prisoners forming new gangs, this study did not collect any such findings. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Existing literature indicates that drug distribution within prisons is a significant factor shaping the daily experiences of prisoners (Crewe 2005). Moreover, criminals often use periods of imprisonment to substantially develop their drug dealing networks (Pearson and Hobbs 2001). However, there were no respondents in this study who were willing to divulge any substantial information about how drugs were distributed within the prison, and whether/to what extent organised gangs were instrumental in such distributions. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The youngest prisoner interviewed was 28 years old, and the oldest was 53 years old. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. This can be contrasted with the more malleable nature of London gang members’ allegiances (see Pitts 2008; Phillips 2008, 2012a). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. One possible reason for this difference may be that Locktown’s gang problems have historical roots, which can be traced back to the Victorian Era (see p. 30). This can be contrasted to the more recent formation of many London gangs (Davidson 1997; Orjuela 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Cf. Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Klein 1995. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. But see also Phillips 2008; Criminal Justice Joint Inspection 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. The ethnic identities of prisoners affected the high levels of hostility towards individuals considered to be racists. Higher numbers of ethnic minority prisoners on particular wings underscored this hostility, leading to a greater likelihood that “racists would get sorted out” (Colin). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Fieldwork notes: On the whole, prisoners congregate and socialise in racially mixed groups during periods of free association, in the gym and whilst in the prison’s outdoor exercise yard. In the main prison, racially homogenous groups are rare, and this is reflected by the socialisation of prisoners. The only exception to this is (Wing X) where there is a visible separation between groups of white non-Muslim prisoners and Muslim prisoners; both are clustered in their own self-contained groupings. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. It is, however, overly simplistic to solely ascribe prison-bullying to gang membership. The ‘importation’ of gang members’ outside characteristics is only one of several factors which contribute to their anti-social behaviour within prisons (DeLisi et al. 2004). Other factors which contribute to the behaviour of gang members include their histories of prior violence and confinement, as well as the effects of prisonization and moral disengagement (DeLisi et al. 2004; Wood et al. 2009). Such situational factors ought to be borne in mind when investigating bullying by/amongst prison gang members. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. See n.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. However, this is not a characteristic unique to the period of late modernity. For example, Sutherland (1937:174), writing at the beginning of the twentieth-century, stated that for the professional thief “the victims are just means to an end, the possessors of wealth which the thief desires.” In light of this, it is clear that late modernity has not fundamentally altered criminal behaviour, rather, that it has merely accentuated many of its underlying features. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. It is problematic to align City Prison under anyone of Glantz’s models. The prison is, perhaps, closest to the ‘shared-powers’ model, where there is recognition of the prisoner’s right to associate in collective groupings, yet the prison does not cede overall control to the prisoners. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Crewe (2009:135) corroborates this characteristic of prison groupings through his ethnographic study of an English prison, stating that “in most UK establishments, locality is more important than ethnicity”; any self-segregation of prisoners is due to “shared cultural backgrounds rather than racial hostility”. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)