Gangs in Prison: The nature and impact of gang involvement among prisoners

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A forward looking social business, Catch22 has more than 200 years’ experience of providing public services that help people turn their lives around.

We work with troubled and vulnerable people, helping them to steer clear of crime or substance misuse, do the best they can in education or employment and play a full part in their family or community.

The Catch22 Dawes Unit brings together research, policy and practice in order to understand how to reduce the harm caused by gangs and gang-related crime.

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Executive summary

Research context
Recent years have seen an increase in policy focus on the issue of gangs in prison, and emerging research exploring the issue. Research exploring gangs in prison in a UK context is, relatively, in its infancy. But there is evidence to suggest that the more extensive US literature - which describes the presence of highly-structured, hierarchical gangs exercising substantial control over the prison regime - is unlikely to apply in the UK. The existing UK evidence base instead points to looser ‘collectives’ of prisoners formed dynamically in response to the conditions encountered in the prison environment. The evidence relating to the impact of these collectives in UK prisons has thus far been inconclusive.

Whilst policy and practice to tackle gang involvement among prisoners has begun to be developed in the UK, there is limited available evidence relating to effective techniques and approaches. It is suggested that rehabilitative approaches may prove effective and there has been recognition among UK policy makers of the need to take a multi-pronged approach to the issue, with emphasis on intelligence-gathering, information-sharing, enforcement and rehabilitation.

Research aims
The overarching aim of this research project is to build upon the existing evidence relating to gangs in custody to support the further development of policy and practice in this area. Specifically, the research aims to explore:

• the nature and impact of gang involvement among prisoners

• how custodial establishments can reduce gang involvement among prisoners and respond to the negative consequences arising from gang involvement in custody.

Key findings
The key findings in this study relate to the nature and strength of gang allegiances in prison; the impact of gangs in prison; and managing gangs in prison and encouraging gang exit.

Nature and strength of gang allegiances in prison
• Gang-involved prisoners do not appear to be recreating gang entities found in the community when in the prison
• This is partly because there tends not to be sufficient numbers of prisoners from specific gangs in the community to enable this to happen
• Instead, fluid notions of area and territory (ie the community location in which prisoners usually reside) are being used to guide the formation of relationships and allegiances in prison

• This process is dynamic and prisoners respond to the conditions encountered in the prison environment. For example, if there is a lack of prisoners from one’s direct community, the boundaries of ‘area’ may be expanded to include neighbouring communities

• This process is occurring as part of the adaptation to prison life. Prison can be a threatening and insecure environment. Notions of area and territory can be used to indicate to prisoners who can be trusted
• Relationships and allegiances in prison can offer prisoners a sense of meaning and belonging within this environment, as well as emotional support and instrumental benefits (for example, lending items to other prisoners when in need).
• However, prisoners were found to differ in the strength of their gang affiliations in the community. Some prisoners described being very connected and involved with a gang, whereas others described looser connections in which they would ‘drift’ in and out of offending with a peer group.
• Where prisoners had stronger connections to gangs in the community, they were often found to be far more territorial in the way they formed relationships and allegiances in prison. These relationships and allegiances were often characterised by hostility and opposition toward those deemed ‘enemies’ from ‘rival’ areas.
• Conflict does not arise exclusively due to gang issues. Underlying gang as well as non-gang related conflict appears to be a desire to establish and maintain status, dominance and respect in the prison environment.
• However, the incident data revealed that gang-involved prisoners are disproportionately more likely to be involved in violent incidents in prison, including assaults, fights and weapon-related incidents. They are disproportionately less likely to be involved in self-harm incidents, suggesting that gang-involved prisoners may be more inclined toward externalising rather than internalising their issues.
• Prisoners consistently describe several differences between the ways conflict manifests in custody and the community that reduce the likelihood that conflict will occur and escalate in prison in comparison to the community.

**Impacts of gangs in prison**

• There was no evidence that gang-involved prisoners were exercising control over aspects of the prison regime; for example, they did not appear to be controlling contraband markets.
• Instead, impacts tend to be relational. Strong gang affiliations and commitment to area-based loyalties, which manifest in a territorial, oppositional and hostile manner towards perceived ‘enemies’, can create conflict and aggression among prisoners.
• Conflict can develop within the prison walls, but can also relate to both current and historical issues in the community.
• The impacts can be wide-reaching, involving prisoners who may not have been party to the original dispute.
• Prisoners’ desire to show loyalty, as well as the use of bribes, can result in escalating tit-for-tat retaliation among increasing numbers of prisoners.

**Managing gangs and encouraging gang exit**

The key findings in this study relate to the nature and strength of gang allegiances in prison; the impact of gangs in prison; and managing gangs in prison and encouraging gang exit.

• Relationships can come under strain during periods of imprisonment. Whilst contact with the outside world can help ease the prisoner experience, it can also be associated with intense feelings of sadness as it reminds prisoners of what they are missing.
• Relationships with fellow gang members still in the community can be particularly difficult to maintain, associated among some prisoners with a sense that ‘road friends’ are not ‘true friends’ whom one can rely upon.
• Regardless of strength of gang affiliation, prisoners were emphatic that they did not want to come back to custody. Prisoners describe factors that may reduce the likelihood of reoffending and returning to prison, but the clarity of their commitment to this and post-release plans varies.
• There were clear teachable moments as prisoners associated their offending with gangs and recognised that they need to exit gang life to avoid coming back to prison.
• The prison system has a key role to play both in capitalising on these teachable moments to encourage gang exit as well as considering the impact of the prison environment on the likelihood that prisoners will create problematic groupings in custody.
• This applies to all prisoners, including those with weaker connections or who intend to ‘keep their head down’ whilst in custody. For these prisoners, failure to address their gang involvement represents a missed opportunity for rehabilitation whilst gang associations remain on the outside ready to be taken up again upon release.
• However, efforts at encouraging gang exit need to take into account the environments from which prisoners are coming and to which they will return upon release.

**Conclusions**

This research reveals that the process of forming and developing relationships and allegiances in custody is complex. Prison is a specific social world, in which attitudes, allegiances and loyalties developed in the community are imported into custody. These act as guiding frameworks for developing functional relationships and associations in response to the conditions encountered within the custodial environment.

Gang involvement means different things to different prisoners and when attempting to understand the nature and impact of gang involvement in custody, it is important to approach this on an individual level and seek to understand underlying attitudes and determinants of behaviour.

By acting on the findings and recommendations in this report, the prison system and other partners may be able to improve the management of gangs in custody. They may also be able to capitalise on ‘teachable moments’ to encourage rehabilitation and gang exit upon release from custody into the community.

**Recommendations**

At the end of this report, a number of recommendations emerging from the findings can be found. In brief, these recommendations cover the full process of identifying gang-involved prisoners and assessing the problem, to intervening to manage and address the issues:

1) The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) to work with prison establishments to support the introduction and adoption of effective mechanisms to identify gang-involved prisoners. NOMS to also work with the police and other agencies to facilitate the exchange of information.
2) The Home Office Ending Gang and Youth Violence team to work with prison establishments to support the introduction and adoption of a standardised process to assess the nature of issues related to gangs faced by prison establishments.
3) Prison establishments to adopt mechanisms for identifying the circumstances in which issues are likely to arise, and pre-emptive methods to address issues and reduce risk.
4) Prison establishments to adopt approaches for addressing issues when they arise and for thorough investigation of incidents to enable staff to tackle the underlying causes of issues.
5) Prison establishments, with the support of NOMS, to provide rehabilitation to gang-involved prisoners to encourage gang exit upon release into the community.
Introduction and Methodology

Section 1: Introduction

The concept of the ‘prison gang’ brings to mind highly-structured American super-gangs, nurtured in mega-prisons with low surveillance levels and a high level of prisoner control. It bears no comparison to anything emerging in the UK. It has not been until relatively recently that researchers and policy makers in the UK have started asking questions and attending to the existence and impact of gangs in custody, and the relationship between these and gangs in the community.

The American literature reveals highly-structured prison gangs that directly replicate and influence entities found on the street. However, the emerging UK-based evidence suggests that gangs in UK prisons tend to represent more fluid, territorial-based allegiances, formed dynamically in response to specific institutional environments. Studies have found evidence of group-related misconduct within prisons, but not the presence of structured gangs that replicate and sustain community collectives.

There is an extensive connection between prison gangs and institutional violence and misconduct in US prisons. The UK evidence is, however, inconclusive on the extent to which gang-involved prisoners are involved in prison-based violence and misconduct. This leaves unanswered questions relating to the impact of gangs in UK prisons.

This study builds upon the existing evidence base by exploring how prisoners considered gang-involved in the community develop associations and allegiances in a London-based prison. This includes an exploration of how allegiances and experiences in the community affect these processes and the impact of gang involvement on prisoners’ experiences in custody. Using prison incident data, the study also explores the extent to which prisoners considered to be involved in gangs in the community are involved in prison-based violence and misconduct.

Throughout the study, ‘teachable moments’, in which gang-involved prisoners may be questioning their involvement in gangs and may be ready to consider gang exit, are identified. Policy implications, in terms of the management of gangs and related issues in custody, as well as the encouragement of gang exit and preparing gang-involved prisoners for release, are discussed. Recommendations for policy and practice are identified.
Section 2: Context

Recent years have seen an increase in policy focus on gangs in custody and emerging research exploring the issue. This section describes current policy and practice developments and explores what studies have thus far revealed about gangs in custody.

Policy and practice

In 2010, HM Inspectorate of Prisons, Probation and Constabulary conducted a joint investigation into gang involvement among children and young people in the criminal justice system. The report raised criticisms of how gang issues among children and young people in custody were understood and addressed. It highlighted a lack of leadership, understanding and coordination on the issue. Young people and staff had differing views on the nature of prison gangs, with staff down-playing gang activity and feeling that young people overstated their involvement. Safeguarding was described as under-developed, with gang involvement not consistently taken into account. Strategies to address and reduce gang association were described as variable across establishments and generally quite limited. Overall, approaches were criticised for being reactive rather than proactive and dealing with the symptoms of problems.

Since this report, the issue of gangs in custody has risen up the policy agenda, both in terms of the management of gangs in custody and the rehabilitation and preparation for release of prisoners involved in gangs. For example, in their 2012-13 strategy, the Youth Justice Board (YJB) recognised the need to improve practice around gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence. The Board committed to supporting new developments aimed at reducing gang and youth violence.
The voluntary and community sector has also developed practice to support the management and rehabilitation of gang-involved prisoners. For example, Catch22 provides a service to all prisoners identified as gang-involved in HMP Thameside.17 The team engages with all prisoners within 24 hours of arrival in the prison to identify any issues with gang involvement and to set out the available support. As part of this work, a range of interventions is offered to decrease the impact of gang association and violence within the prison. The team works closely with other agencies, both inside and outside the prison, to ensure that information is shared to reduce the risk of violence both to and by prisoners. These policy and practice developments, along with others, clearly demonstrate the attention that is being paid to the issue of gangs in custody. Thus far, whilst there have been some developments in practice aimed at addressing and tackling gang-involvement in custody, it has mainly been at the level of policy commitments to developing initiatives and underlying aims and principles. There is therefore an opportunity to capitalise on initiatives and underlying aims and principles.

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With respect to prisons, there is an aim to improve the rehabilitation of offenders through custody and into community. An example of this is through the development of resettlement prisons, where prisoners will spend all (for short-term sentenced prisoners) or at least the last three months (for long-term sentenced prisoners) of their sentence in a prison situated in the area into which they will be released. Prisoners will be supported by a single, consistent provider throughout their sentence. ‘Through-the-gate’ services will be provided to ensure effective resettlement from release. This focus on the rehabilitation and resettlement of prisoners provides a clear opportunity to investigate and highlight the issues specific to gang-involved prisoners.

In addition, a substantial amount of policy attention and development of practice has focused on young offenders and the secure estate. This study further extends this by focusing specifically on the experiences of young adult prisoners aged 18 to 25-years-old. The study therefore develops an understanding of how gangs manifest in custody and the impacts of gang involvement among this older age group.

**What do we know about gangs in prison?**

Research efforts exploring gangs in prison are in their infancy in the UK. This is particularly so in comparison to the US evidence base, which is much further developed.28 A review of the UK and US literature, however, shows that what can be taken from the more extensive US evidence base may be limited and further work in a UK context is required. This section discusses what the existing evidence tells us about gangs in custody.

**The nature and structure of gangs in custody**

Studies of prison gangs in the US reveal highly structured, hierarchical gangs that directly replicate entities found in the community.23 24 Studies in the UK have revealed comparatively less structured entities that could be better conceptualised as ‘groupings’ or ‘collectives’ of prisoners.25 These entities are ‘fluid’, with notions of area and territory emerging as frameworks guiding how prisoners form relationships and allegiances with one another; there is not a direct replication of street gangs occurring in custody.25 26 The process is ‘dynamic’, whereby prisoners appear to be responding to the circumstances they encounter in the prison environment. For example, in larger prisons, prisoners have been found to form regional rather than local alliances with one another.27

Studies in the UK are likely revealing different findings to those in the US, as American prison gangs exist within a different context to UK prison gangs. US prisons tend to be larger, with lower prisoner-to-staff ratios.28 American prison gangs are often found in environments in which the staff have poor control over the environment and prisoners perceive (and experience) violations of their rights.29 Where official mechanisms and prison norms fail to provide effective governance, gang associations develop for safety and protection.30 31

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Similarly to the US, however, the collectives developed among prisoners in UK prisons offer prisoners friendship and group solidarity. Territoriality provides a sense of ownership over a place32 and the associated mutual support may provide a sense of security within the highly structured prison environment.33 Motivations to join and develop collectives can also arise for instrumental reasons, such as desire to make money or for protection.34 35 Furthermore, in the restrictive, hyper-masculine prison environment,36 37 39 40 prison gang involvement can provide prisoners with a mechanism to display aspects of their masculine identity such as power, dominance and status.38 41

Existing studies have shown that gangs in prison appear to be forming in response to the custodial environment and have meaning and serve purposes for those involved. This study takes this further by exploring specifically how prisoners with pre-existing gang involvement in the community form relationships and allegiances in custody. This study will explore the how these prisoners form relationships and allegiances in prison, including the impact of their community gang associations.

**The impact of gangs in custody**

Understanding the impact of gangs in prison is important to tackling any negative consequences. The US literature describes prison gangs that exert substantial control over the prison regime and are implicated in violence and misconduct in prison.33 42

Again, studies in the UK have just started looking at this. The emerging UK evidence is relatively less clear and, thus far, has not revealed an association between gang involvement and involvement in violence or misconduct.43 However, existing research appears to conflate group-related behaviour with gang activity. The failure to find an association may, therefore, be because the results pertain more to group behaviour rather than gangs.44 45 This study investigates the issue further by specifically looking at whether prisoners considered to be involved in gangs in the community are more or less likely to be involved in incidents of violence or misconduct in prison compared to prisoners who are not considered to be involved in gangs.
Tackling gangs in prison

As discussed previously in this section, there have been a number of policy developments related to tackling gangs in prison. This study seeks to inform further developments by investigating the issue of gangs in custody and developing the evidence base. The final part of this section sets out the evidence relating to managing and addressing gang involvement among prisoners.

Thus far, there has been very little study or evaluation of practice intended to manage and address prison gang involvement. In the US, approaches tend to emphasise suppression of gang activity. For example, in the US, isolation has been used to restrict access to rehabilitation and reduce the likelihood that they are successfully reintegrated into the community upon release. Interventions may also serve to trigger or amplify group processes that foster cohesion, for example by providing opportunities for social interaction. Persistent contact with authority may reinforce negative perceptions of authority, which may also strengthen gang identities. In the UK, ‘keep apart’ procedures, in which gang-involved prisoners are identified and placed in different parts of the prison, are often used. These have been criticised for resembling postcode boundaries that sustain gang identities, and the ease of this process can depend on how gang members are, and individuals can be pulled back into deviant networks where such networks are maintained in the community. Furthermore, prison can provide opportunities to broaden gang networks. As the gang expands and members become more embedded, pushes and pulls become stronger.

Catch22 Dawes Unit welcomes the policy recognition of the need for a multi-pronged approach that combines enforcement and rehabilitation with effective intelligence and information-sharing. Particularly given that evidence suggests that rehabilitative elements may prove effective when attempting to intervene with gang-involved prisoners. This study explores the ‘teachable moments’, in which gang-involved prisoners may be questioning their involvement and ready to consider gang exit. It uses this exploration to identify the points at which prison establishments may intervene to encourage and strengthen these processes. This study also supports the development of approaches to manage and tackle gangs in prison. It explores the impact of gang involvement in custody and the motivations and mechanisms underlying how gang-involved prisoners form relationships and allegiances in custody.

The review of the literature and policy developments in this area clearly shows that attempts to understand and address gang involvement in custody are in relatively early stages. The existing evidence base suggests that gangs in custody are forming in complex, nuanced ways and the impacts of these groupings and their relationships to street collectives are not fully known. By developing the evidence base, this study provides much needed insight into the ways gangs may form in custody and the functions and impacts of these groups. This can be used to develop effective practice to intervene and manage these groups, as well as to encourage gang exit.
Section 3: Aims and research questions

The review of the literature has revealed the need for further research investigating the nature and impact of gang involvement in UK prisons. In particular, there is a need to focus specifically on the experiences of prisoners considered to be involved in gangs in the community. This will allow for an exploration of how gang involvement is affected by being in custody and how gang-involved prisoners form relationships and allegiances in prison.

UK-based research is particularly required given that the more extensive US literature is unlikely to have a lot of applicability to the situation in the UK. In summary, the existing evidence relating to gangs in UK prisons reveals:

• gangs are unlikely to be highly-structured entities directly replicating street-based collectives. They are instead emerging as more fluid, looser networks of prisoners
• gang involvement among prisoners is likely to provide prisoners with perceived instrumental, material and emotional benefits, as well as opportunities to express masculinity in the constrained prison environment
• the impact of these collectives is relatively unknown. It is unclear whether gang-involved prisoners are more likely to become involved in violence and misconduct in prison
• the evidence is also unclear regarding the most effective techniques and approaches for tackling gangs in prison. Approaches just emphasising suppression of gangs and related activity in prisons risk unintended consequences that may entrench the problem. It is suggested that incorporating rehabilitative elements into techniques to manage and address gang involvement would be more effective.

Research aims

The overarching aim of this research project is to build upon the existing evidence relating to gangs in custody to support the further development of policy and practice in this area. Specifically, the research aims:

• to understand the development, nature, form and function of allegiances and relationships in custody and how these are related to and affected by relationships and allegiances in the community
• to understand the extent to which gang-involved prisoners are involved in violence and misconduct in prison
• to understand how custodial establishments can reduce gang association among prisoners and respond to the negative consequences arising from gang association in custody.
Research questions

The research questions guiding the research are as follows:

1. How is gang association affected by being in custody?
   a. To what extent do pre-existing street gang allegiances endure in prison?
   b. What influences the strength and durability of street gang allegiances in custody?
   c. To what extent do street gang members develop new gang affiliations in prison, and how strong and durable are these?
   d. How does gang affiliation affect gang members’ experience of life inside the prison?
   e. When are the ‘teachable moments’ in the movement between community and custody?
   f. To what extent do the above factors vary between those who are sentenced and those on remand?
   g. What (if any) relationship is there between street gang affiliation and involvement in misconduct and violent incidents in custody?

2. What implications do the findings have for the management of prisons, including maintaining order in prison?

Section 4: Methodology

To achieve the research aims, the methodology comprised a qualitative and quantitative component.

Component one: qualitative interviews

Sample

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 young adult prisoners aged between 18 and 25 residing in HMP Thameside, a local category B prison in London. The age group was chosen to extend the focus to an older group, because previous research has tended to focus on a younger age range. The intention was to recruit a second, non-London prison site to the study; however, it was not possible to do so within the time-frames available. Thus, the results can be considered applicable to the nature of the prison establishment that was focused on.

All participants had been identified by the prison establishment as gang-involved in the community. The prison uses various means to identify gang involvement in the community. Every prisoner under the age of 30 is profiled, and demographics and nature of the offence are taken into account. Each prisoner under the age of 30 is profiled, and demographics and nature of the offence are taken into account. Each prisoner is interviewed to ascertain or corroborate community ties and the likelihood of affiliation to gangs. Prisoners are advised to be as honest as possible throughout this experience so they can be kept safe, as the prison will not place them on a wing where there may be conflict. Those identified as gang-involved will then be flagged on the system.

Both remand and sentenced prisoners were included in the study to ensure the full prisoner experience was captured, as well as to compare the experiences of remand and sentenced prisoners.

The sample comprised two separate groups of prisoners. The first group comprised prisoners who had just arrived in custody, who were interviewed in the first two to four weeks of arriving. The second group comprised prisoners who had been in custody for approximately three to six months.

Ideally, we would have interviewed the same prisoner on two occasions: once at the beginning of their sentence and again after they had been in prison for a number of months. High rates of attrition precluded adopting this longitudinal methodology, as prisoners were being bailed and transferred around the prison estate. This means it has not been possible to discuss how issues change as individual prisoners progress through their term. Instead, the methodology allowed a comparison of the issues and experiences of prisoners who had recently arrived and those who have been in prison for longer.

Interviews were also conducted with three staff members working in the prison. Interviews were conducted with a representative from the Wings, the Violence Reduction Team and the Gangs Team in the prison.

Semi-structured interviews

One-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant.

For the prisoner interviews, the interview schedule (see Appendix I) included questions exploring expectations and experiences in prison, pre-prison life in the community, relationships and allegiances in custody and the community, experience and involvement in conflicts in custody and expectations for the future. Prisoners’ development of relationships and allegiances in custody were explored diagrammatically to best understand how they develop relationships and what influences this process.
The staff interviews explored each staff member’s understanding and experience of gangs in the prison and the nature of relationships, allegiances and conflicts between prisoners (see Appendix II).

Eurogang survey and prisoner background data

Questions were extracted from the Eurogang survey\textsuperscript{10} to form a questionnaire administered to participants to confirm whether they self-identified as gang-involved, based on their friendship group in the community. The key questions used to assess whether an individual self-identifies as gang-involved, as per the Eurogang definition of a street gang as ‘any durable, street-oriented youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of its group identity’,\textsuperscript{9} are as follows:

- age of individuals (youth group predominantly aged under 25)
- durable (group existed for at least three months)
- street-oriented (spend time together outside in public places)
- criminal identity (illegal things accepted/carried out among the group).

In addition, background demographic data was obtained for each participant from prison records. See Appendix III for a full breakdown of the demographic and offending characteristics for each participant.

Procedure and analysis

All consenting participants were booked in for the interview with a member of the research team via the legal visits system. The interviews with prisoners took place during the legal visiting times. A convenient time for the interview was arranged with each staff member. The interview was held in a private room in the visitors’ centre. Prison guards were present outside the room. This ensured confidentiality for the participant, whilst ensuring risk was effectively managed.

Component two: quantitative analysis of prison incident data

Prison incident data

The second stage of the research involved quantitative analysis of prison incident data to explore whether prisoners considered involved in gangs are disproportionately likely to be involved in misconduct whilst in prison.

Data pertaining to the incidents of violence and misconduct carried out by prisoners in HMP Thameside between November 2013 and April 2014 was obtained from prison records. The data covered the number of individuals involved in these prison incidents and whether each individual was deemed involved in a gang in the community (as per the official identification and definition process adopted by the prison establishment used in the qualitative component of the research).

We obtained data relating to the gang status of prisoners only for those prisoners aged 30 and under. Therefore, the analysis and findings relate only to prisoners of this age. The age range of the sample of prisoners included in the interviews was therefore different to the age range used for this quantitative analysis. This was unavoidable as it was not possible to break the data down further. A total of 381 individuals aged 30-years-old and under were involved in 295 incidents across the six-month period. However, the same individual may have been involved in more than one incident.

We obtained figures for the proportion of the total prison population (aged 30-year-old and under) who are considered gang-involved. As of 8 May 2014, 84 of the 404 prisoners aged 30-years-old and under were considered to be gang-involved within the prison (21%). The intention was to obtain average figures relating to the proportion of the prison population considered gang-involved over the six-month period, but this was not possible. The analysis therefore involves comparing different time periods. However, prison staff confirmed that there tends to be minimal fluctuation in the proportion of the population considered to be gang-involved at any one time, so this is unlikely to impact on the reliability of the analysis.

The data was analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Chi-squared goodness-of-fit tests were conducted to explore whether gang members are disproportionately involved in prison misconduct, based on the proportion of the prison population considered to be gang-involved.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the internal Catch22 Ethics Board and the National Research Ethics Committee at NOMS.

In particular, consideration was given to the need to protect participants from potential harm from other prisoners. It was identified that prisoners may be at risk if other prisoners find out that they are taking part in a study exploring gangs in custody. Therefore, it was decided that potential participants would be informed that the study was on social networks and experiences in custody and how these relate to relationships and experiences in the community.

Potential participants who met the eligibility criteria were contacted by the Catch22 team in the prison. They were informed of the nature of the study and what would be required. If they consented, a suitable time was arranged for the interview. The interview was held in a private room in the visitors’ centre. Prison guards were present outside the room, but only the interviewer and participant were present in the room. This ensured confidentiality for the participant, whilst ensuring risk was effectively managed.

The interviewer reminded the participant of the nature of the research and what was required and confirmed consent. The participant was informed of their right not to answer any of the questions and their right to withdraw from the research, up to and including pre-publication stages of the research. At the end of the research, the participant was offered the opportunity to clarify or add to anything that had been said, or to ask any questions. The participant was thanked for their time and advised to direct any subsequent questions through a member of prison staff who could put them in touch with the research team.

It was not expected that involvement in the study would cause the participant harm or distress; however, participants were advised that if they did feel harm or distress as a result of their participation to speak to a member of staff in Safer Custody.

The interview process was recorded from when the interview was formally started, until the Eurogang survey had been administered and participants had confirmed they had no questions or clarifications. Participants were informed that the interview would be recorded and that their name was not used during the process. Interview recordings were stored in a secure area of the Catch22 computer system, accessible only to the research team.

With respect to the incident data, consent from individual prisoners was not obtained as the prison only provided top-level, aggregate data. The prison was not able to email the data, so a hardcopy was stored securely in a locked drawer and securely shredded and disposed of once no longer required for the purposes of the research. The SPSS data files were removed from the computer system once no longer required.
Section 5: The nature and strength of gang allegiances in custody

Similarly to previous UK-based work in this area, this research found that prisoners are generally forming relatively fluid, dynamic, area-based relationships and allegiances in custody. Notions of ‘area’ and territory are being used as guiding frames for establishing who can be trusted and for forming relationships within the context of the prison environment. However, for those with stronger gang associations and ties with offending peer groups in the community, these area-based allegiances are much stronger and can take place in opposition to, and at the exclusion of, those deemed to be ‘enemies’ from rival areas.

Expectations for custody

Expectations for custody vary among prisoners and are to some extent determined by whether the individual has previous experience of custody and what any experiences were like. For prisoners without previous experience of custody, there is a degree of uncertainty as to what to expect. Some form expectations based upon the accounts of friends or relatives who have been to prison, or media representations. These prisoners nevertheless emphasised that it is impossible to really have a clear understanding of what it is like in prison until one is in prison and has experienced it.

‘I had good information. A lot of my brethren are in jail or are just coming out of jail or just going in now, so I know a lot about all the different jails, it’s alright’
(Prisoner interview)

‘I didn’t have no idea what to expect.’
(Prisoner interview)
Among those with previous experience of prison, there is sometimes a great deal of worry and concern about what they will encounter. This can surround issues such as encountering ‘enemies’ and the violence associated with the prison environment. Other concerns relate to coping with the loss of freedom, losing employment and/or housing and stress on familial relationships and friendships. A particularly strong theme was anxiety about being away from family and friends and missing them.

‘...sometimes you’ve got your worries who is gonna be in the prison or whether you’re gonna have trouble ...' (Prisoner interview)

‘To be away from my family a bit and not work. Obviously when I get out I have to worry about getting somewhere to live. Obviously I’ve just got my flat is all. So I mean there’s a chance I can lose it. ’ (Prisoner interview)

‘Little stuff like my family, waking up and opening up my own door, that’s the sort of stuff that winds me up.’ (Prisoner interview)

Other prisoners with previous experience of prison downplayed any concerns, with some making remarks such as ‘prison is easy’ or ‘prison is a holiday camp’, which they based on their previous prison experiences. However, this may be more of a façade or coping mechanism, with some prisoners explaining that it is necessary to appear unconcerned as they have already been through the process before. Others are quieter and try to stay in the background, often because they do not know what to expect. Staff members consider these behaviours to be different mechanisms to manage entering the prison environment.

‘So you get the really quiet ones, “I don’t know what to expect, I don’t know what’s coming next.” Then you get the bravado ones, “I’ve done loads of bird, I’ve been here before blah-blah-blah-blah.” So in that respect it is quite different, their behaviours go from like the really quiet to the loud, boisterous, “I’m gonna be top dog, look at me.”’ (Staff interview)

Safety and other prisoners
Most prisoners feel that the presence of guards makes them feel safer in the prison environment.

‘If you get into a problem on the landing, it’s only gonna last a matter of five seconds. Because the guards are gonna be there straight away.’ (Prisoner interview)

Notwithstanding this, prisoners generally felt that prison is not a particularly safe place to be. They described having to always be on guard for something to happen. ‘Movements’ (times of day when prisoners are collectively moved around the prison estate to attend education, work, visits and so on) are considered a particularly risky time, due to the numbers of prisoners being moved around the establishment together. It is here that issues tend to arise, from both the prisoner and staff perspective. Often it appeared as though prisoners import this concern for safety and need for hyper-vigilance from streets.

‘...it’s mostly movements and association, because that’s the only time you get out of your cell... on movements, every other wing leaves the premises where they live. So when they’re leaving their residence and they’re coming off the wing, they’re all meeting at the same time. It’s not just enemies meeting, it’s friends and friends of enemies. Do you see what I’m saying? So it’s a whole big bang.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘I don’t feel safe anywhere, it’s just, it’s constantly looking over your shoulder.’ (Prisoner interview)
Area-based allegiances and territory

Evidence of pre-existing gang structures migrating into custody did not emerge in this study. From the perspective of both prisoners and prison staff members, this is effectively because there are unlikely to be sufficient numbers of prisoners from specific gangs in the community in the prison at any one time. Most prisoners did not describe knowing a large number of other prisoners from the outside, let alone having had community gang affiliations with many prisoners that they could effectively recreate in custody. As one prison staff member described:

‘… they might be out-numbered, they don’t have their social network around them so they have to create another one.’

(Staff interview)

Instead, notions of area and territory are used as guiding frameworks to decide who can be trusted in the prison environment and who prisoners feel willing and comfortable associating with. As discussed earlier in this section and in previous work, prisoners tended to describe prison as a challenging and insecure environment in which it is difficult to know who can be trusted. This is heightened by the nature of the establishment, with prisoners feeling that trust and relationships are even more difficult to establish due to the policy of moving prisoners around establishments, which makes it more difficult for prisoners to build bonds and closeness with other prisoners over the long term.

‘I wake up one morning and everyone on this list could be shipped out tomorrow. It’s not really that sort of place wherever I can just build up friends and go “yeah, yeah these are my bridges” and then wake up the next morning and they’re all gone.’

(Prisoner interview)

Where someone is from is therefore used as a short-cut to decide who can be trusted. Regardless of whether a prisoner is previously acquainted with another prisoner in the community, coming from the same area makes prisoners feel that they are likely to have something in common and be able to trust one another.

‘… you’ve got some background with them… and everything and yeah, so you’ll definitely be more open to talk and be friendly with them because you must have some sort of sense of each other.’

(Prisoner interview)

Area can also be used as a guide to form relationships and associations where individuals may not be from the same area but may be linked through area. Larger networks can form when a prisoner knows someone from the same area, who is acquainted with someone from another area. Often as the person known from the same area is automatically trusted, they can vouch for this person and a relationship can be formed. For example, a prisoner is from Lewisham and is acquainted with someone else from Lewisham. This acquaintance is friends with a prisoner from Peckham. Ordinarily, the prisoner from Lewisham would not trust or want to get to know the prisoner from Peckham; however, because someone from his own area who he can trust knows and vouches for him, the prisoner from Lewisham feels comfortable getting to know this person. This can also occur if a prisoner has known someone previously from another prisoner’s area, which means they can be trusted.

‘Certain people ask you what area you’re from, you tell them your area and they might have been in prison [with someone] that was from your area before. That’s it; you’re there already, because they were already with someone from your area in prison.’

(Prisoner interview)

These area-based allegiances are recognised by staff, who observe that:

‘… if they’re from the same area they sort of try and stick about together’

(Staff interview)

This process is dynamic: whilst prisoners will align with others who reside in the same area as them in the community, the boundaries of ‘area’ will be expanded if the circumstances dictate. For example, if there are limited numbers from prisoners’ direct communities, they will form associations with those from neighbouring communities. This is particularly the case where association is considered necessary to feel safe or (as will be discussed further in the next section) it is considered more important to maintain disputes and disagreements with specific areas. In this instance it is in prisoners’ perceived best interests to align in a more fluid way. In these cases, prisoners may align with other prisoners they would ordinarily eschew in the community (for example, from rival gangs in their area) as they will feel stronger in opposition to ‘enemies’ from other areas.

‘You’ll get some situations, for instance, where you’ll have someone that might have an issue with a particular group or whatnot and they’re the minority of that group, basically. So they might join another group, because they’ve got no choice, it’s either join or be the victim whereas if it was on the outside they would be able to, you know, have their own people on their side. So demographics change basically once they come inside, they could have an issue with say Peckham and Brixton could have an issue with each other, but the Peckham boy might be outnumbered, he might join the Brixton guys because he knows he ain’t got none of his Peckham boys with him.’

(Staff interview)

Importation of street-based mentalities and value systems

Whilst prisoners are effectively responding to their expectations and experiences within the custodial environment, they are also bringing in pre-existing street-based mentalities and value systems that heavily emphasise area-based loyalties and notions of territory. As will be seen in the ensuing parts of this section, prisoners varied in terms of how involved they are in territory-based gangs and disputes, yet most described strong attachments to their community and long-standing allegiances in the community with peers. These allegiances were often described as emerging from shared experiences and hardships. As one prisoner described:

‘… we just all grew up on the streets, we all had nothing.’ ‘Everyone lives in the same area. We’ve all been friends from little. Certain people know like certain of my friends, my mum and their mum are friends.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘You’ll get some situations, for instance, where you’ll have someone that might have an issue with a particular group or whatnot and they’re the minority of that group, basically. So they might join another group, because they’ve got no choice, it’s either join or be the victim whereas if it was on the outside they would be able to, you know, have their own people on their side. So demographics change basically once they come inside, they could
Thus, prisoners appear to be bringing in a mindset dictating that where someone is from determines the extent to which they can be trusted and the likelihood that prisoners will have commonalities and shared perspectives.

**Strength of ties to gangs in the community and allegiances in custody**

Whilst prisoners appear to be importing notions of area and territory as guiding frameworks for developing trust and relationships within the custodial environment, there are variations as to how this manifests based on the strength of prisoners’ gang affiliations on the outside.

The Eurogang survey was administered to all participants to assess whether they self-identify as being in a gang. This does not require the participant to literally use the term ‘gang’ to describe their predominant friendship group. Rather, the group must be a youth group (aged under 26), durable (group has been in existence for at least three months), street-based (spending time on the street or other public spaces) and criminality must be central to their identity (criminality accepted and/or carried out within the group). Of those interviewed, 11 individuals fully met the definition, one individual partly met the definition (was not classified as a youth group as had older members) and seven individuals did not meet the definition.

Of those who did not meet the definition, whilst they offended in groups and had knowledge of gangs in the area (and perhaps were on the very periphery), their involvement in group offending tended to be very fluid. They perceived themselves as ‘drifting’ in and out of offending and associating with the group, and their identity is not bound up in this lifestyle. Often, they have other friends who are not offending and some described previous gang involvement, which they had begun to break away from. They distinguished between friendships and associates and have begun to question whether they want to continue relationships with gang-involved peers in the future. By comparing the responses of those who were more strongly affiliated and tied to a gang with those who were less so, it is possible to understand how the strength of allegiances in the community affects the formation of relationships in custody.

Prisoners varied in terms of how much emphasis they place on the strength of their commitment to area-based loyalties and bonds. For some prisoners, this is fairly relaxed and could involve something as simple as a ‘nod’ to demonstrate recognition of their perceived commonalities and shared perspective. Here, these loyalties and bonds tended not to be placed in opposition to those from other areas. These prisoners were quite at ease with the idea of associating with prisoners from other areas and building relationships based on other values and ideas about what makes another person appealing (as will be discussed later in this section). However, for other prisoners, commitment to the idea of area-based allegiances was much stronger. These allegiances are defined by their opposition to those from other areas and these prisoners are far stricter about who they would associate with, although approach this tactically and strategically depending on the circumstances encountered in the prison at any one time. That some prisoners behave in this way is recognised by other prisoners, who observe how they react when they find out where they are from.

Those prisoners with a looser conceptualisation of ‘area’ and the importance of this to forming relationships tended to be those involved in more fluid group offending in the community, who do not self-identify as gang-involved as measured by the Eurogang survey. In contrast, those prisoners who described stronger area-based allegiances tended to be more strongly aligned with gangs in the community, tending to self-identify as gang-involved in the community in the survey. Whilst describing their offending as inherently ‘their own choice’ and an individual issue, which could be seen to represent a desire to express a masculine identity of independence and self-sufficiency; these prisoners described a more ingrained gang lifestyle in the community. These prisoners are often more concerned about ‘meeting up with enemies’ when arriving at prison.

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Prisoners with looser notions of area and affiliation tended, on the whole, to be older. They often described having reflected on their offending and having considered the impact of more than one prison sentence on their identity and what they want out of life. This may also be due to groups breaking up as people age. As one prisoner stated in respect of the circumstances of previous gang associates:

‘… obviously they’re millionaires now… or they’re dead… or they’re off the road and just living a normal life’

(Prisoner interview)

Prisoners were interested in leaving gang lifestyles behind due to the high costs involved, in terms of the impact of imprisonment. Those prisoners more ingrained in gang lifestyle likewise tended to be younger and more caught up in the need to express strength, dominance and peer solidarity, which appear more integral to their masculine identity and self-concept. These findings are in line with evidence from the Transition to Adulthood alliance regarding the levels of maturity of younger young adult offenders.20

However, prison staff members were more suspicious that older gang-involved prisoners may be less visible but may be operating ‘behind the scenes’. Therefore, there should be a focus on behaviour rather than labels to some extent, but also an understanding and awareness that all may not be as it seems.

‘… with my area it’s Peckham versus the whole of South London’

(Prisoner interview)

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‘… obviously sometimes we will get times when yeah we sit down in one house and we’ll have a talk. But most of the time it ends up with someone getting shot, that’s pretty much it.’

(Prisoner interview)

It is possible that these differential attitudes and experiences are being imported into the custodial environment. All prisoners naturally gravitate toward those they perceive to be from their own area or community. But it is among those who are more strongly committed to the symbolic value of territory and the need to defend it that these allegiances are likely to be held in opposition to others from specific areas.

‘… this jail’s full of Brixton boys and I’m from Peckham, it’s not really good’

(Prisoner interview)

‘I don’t know, like, just we [different areas of London] hate each other, that’s all. I don’t concentrate on nobody else.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘Someone will see me, they’ll take to me however, based on how I am, blah, blah, blah, but if they see me and know I’m from a certain area, they’ll take to me a totally different way.’

(Prisoner interview)

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‘… obviously sometimes we will get times when yeah we sit down in one house and we’ll have a talk. But most of the time it ends up with someone getting shot, that’s pretty much it.’

(Prisoner interview)
There’s a certain person that I trust. They walk, the way they talk. It’s just them in ‘It’s the way they are. Their attitude, the way the necessities of prison life are often treated with criticizing other prisoners who they perceive not to of masculinity present here with prisoners access to resources. There were again elements of a common ‘area’ . Even among prisoners with that relationships do not just develop out of a sense that relationships based on these factors and those arriving often intended to do so. It appears that whilst area is used as a way to decipher similarities and commonalities among prisoners, underlying this, for many prisoners, is a desire to understand who may become a friend or someone one to rely upon in the challenging prison environment. As prison staff recognized, ‘… everyone needs friends, don’t they? So it’s that sort of thing really’ (Staff interview). When considering gang affiliation in prison, the key issue to explore is whether this desire to develop attachments and bonds with others actually takes on more malign features, whereby those with stronger gang affiliations and commitment to territorial conflict and hostility bring this into the prison environment.

To further understand how relationships develop in custody, this section will end by discussing the functions of relationships in prison to prisoners and how these act as a functional adjustment to the prison regime.

Functions of relationships in custody and ‘being alone’

Developing relationships in custody helps create a sense of loyalty and connection among prisoners, giving prisoners a sense of meaning and belonging within the prison environment. Relationships are thus to some extent part of the functional adjustment to the prison environment, in which prisoners feel very isolated and alone.

‘I know there are a couple of other Muslim brothers, who I go to the gym with, that I’m close with in here and who would look out for each other’

(Prisoner interview)

Both prisoners that have recently arrived in custody and those who have been in for longer shared these views about establishing relationships with others. Those who have been in for longer had developed relationships based on these factors and those arriving often intended to do so. It appears that whilst area is used as a way to decipher similarities and commonalities among prisoners, underlying this, for many prisoners, is a desire to understand who may become a friend or someone one to rely upon in the challenging prison environment. As prison staff recognized, ‘… everyone needs friends, don’t they? So it’s that sort of thing really’ (Staff interview). When considering gang affiliation in prison, the key issue to explore is whether this desire to develop attachments and bonds with others actually takes on more malign features, whereby those with stronger gang affiliations and commitment to territorial conflict and hostility bring this into the prison environment.

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‘I can come out and I know I’ve got them group of friends to go around. I’m not just gonna come out [of prison] and be lost. Like on the landing, you can come out of your cell, you’re lost, you ain’t got no one to talk to, no one to chat to, no one to hang around with … But when you got your friends, you know that you come out, you look around, they’re there.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘You’ll be happy today, tomorrow you’ll be sad. You’ll be sad for a couple of days and then you will be happy. But only one thing here you’ve got some good friends in here that always look out for me though’

(Prisoner interview)

A key component of trust and the foundation of relationships, from the perspective of prisoners, is that one can rely on other people to ‘help you out’ or ‘have your back’. Thus, these relationships and bonds can make prisoners feel safer and protected in the prison environment, which, as discussed earlier, can be experienced as dangerous and intimidating. These relationships also help ease the trials and tribulations of prison life. Prisoners with a bond describe helping one another out, for example, lending each other money, food, cigarettes and other items when in need. For some prisoners, helping each other out with difficulties, for example writing letters if an individual struggles with literacy, is another way in which closeness is expressed. These sentiments are expressed particularly strongly among those with less strong gang affiliations, although even those with strong affiliations still recognise the value of having someone look out for them.
Section 05: The nature and strength of gang allegiances in custody

There was not a great deal of difference observed between those with strong and less strong gang affiliations in the community. Some of those with strong affiliations express hostility toward maintaining relationships, yet some with less strong affiliations sometimes also wanted to avoid maintaining relationships. However, this was often because they were keen to avoid offending and returning to custody. It was not apparent that gang affiliations were strengthened or developed in custody. Whilst those with strong affiliations express this whilst they were in custody, it did not appear as though they develop new gang associations that they intend to continue.

The findings throughout this section are also applicable to both remand and sentenced prisoners. Throughout the study it emerged that the distinction between remand and sentenced prisoners is not completely clear. Remand prisoners were often expecting to be sentenced and some sentenced prisoners were hoping to be released from prison early. Remand prisoners also often had previous experiences of custody. Thus, there was not a great deal of difference in terms of how remand and sentenced prisoners navigate the prison environment and build relationships with other prisoners.

Conclusions

The findings have revealed that, as expected based on previous research, gang-involved prisoners are not importing and re-creating street gang structures in prison. This is partly because there tends to be a lack of prisoners from specific gangs in the community to enable this. However, affiliations and allegiances are enduring in prison as gang-involved prisoners are using fluid and dynamic notions of territory to guide their relationships and allegiances in custody. The strength of these processes appeared to be related to the strength of prisoners’ gang affiliations in the community. Where these are stronger, prisoners tended to be developing more rigid territorial allegiances, characterised by hostility and opposition to those perceived to be ‘enemies’ from ‘rival areas’. Whilst these attitudes and value systems are imported into the prison environment by prisoners, they guide the development of new associations. However, the extent to which these new associations are likely to endure once prisoners are released from custody appeared to vary among prisoners.

It is therefore important to explore the differences between prisoners when trying to understand the influence that gang-involvement in the community has on affiliations in custody. A key focus should be on understanding why prisoners form relationships and how they are responding to the prison environment. Relationships appeared as part of the functional adjustment to the prison environment and play a role in managing and easing the experience of the prison regime. Rather than automatically problematising and pathologising the nature of gang-involved prisoners’ relationships, it should be understood that prisoners will naturally gravitate toward those they feel are similar to them. Instead, there should be a focus on the impacts of relationships: where these are problematic it becomes important to explore the value systems and experiences of prisoners that underlie their behaviour.

A key difference between custody and the community is this idea of being alone in the prison environment. Whilst bonds with other prisoners can be experienced positively, there is a perception that one never truly knows another person in that environment and fundamentally has to learn to navigate and cope with the prison experience alone. Prisoners appeared to be attempting to fulfil their concept of masculinity, whereby they feel compelled to emphasise that they are independent and can manage and survive prison alone, whilst on the other hand, acknowledged the benefits of forming relationships in custody. For this reason, relationships can be functionally beneficial whilst in custody, yet will not always be maintained or have any deeper resonance for some prisoners.
Section 6: Impacts of gangs in prison: conflict

As with previous UK-based research on gangs in custody, there was no evidence in this study that those with gang associations were controlling aspects of the prison experience; for example, they did not appear to be exercising control over contraband markets. Staff members expressed some concern that gang-involved prisoners may be implicated in drugs markets, but possibly more indirectly and at arms length. For example, they may not be outwardly dealing drugs on the wing, as that could be more easily observed by staff, and may instead be facilitating or controlling markets. Overall, they described feeling that some prisoners may be attempting to be ‘kingpins’ on the prison wings; yet, they tended to feel that gangs are not likely to be exercising a substantial amount of control.

Instead, the impacts of gangs in custody tend to be relational. Strong affiliations and commitment to area-based loyalties, which manifest in an oppositional and hostile way toward those perceived as ‘rivals’, can create conflict and aggression between prisoners. These conflicts can develop within prison and can relate to disputes brought in from the community.

Prisoners and staff members agree that the primary impact of gangs in custody is in creating conflict. The impacts can be wide-reaching, involving prisoners who may not have been party to the original dispute, and tit-for-tat retaliation as prisoners feel compelled to stand their ground and show loyalty to others. However, conflict can also occur within the custodial environment for other reasons. There are differences in the way in which conflict plays out in the prison compared to the community, with implications for the management of conflict in prisons.

Area-based conflicts

Whilst fluid notions of territory and area-based loyalties can engender a sense of belonging, trust and closeness with other prisoners, it can also isolate prisoners and cause conflict. Commitment to the importance of where prisoners come from can affect the experience of prison and levels of safety. A cycle appears whereby prisoners sense danger and experience the atmosphere as threatening, thus aligning with those they feel they can trust. Yet aligning with those from the same area and expressing hostility toward those considered to be from rival areas can create a dangerous and threatening environment, to which prisoners must respond by seeking out those they can trust, based upon area.

‘How most gangs work… people from this area have a problem with people from that area, you know it’s like that.’

(Prisoner interview)

For prison staff, gang affiliation effectively means that the prisoner is focused on maintaining their reputation and the reputation of where they are from. They want to project this notion of masculinity that they are strong and untouchable, which manifests as conflict between those from different areas competing for this reputation and status. This can be contrasted against those who are not involved in gangs and do not need to get involved in these issues.
Section 6: Impacts of gangs in prison: conflict

I think if you’re in a gang you’ve got a lot of reputation, or you look to gain reputation because of the area you’re from. So a lot of it is about letting everyone know what area you’re from, “My area’s the best, the strongest, no-one can touch us. We’re the invincibles, basically.” Whereas someone that’s not in a gang doesn’t have that expectation, they don’t have to worry about that.” (Staff interview)

Area-based conflict occurs within the prison walls, yet it is often brought in from the community. Prisoners may have known each other before custody and have pre-existing issues, for example, relating to ‘business disputes’ or being from ‘rival gangs’. However, prisoners are tactical and strategic in terms of the pre-existing conflicts that they react to in custody. For example, prisoners from the same area may have had disputes in the community, but bury these when they come to custody as it is considered in their best interests to align with one another and strengthen their area-based identity. Conflict between prisoners originating in the community may not necessarily have involved the individuals directly. For example, there may be disputes between respective family members, which causes conflict between prisoners. These pre-existing disputes can have a long history, predating those actually involved in the conflict in custody.

‘Brixton and Peckham’s been ‘beefing’ for a good 30, 40 years and we don’t even know why we’ve got trouble with each other anymore, it’s gone that deep. Now I don’t even know why we’re fighting, it’s just people just come round and shoot someone for no reason, go back to their ends, try and get some ratings, get fuck all.’ (Prisoner interview)

Furthermore, current issues occurring in the community can migrate into custody. Both prisoners and prison staff were clear that information travels easily between prison and the community. Therefore, if groups in the community enter into conflict, for example, this will be played out among those from the relevant areas in custody. For example, two staff members independently described an occasion in which a person involved in gangs was stabbed in a shopping centre. At the time, the victim’s cousin and someone involved in the same gang as the person who stabbed the individual were in the prison. They both found out about what had happened and there was subsequent violent conflict between them. Monitoring events in the community is therefore included in efforts to manage conflict in custody among prison staff.

‘Whatever goes on outside it comes in the prison’
(Prisoner interview)

‘A lot of them have all got phones in their cells so they contact friends or family. A lot of them come to visit them so yeah; they’ve got that access to contact. They know what’s going on, on the outside; definitely they know’
(Staff interview)

‘It could be tit-for-tat, so it could be something that happened five years ago, a young boy got killed and that gang’s gone over with that person’s family and it’s just gone back and forth, back and forth. It just continues and it happens like that.’
(Staff interview)

Willingness to get involved in conflict

Most prisoners were clear that the most effective way to stay safe in prison and avoid getting into conflict is to ‘keep yourself to yourself’ and ‘keep your head down’. For some, it is important to not come across like a victim and someone who can be taken advantage of. These sentiments were expressed both by prisoners who had recently arrived and those who had been in for longer, as well as those with and without previous experience of prison.

‘If you move scared, if you ask too many questions, if you’re shaky and too quiet, I don’t know, there’s so much different ways. If you’re so quiet, people are just going to take you for a victim.’ (Prisoner interview)

Prisoners varied in terms of how regularly they perceive conflict as occurring and how easy they believe it is to avoid. For some prisoners, conflict is perceived as a minor part of the routine of prison life and something they can stay out of. However, one prisoner felt it is difficult to avoid conflict regardless of whether one wants to be involved.

‘You can’t avoid people really you just gotta take the rough with the smooth really. If you caused an issue, deal with it, move on from it. If you can’t move on from it then boy, let’s get your arse shipped out, so that’s why’
(Prisoner interview)

Other prisoners were more upfront about their commitment to conflict and the need to establish oneself as powerful within the prison environment. As discussed in previous research, for these prisoners, expressing dominance and strength, and avoiding being a ‘victim’ is central to establishing and maintaining their masculine identities.77 78 79

‘If I get into a fight, I get into a fight. Deal with it, because you’re in prison, what do you expect? Do you know what I mean? ‘F’ it, basically. There’s nothing else you can do. You’re trapped, there’s nowhere to go, you can’t run anywhere. You’re going to see them eventually. That’s how I see it, personally’
(Prisoner interview)

Prisoners who felt that conflict is easier to avoid tended to be those who are less strongly affiliated with gangs in the community. They were less interested in entering into conflict based on where other prisoners are from and what may have gone on or is going on in the community. However, they were aware that this does occur in prison and others will judge them on where they are from. These prisoners described keeping an open mind about where people are from, but observing how prisoners visually react and adjust their body language when they find out someone is from a given area. This may not automatically lead to conflict but prisoners will maintain wariness of one another.

‘… because of where I’m from other people from other areas might take different views and that of me. Do you know what I’m saying? Literally based on my area’
(Prisoner interview)

‘No. If I have a conflict with you I won’t avoid you’
(Prisoner interview)

‘I just come out feeling like a lion, so if anyone does put any trouble my way I’m going to deal with it there and then rather than moan about it and sit in my cell crying.’
(Prisoner interview)

‘… you have to do certain things to survive in prison, or you’re just going to get bullied on a daily basis and I’m not letting that happen to me.’
(Prisoner interview)

‘I think if you’re in a gang you’ve got a lot of reputation, or you look to gain reputation because of the area you’re from, “My area’s the best, the strongest, no-one can touch us. We’re the invincibles, basically.” Whereas someone that’s not in a gang doesn’t have that expectation, they don’t have to worry about that.” (Staff interview)
Regardless of their willingness to engage in conflict, prisoners spoke of availing themselves of the opportunity to avoid being placed in wings with people with whom they are likely to have conflict. Upon entry into custody, gang-involved prisoners are given the opportunity to inform prison staff as to who they wish to keep separate from (this may be as general as other prisoners from a specific area or postcode). At this stage, prisoners are not aware of whether they are going to be advantaged or disadvantaged in terms of who else they will find on the wing. There is a risk that they will be on a wing with ‘rivals’ or ‘enemies’ and no-one from their area. Therefore, even those prisoners committed to gang affiliation and area-based loyalties are likely to inform staff and seek to be kept separate.

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‘... coming from another area even though they’re not involved... in a gang thing in that area, like people still think, yeah, you’re from that area, so what, you must be involved somehow.’ (Prisoner interview)

Those seeking to avoid conflict spoke of wanting to keep out of it as they are more focused on getting through their sentence easily and being released. For example, one prisoner explained, ‘I ain’t got time for that, I come in here to do my sentence and get the hell out, I want to be with my lad, if you know what I mean’. However, prisoners generally recognised that they have a breaking point where they will feel compelled to react.

‘Me now, you have to really push me to the edge to a point that I say, “No, fuck it, enough is enough”.’ (Prisoner interview)

Prison staff members recognised that prisoners vary in terms of their willingness to get involved in conflict. They spoke of the character of individual prisoners in determining the likelihood that they will get pulled into conflict.

‘It’s very difficult because I think it’s down to individual and character. Certain individuals you can’t peer pressure them into nothing; they’ll do it because they want to do it. So they probably get more respect or people are less likely to go to them or challenge them. Whereas if you’re an individual that isn’t very strong minded in that sense and very easily led then that’s how you get caught up in a lot of problems basically.’ (Staff interview)

These findings show that even gang-involved prisoners keen to avoid conflict are nevertheless still at risk of engaging in conflict and violence, particularly if provoked. Therefore, gang association can put these individuals at risk of violence and conflict.

‘If I told them yeah, I’m not from this gang and then they go and house me in a bit where I’m with my rival gang, You have a problem.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘They [non-London prisoners] tend to get paid no mind, really’ (Prisoner interview)

‘Everyone’s just a new face to me. So nothing really could happen to me. Like I ain’t made no enemies, I ain’t made no friends so like I’m just myself in my cell so these people just look at me and say, “I’ve never seen this guy before.” I ain’t seen them before anyway, so yeah!’ (non-London prisoner describing his experiences with other prisoners)

‘I suppose they [non-London prisoners] might just try and stick their oar in a little bit but most of the time they don’t bother. We do get people from outside London, but it’s not big numbers. So mostly it is all round here and they all know each other around here...’ (Staff interview)

The exception to this is when a non-London prisoner is associated with someone from a certain area of London. In this case, they may enter into conflict and may be prepared for this and/or seek it out.

‘Having each other’s backs’ and vicarious conflict

Conflicts between prisoners can be ‘vicarious’ in that they do not necessarily involve just those with the original dispute. As mentioned in the previous section, a basis of loyalty and trust among prisoners is whether they feel one another would ‘have their backs’. Getting involved in each other’s conflicts is therefore a way of demonstrating this loyalty. This has been observed by staff, with one participant describing prisoners getting involved with and/or continuing each others’ disputes out of what appears to be a sense of loyalty or duty.

‘A friend wouldn’t stand there and watch something happen to you. So I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t do that...’ (Prisoner interview)

‘Yeah, sometimes they just take it on themselves to do something. It’s just like, “Why have you got involved?” I think sometimes they think they have to, to show their loyalty... it might just be that he thinks that he has to.’ (Staff interview)

‘Like there’s one guy in particular I know, he’s from I think Birmingham or something, but when he does come to London he stays with his cousin [in] a particular part of, like, West London… North West London and them guys got problems with another group here from East London. I don’t know if it was out of like, just the particular names that he mentioned, or who his cousins was or something, but yeah, he was having a heated argument with someone else from the other side. Just based on because he was saying yeah, so and so is my cousin. I go down there...I don’t think the two before that knew each other or would even care about each other if they didn’t have that come up.’ (Prisoner interview)

Prisoners described getting involved with each other’s conflicts to support or defend others, or to keep conflict going in instances where the involved individuals cannot, for example, because they are incapacitated through segregation. Here, area-based loyalties emerge. Prisoners described that if one has a problem with one person from an area, one will have a problem with everyone from that area. As such, conflict arising from area-based allegiances and disputes can be on-going and involve tit-for-tat retaliation between increasing numbers of prisoners.
Non-gang involved prisoners can also find themselves involved in conflict between rival gang members because they have got themselves in the middle of a dispute. If a gang-involved prisoner considers another prisoner to have created or exacerbated conflict between them and a rival, there is a risk of retaliation against that individual.

**Non-gang-related conflict**

Whilst conflict can arise due to area-based issues and disputes, it does not exclusively occur in these ways. Non-gang related conflict occurs and is described as part of the tussle for respect and status in the day-to-day life of the prison. Conflict can arise, for example, because someone has pushed in the queue or because someone has not given back something that was lent to them. Bullying can also be an issue, whereby individuals are targeted as they are considered to be ‘weak’.

‘It could be, ’You said something wrong to me on the wing, you looked at me wrongly, I’m having a bad day so have that.’ I’ve just been in an incident meeting and it’s stuff over like cell mates, “I wanna watch this and you wanna watch that.” You can’t get a TV for everybody. ‘Yours is louder than mine’.

(Staff interview)

‘... they will do it, people do anything for a roll-up nowadays. A roll-up here is the most valuable thing, asset you can ever have.’

(Prisoner interview)

Staff members also recognised that prisoners can use other prisoners to carry out their disputes for them. This can make it difficult for staff to establish who is responsible and can create a false impression that a prisoner is not involved.

‘... you can’t really put it on that person because he’s not the aggressor, he might be getting somebody else to do it so he looks like he’s Mr Good Guy. So there’s situations like that that happen also.’

(Staff interviews)

‘I am not one of those people you give a small dinner, am I. I’m not one of those guys. Give me more food I’m not an idiot… I should have enough respect to be treated like someone important…. So I told him. I put him in his place.’

(Prisoner interview)

Conflict can also arise because prisoners do not like how other prisoners ‘come across’. As described in the previous section, prisoners place emphasis on how others present themselves and their ability to function in the prison environment, as part of their conceptualisations of acceptable masculinity. Some described low level conflict with other prisoners because they do not behave in the prescribed way. For example, some prisoners can become aggressive when they tire of others lacking financial resources repeatedly asking to borrow or use things. Furthermore, those who lack means may steal from others and this can lead to fights.

‘People who don’t get any money sent in, they’re the people who normally fight and that (because they try to steal things from other prisoners’ cells).’

(Prisoner interview)

As discussed in the previous section, those prisoners who were establishing firm territorial allegiances with other prisoners, which are formed in opposition to perceived ‘rivals’ and ‘enemies’, were to some extent bringing in this mentality from the streets (whilst responding to the institutional environment). The same applies to those who seek or are willing to become involved in conflict, including over non-gang related issues. One prisoner, whilst self-identifying as a gang member and with strong gang affiliations in the community, was more concerned about establishing and maintaining respect and status. He reported being very committed to violence and willing to engage in violence in response to perceived slights. Whilst some prisoners are drawn to gangs as a means to establish and maintain respect and status, suggesting the same underlying issues, this prisoner appeared to be expressing this more on an individual level rather than through a group.

This prisoner referenced how he feels about engaging in violence within the community, which appears to relate more to giving and receiving of respect than area-based conflict. He discussed what would motivate him to get involved in conflict in the community:

‘People who’ve disrespect me, personally, personal trouble. People that, for instance, somebody had broken my Nan’s window, yeah, because I was making more money than him for selling class A and he tried to rob me one time.’

(Prisoner interview)

The attitude he was importing into prison was one of valuing extreme violence in response to perceived disrespect and this influences the way in which he manages the prison environment and how he treats prisoners and staff. This further demonstrates that the differential mindsets of individual prisoners need to be explored to understand their behaviour and how and why they form allegiances in custody.
Differences between custody and the community

As with forming and maintaining relationships in custody, prisoners described differences in terms of how conflict manifests itself in prison compared to the community. Prisoners described conflict becoming magnified in custody. Issues that may not have resulted in a serious dispute or conflict in the community can get exaggerated in custody and can lead to violence and subsequent retaliation among increasing numbers of prisoners. This applies to both conflict based on area and territory, as well as non-gang-related conflict.

‘Someone could push you, someone could say something to you or someone could say alright, I don’t like this person. Or they can say fuck your friend. And you’re going to be… You can’t just let it go. Because in prison… little things out there are big things.’

(Prisoner interview)

Yet, overall, prisoners described there being more factors that reduce the likelihood of regular, serious conflict in prison compared to the community. As discussed in the previous section, the presence of prison guards means that conflict can only escalate to a certain point before being broken up. That there are fewer weapons (or at least it is more difficult to access weapons) in prison makes prisoners feel as though conflict will be less serious than in the community. Furthermore, as prisoners generally spend a great deal of time locked behind their door, opportunities for conflict are more limited than in the community. This is why movements, as discussed in the previous section, are considered particularly risky times.

‘… because on the streets you can’t meet no-one, you can’t see no-one and if you do it’s a straight knife fight, or a gun battle, or whatever, but in here everyone’s different, they haven’t got a gun, they can’t act big and bossy. They have to act normal or they get punched in the face. Outside it’s a lot more harder. When you’re outside and you see someone you don’t like, it’s game over, someone’s getting hurt.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘Outside is worse because outside you can get stabbed.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘Say on the walkway and when you come out the wings, that’s the only opportunity you got really so you best do it then. So like if you were on road you have opportunity to either do it when he’s at the café or do it when he’s walking out the café, do it when he’s round the corner from the café. You get me? Do it when he’s at his house, do anything. Like you got more than one opportunity. In here you just got one opportunity to do it.’

(Prisoner interview)

One prisoner explained that by virtue of being locked up and the resulting restrictions on freedom of movement, in custody there are more opportunities to ‘get to know someone’ rather than engage in conflict. He contrasted this with the situation in the community, whereby disputes between people instantly lead to conflict and violence. In custody, it is not always possible to do this and so for some prisoners may represent an opportunity to break down barriers and misconceptions.

‘… because if I fight, I get extra time, and I don’t want that.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘…in here everyone’s shitting their pants, no-one don’t want to lose their telly.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘The way it is outside [in the community] if you have issues with people, like straight away it’s gonna be a fight. It’s all gonna kick off as soon as you go round the corner and there they are. But in here, you can’t always fight, so in a way you’ve got more time to learn what people are really like and maybe think differently. That would never happen outside.’

(Prisoner interview)

In addition, prisoners described feeling that the immediate ramifications of conflict are greater in custody than in the community. Fights and other forms of conflict are likely to be detected and punished in custody, whereas conflicts in the community can often go formally undetected and unpunished. Prisoners were clear about wanting to avoid the associated consequences of involvement in conflict, for example, being placed in segregation, ‘extra time’ added to their sentence and loss of privileges.

‘… some people… they just let their anger get to them first. Like me, I’d rather take the opportunity where I won’t get caught.’

(Prisoner interview)

What does the incident data show about gang-involved prisoners and their involvement in violence and misconduct in custody?

As part of the research, prison incident data at HMP Thameside was analysed to explore whether prisoners deemed to be gang-involved upon arrival are disproportionately likely to be involved in incidents based on their proportion in the prison population. Incidents covering the period between November 2013 and April 2014 (inclusive) were analysed. Data pertaining to the gang status of prisoners was only available for prisoners aged 30-years-old and under, so the results are only applicable to this group. Whilst this includes prisoners slightly older than the prisoners interviewed for the study, the analysis nevertheless demonstrates the involvement of gang-involved prisoners in incidents and can be used to illuminate the qualitative findings.

A total of 295 incidents involved 381 prisoners (the same prisoner could, however, have been involved in more than one incident). As can be seen in Table 1 below, the majority of incidents relate to self-harm (28%), followed by assaults (15%) and fights (13%). Of the 381 prisoners, 20% (75) were gang-involved. As of 8 May 2014, 21% of the 30 and under prison population was gang-involved. Therefore, involvement of gang-involved prisoners in incidents as a whole is as expected based on their proportion in the prison population. However, when breaking down the incidents by type, disproportionality emerges.
Section 6: Impacts of gangs in prison: conflict

As can be seen in Table 1, gang-involved prisoners are significantly disproportionately likely to be involved in assaults and weapon-related incidents compared to their proportion in the general prison population. They are significantly less likely to be involved in self-harm and ‘other’ incidents. The results relating to self-harm suggest it may be possible that gang-involved prisoners are more likely to externalise distress and frustration, rather than turn in on themselves and self-harm.

The figures suggest that gang-involved prisoners are disproportionately likely to be involved in staff assault and fights. However, these were not statistically significant. It is likely that these did not reach significance because of too small numbers of these incidents.

When taking all violence-related incidents together (assaults, staff assaults, fights and weapons), 38% of prisoners involved (60 out of 159 individuals) were gang-involved, which is a statistically significant finding (p<.001). These results suggest that gang-involved prisoners are disproportionately responsible for violence-related incidents in custody.

When considering these findings it is important to bear several points in mind. The data is based on prisoners labelled by the prison as gang-involved upon entry to the prison. There is a possibility that incidents involving gang-involved prisoners may be more likely to be detected, for example, due to greater surveillance of gang-involved prisoners. Furthermore, there are prisoners who are suspected of being gang-involved or linked to gangs but not recorded as such and so are not included here. As discussed in this section, conflicts between gang members can involve non-gang prisoners, so this data may not have fully captured the extent to which gang-involved prisoners can be responsible (directly or indirectly) for violence in custody. The data also does not show where incidents are related to one another, for example, retaliation incidents.

Importantly, the data does not show whether the incident itself is related to gang issues or whether prisoners in gangs are just more likely to be involved in incidents (for example, due to their general disposition). Thus, it is not clear from the findings what the focus should be when trying to reduce involvement in incidents. Does the gang issue need to be tackled or the underlying attitudes and personality traits? In addition, the analysis does not show the proportion of prisoners considered gang-involved who go on to become involved in an incident whilst in prison. It is possible that a small core of gang-involved prisoners is disproportionately responsible for incidents and some never go on to become involved in an incident.

Finally, when interpreting the findings it is important to bear in mind that whether a prisoner is considered gang-involved is based on the definitions and identification processes adopted within this institution. Different institutions may have different processes, which will need to be considered when assessing the applicability of these findings. This also relates to the classification of incidents, which may differ across prison establishments. In particular, the distinction between fights and assaults was often unclear. Assaults are deemed to involve a perpetrator(s) and victim(s), whereas fights are considered more equal incidents between those involved. However, establishing this is difficult and prison staff members were aware that often in fights one or more prisoners may have provoked the incident.

### Conclusions

The findings reveal that the main impact of gang-involvement among prisoners is in creating conflict in prison. Area-based issues stemming from gang loyalties based on territory can result in conflict in custody between those who perceive themselves as rivals. The impacts of this can be far-reaching as those from the same area become embroiled in the dispute and tit-for-tat retaliation can continue between increasing numbers of people. Even among prisoners with weaker connections to gangs who tended to wish to avoid getting involved in conflict, there is an increased risk of conflict particularly if prisoners are provoked. Conflict between prisoners can also arise for other reasons and appear inherent in the day-to-day tussle for respect and status in the prison environment. However, the incident data revealed that gang-involved prisoners are disproportionately involved in violent incidents in custody. Among those who are engaging in conflict, it is important to understand what underlies conflict and the ways in which different prisoners are involved.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incident type</th>
<th>Gang-involved</th>
<th>Not gang-involved</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assault 1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>52%**</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contraband 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damage 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fight</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other 4</td>
<td>2</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self harm</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>3%***</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff assault 8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weapon</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>38%*</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>75</td>
<td>306</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at <.05 level  **significant at <.01 level  ***significant at <.001 level

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1 Assaulas include assaults, serious assaults, alleged assaults, suspected assaults and sexual assault
2 Contraband includes possession of fermenting liquid, mobile phones, SIM cards, USB cards etc.
3 Damage includes deliberate damage and fines
4 Other includes incident at height, bomb hoax, dirty protest and attempted escape
5 Staff assault includes assaults and serious assaults
Section 7: Managing gangs and encouraging gang exit

Relationships can come under strain during periods of imprisonment. Whilst contact with the outside world can help ease the prison experience, it can also be associated with feelings of intense sadness as it reminds prisoners of what they are missing. Relationships with fellow gang members can be particularly difficult to maintain, this relates to some with perception that the ‘road friends’ are not ‘true friends’ that one can rely upon.

Regardless of strength of gang allegiances, most of the prisoners interviewed were emphatic that they did not want to come back to custody. Imprisonment is experienced as a ‘waste of time’. Prisoners are acutely aware of time passing them by while they are in prison and others are moving on with their lives. Prisoners discussed the features that may reduce the likelihood of them reoffending and returning to prison, yet there were variations in the commitment to this and clarity of plans for release. These findings have implications for encouraging gang exit, both whilst an individual is in prison and in preparation for release.

Contact with the outside world

Contact with the outside world, in particular family relatives, is valued by prisoners. This contact can ease the experience of prison life and provide a source of practical and emotional support.

‘Even if I’m in the wrong or I’m not in the wrong or whatever, they’ll always be there for me. Whenever I speak to my baby’s mother for my little one and everything it make me more happy and make me more relaxed and everything. But yes at times when you’ll be stressed out and everything and other time when you’re happy’ (Prisoner interview).

‘So make sure you’ve got that number and the address and everything and make sure you’ve got a really good person or a good parent. Someone that you know would that would definitely send you money and come and visit you and everything.’ (Prisoner interview)

Prisoners discussed means of keeping in contact. Ordinarily, prisoners contact relatives and friends using phones available on the prison wings. In the research site, prisoners had access to phones in their cells. Having phones in the cells is considered particularly helpful in maintaining contact, although the expense of this can be difficult to balance against other outgoings whilst in prison as prisoners are required to purchase credit to use the phones. Letters are cheaper in this regard, but are seen as inferior to phone calls due to the length of time it takes to send and receive letters.

‘Obviously you need phone credit to phone people so what are you gonna do, what are you gonna choose? So if you ain’t got no money coming in, you’re gonna have to work like a dog in prison to be able to get enough money to do your canteen and make your little phone calls and that. You know what I’m trying to say?’ (Prisoner interview)
Notwithstanding the value placed on maintaining contact with the outside world, visits and contact can also intensify negative emotions for prisoners. Many prisoners spoke of how much they missed their family and friends. As discussed in Section 4, this was a key concern for prisoners upon entering custody. Speaking to and seeing family members can remind prisoners of what they are missing and the damage done to relationships as a result of their being in prison.

‘And whenever I speak to my baby’s mother, yeah, she’s saying that my son’s trying to crawl and everything like that and I’m missing out a lot.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘Some people have a visit then your visitor is going outside and you’re going back to the cell; that can hurt you even more.’

(Prisoner interview)

For these prisoners, visits and contacts can become difficult and unpleasant. As a result, some prisoners attempt to cut down on the amount of contact they have with the outside world. This is seen as preferable to dealing with the negative emotional impacts.

‘Yes, my dad comes to visit me once a week, once every two weeks. I don’t really like visits that much. Once I’m in, I’m in. I don’t really like people like my father and my mother coming to visit me, it just hurts. When they have to go and that, I don’t really like it. It’s not a good feeling.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘As my sentence goes on, I plan to space out my visits… I feel like [if] I’m seeing everyone often, like every other day, maybe I’m going to miss being outside too much, so I’m planning myself like to kind of start spacing that out a bit… I think kind of to protect myself.’

While finding contact with the outside world painful and desiring to reduce the frequency of this contact to avoid negative feelings were common experiences, not all prisoners were of this view. One prisoner spoke of wanting to maintain contact so that he was not forgotten about among family and friends. For this prisoner, maintaining contact makes him feel as though he will have something to go back to upon release and counters some of the feelings that time is passing him by and others are moving on.

‘I like to keep my relationships going even when I’m in prison so I know that when I get out I don’t want to come out to nothing.’

(Prisoner interview)

Differently, one prisoner described feeling as though he had little choice in not being able to maintain contact with family. He described challenging and difficult family relationships and that he received very few visits, letters or phone calls whilst in prison. This made him feel completely alone in the prison environment and he could not understand why others who had the opportunity for more contact did not value this more. These findings show that the experience of keeping in touch with the outside world is complex and intimately associated with how prisoners experience prison.

Maintaining relationships with gang associates in the community

It was common for prisoners’ fellow gang associates in the community to have also been in prison either currently or in the past. Relationships between gang members can weaken when they go to prison. Prisoners described fellow gang members effectively ‘disappearing’ now they are in custody and a complete absence of any contact or support from other gang members. This seems mutual, with prisoners finding that contact with other gang members has ceased when these individuals have gone to prison.

‘But that’s why I only keep in contact with them really [gang members who are not in prison]. Like, them two in particular, “cause the rest of my brethren are all in jail”’

(Prisoner interview)

Prisoners described that what was previously a large group of friends and associates can end up being reduced to only one or two people with whom they keep in touch. However, prisoners recognised that even if a lot people do not make contact whilst one is in prison, once one is released these people then assume they will be friends again. This is associated with prisoners questioning who their ‘true friends’ are and realising that fellow gang members, with whom they have felt very close and connected, do not actually care about them and cannot be relied upon. This is particularly the case among older prisoners who may have more experience of this.

‘Because when you come to prison, a lot of people forget about you. Like when you’re outside, everyone’s your friend, you got like 15 friends, 10 friends, but when you come to jail, probably only two will keep in contact with you.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘… they don’t give a shit about you and the only thing they want to do is when you’re on the road and everything they will use you to make money and everything like that. Then when you’re locked up and everything they don’t give a shit, they don’t send you a letter.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘… when man go to jail there’s nothing, no letters, there’s no nothing and there’s no keeping in touch… But when you’re out they want to be interested again.’ (Prisoner interview)

Some prisoners had begun to re-evaluate their gang association through their experience in prison. They explicitly recognised that their offending behaviour is linked to being in a gang and if they were not involved in a gang it would be less likely that they would be in prison. Those who recognised this sometimes discussed feeling resentment that fellow gang members are continuing with their lives in the community and moving on. This is particularly the case when prisoners felt that they ‘went down’ for a crime committed with others. Combined with others failing to maintain meaningful contact or provide support whilst one is in custody, this can be associated with a genuine questioning of the value of these relationships and associations.

‘It’s gonna be hard. It’s gonna be hard because you’re going to be thinking right, I went to prison for you and now you’re telling me… It’ll make you think, wait a second, I thought we was friends’ (Prisoner interview)
Experience of imprisonment and desire not to return

The majority of the prisoners were emphatic that they want to avoid coming back to custody. This was found across all types of prisoner and was not associated with the strength of their gang allegiances. Prisoners discussed wanting freedom and peace in their lives. Among those who had children, they wanted to improve these relationships and become better role models to children. This is particularly the case among older prisoners and those with more experience of custody.

‘I’m happy, I’ll go home and that’s it. I’ll just settle myself down really because I said this is the last time I’m coming to prison, I’m not coming back again. It’s easy to say it, don’t get me wrong. I could never say never say never, I can never say I’m never coming back again. But I’m going to try my hardest not to come back because I don’t want to come back to prison.’ (Prisoner interview)

Plans for the future

The painful experiences of being in prison, along with a realisation that gang relationships may not be as strong or as meaningful as previously believed, is associated with a desire not to reoffend and come back to prison. Securing employment, education and housing, and rebuilding relationships with family and friends are seen as key factors in increasing the likelihood that one will not be pulled into offending and inevitably return to prison. In terms of familial relationships, a particularly strong theme was becoming a role model for children and ensuring that they do not follow down the same path.

‘For you not hardly anything’s happened in seven months the same routine every day but for kids and that a lot happens you know what I mean, birthdays, Christmases, boyfriends all sorts.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘Everything I do here is just so time can go quicker and quicker and quicker. I work in the kitchen, time goes quicker. But then afterwards it gets boring so time starts slowing down. I do a catering course, I just finished it, that speeds up time as well. So it’s the more busy you keep in prison, the quicker the time’s going to go. If you just sit in your room all day doing nothing, time’s gonna go slow.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘I enjoy the] Gym. I don’t know why ... obviously it takes a bit of your energy, makes you tired, go to sleep, wake back up, go to the gym, yeah. Gets rid of your day I think.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘For you not hardly anything’s happened in seven months the same routine every day but for kids and that a lot happens you know what I mean, birthdays, Christmases, boyfriends all sorts.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘Or when they want to grow up they’re going to keep on saying, “Yeah, daddy go to prison. I want to be like him,” or whatever. Don’t want that for my son, I want to grow my son up to be very polite to people, respectful, just like me and to make something of his self’ (Prisoner interview)

‘If I got given a place then I wouldn’t want to lose it so it’s a lot for me, if I was to go out and commit crime I’d think hang on a minute I don’t want to commit crime because I could lose my flat’ (Prisoner interview)

‘I wanna get a job and this and settle down. I’m mainly trying to do the catering thing now so I might work in a catering department or I don’t know, I’m trying to work with kids and that, youth offending and that. So yeah. I’m gonna try and work towards something when I get out.’ (Prisoner interview)

Overall, a strong theme was the need to find things to do to keep busy and that will represent real alternatives and commitments that would be lost by coming back to prison. For one prisoner who did not feel that prison is particularly tough, having these commitments is very important to ensuring he is not tempted to reoffend and end up coming back to prison.

‘That’s why I think that more people have learned from coming from prison that you have to learn how to apply your time and everything. Do stuff with your time or you’re going to find yourself doing nothing’ (Prisoner interview)

Despite these intentions, prisoners recognised that resisting the pull of large amounts of ‘easy’ money will be difficult. Some prisoners recognised that going down the route of committing crime to earn more money is not worth it in the long run. The following prisoner discussed the process of weighing up whether he is financially better off in legitimate employment or continuing in crime.

‘I could get one [job] but no I’d always do it’s just too much money like. Even when I did have a proper job. When I was 17 I had a proper job, I was earning £250 a week being a painter and decorator. I did that for years, I’d still give that up to sell my stock because do you know what I mean on a good day you can earn £450 man easy.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘I don’t really care about getting money or nothing like that, I just want to go to college and learn more stuff and be well educated. So when my son grow up I can treat him the same, I can be smart enough and treat him, if you know what I mean.’ (Prisoner interview)

Prisoners varied in terms of their commitment and the clarity of their plans for the future. Some had clear goals and ideas in mind and had considered the impact of imprisonment on their options.

‘Firstly, generally options… because of your being in prison… a lot of job opportunities will be closed, doors closing isn’t it because no one wants to hire a prisoner, particularly convicts… before I was more narrow in the sort of work that I’ll be looking to do, but I think after coming out of prison that you’re more broader in the sort of jobs that you’re willing to take up.’ (Prisoner interview)

Others were vaguer and appeared more committed to offending behaviour and this lifestyle. Even though their ultimate goal is to cease offending, they are still pulled to this in the short-term and value the idea of making large sums of money.

‘I’ll probably do a couple more bank robberies… Or some armed robberies or selling drugs and weed and whatever, anything that’ll give me quick money… When I get out I want to make at least £500,000 and then just come off it and call it a day.’ (Prisoner interview)
Leaving the gang

Many prisoners spoke of the need to reduce or cease contact with gang associates or ‘road friends’ with whom they are likely to commit crime. They recognised that involvement in an offending peer group heightens the risk that they will reoffend and return to custody. For some, leaving gang life behind has wider benefits in terms of achieving peace and freedom in life.

‘Whoever wants to be at the top of the pecking order can do whatever they like, ‘cause I’m not interested any more.’ (Prisoner interview)

‘So I don’t want to be affiliated with nothing. I want to be walking free on road and no one… like, sometime people be watching their back and thinking, “Oh, I can’t go over there.” I want to be going anywhere I want, whenever I want, anytime I want. Do you know what I mean?’ (Prisoner interview)

Some prisoners spoke of already having a non-offending peer group and the need to establish and strengthen these more pro-social relationships. This was particularly the case among those who were older and had weaker connections to an offending peer group.

Some spoke of the need to move to a different area to effectively ‘start again’. However, prisoners were generally aware of how difficult this will be. They acknowledged that without a ‘local connection’ to another area they are unlikely to be able to move. Ties to friends and family can also make moving difficult and for some, they would prefer to stay in the same area for this reason.

‘Obviously ’cause my mum lives there obviously and my brother and that wants me to come back there’ (Prisoner interview)

A commitment to ceasing or reducing contact with an offending peer group was not felt unanimously among prisoners. Even among those who did wish to do this, there were variations in terms of how committed they are; for some, it was clear that they still feel a pull to this offending group.

‘I’m cutting out my associate ring except for the odd one or two people that you have to keep there just in case you need to… it ever comes to situation where it gets on top and you’ve gotta straighten it back up again’ (Prisoner interview)

Those with strong affiliations to gangs in the community discussed issues of ‘revenge’ from others who may not be happy that one is attempting to exit gang life. These prisoners attempted to downplay these potential threats and stated that they can manage them without retaliating or otherwise being pulled back into the gang.

‘Not being funny, I know that I’m never gonna have any repercussions, ’cause, again, everybody knows what I’m capable of doing, or I would say was capable of doing, because what I did I wouldn’t dream of doing again. But it’s still in people’s minds. So, I’m quite confident in the fact that I will be able to leave jail and live happily in my own community with no problems because people will always relate that…’ (Prisoner interview)
From their perspective, staff members recognised that prisoners may wish to exit gangs and avoid coming back to custody. However, they noticed that this varies among prisoners. In line with the themes emerging from discussions with prisoners, staff members felt that older prisoners are more likely to want to exit gangs. They felt that despite best intentions, some prisoners are at risk of being pulled back into gangs upon release.

‘Again it depends on the person. Some of them, I mean it’s more the older side of it. A lot of them just think, “You know what I can’t be bothered with this no more, I’m not gonna bother, I’m not doing it.” But then you get the ones that come in and they say, “Oh no I gave up the gangs, I was in a gang but I don’t do it anymore.” Then with them you’ve got the two sides of it again, you’ve got the ones that stay away from it or you get the ones that get slightly drawn back into it again. It’s like the devil and the deep blue sea sometimes, it’s like I’m not in a gang, well I was in a gang but I’m not in it now but I’m in prison so I’ll go back into it or I’ll stay away from it.’

(Staff interview)

Encouraging gang exit in custody and upon release into the community

The stated desire among prisoners not to return to custody, and the association some develop between their gang and their offending behaviour, has implications for how the prison system may reduce gang affiliation among prisoners, as well as encourage gang exit upon release into the community. Some prisoners described prison as an opportunity to ‘get your head down’ and have respite from things that may be going on in the community. In addition, even among those who appear to have weaker connections to gangs in the community, there is a risk they may nevertheless drift back into this upon re-entry to the community. The rest of this section describes the findings that relate to reducing gang affiliation among prisoners, both whilst they are in prison and upon release into the community.

The prison regime

There were two key themes emerging from discussions with prisoners regarding the nature of the prison regime that may act as a pull away from involvement in gangs whilst in custody. The first relates to the nature of the relationships between prisoners and prison staff. Many prisoners spoke of feeling as though they can talk to and get on well with staff. They recognised that these relationships are mutual and involve a two-way effort. When prisoners feel like they are treated with respect they are more likely to appreciate that staff are doing their jobs and to show respect in turn to prison staff.

‘It’s the way you talk to people, it’s the way you treat them with respect, they’ll treat you with respect... it’s the way you talk to them and everything. ’Cause sometime there might be a governor, they might lock us in a cell but they’re doing their job... So if you’re being really nice to them and... I’m not saying kiss their arse a lot or anything like that but be nice to them and they’ll be nice to you. If you’re being rude to them or whatever then they’ll make your life a misery, put you on basic and do you know what I mean saying?’

(Prisoner interview)

‘... in a way, you’ve got bad people around you but the staff are all right. I can say that the staff are all right... Every time they see me they ask me how I am, do I need any help with anything? And not even other prisoners that I’ve known for years would ask me them questions, do you know what I mean? So yes, officer wise, it’s all right’

(Prisoner interview)

These relationships are experienced positively and may act to discourage gang involvement. By engendering positive relations between staff and prisoners, it may be less likely that an ‘us and them’ atmosphere develops and prisoners may feel less inclined to develop groupings in response to the prison regime.

Furthermore, mutual respect between prisoners and staff may help counter some of the more disempowering aspects of the prison regime. As highlighted throughout this report, some prisoners are bringing into custody a conceptualisation of masculinity based on asserting strength, dominance and independence. The prison environment can be disempowering and can constrict prisoners’ ability to establish and express their masculine identities. By countering this, mutual respect may discourage prisoners from expressing their masculine identities through hostile, oppositional groupings with other prisoners. When prisoners spoke of staff they were less favourable to, it became clear that an excessive imbalance of power is frustrating for prisoners and some prisoners may feel the need to assert their dominance and masculinity over this.

‘A couple of them are prison guards. One of them is a supervising officer. I just don’t like him; I think he’s a bit of a... The way he talks he thinks yeah, he’s power mad with them keys. If we was all on road and you didn’t have them keys you’d be lost. You wouldn’t know what hit you do you know what I mean? That’s what most of these prison guards don’t think about it.’

(Prisoner interview)

Whilst engendering more positive relations between staff and prisoners may discourage gang association among prisoners, this should not be achieved at the expense of establishing and maintaining good order and control in the prison environment. As such, there is a balance to be struck between engendering positive relationships and maintaining appropriate professional boundaries. A weakening of boundaries and control can result in perceptions of disorganisation among prisoners. For example, if timings for activities are missed or staff members do not appear to have control over the prisoners. Whilst prisoners may perceive that this disorganisation benefits them at times (for example, if they get extra time doing an activity they enjoy), it limits access to opportunities or increases perceptions of chaos or risk, it may be associated with negative consequences among prisoners. For example, prisoners may become frustrated with the regime and feel disempowered, which for some may push them into gang association.

‘I wasn’t really bothered and I found it kind of funny and stuff and get some perks like extra little bit of extra social time and stuff like that so I wasn’t too bothered with it.’

(Prisoner interview)

‘Sometimes they don’t know where people are going, like when movements taking place and I think that everybody just can go... I myself, yeah, I went to a different room that wasn’t my room and the guard just let me in. I don’t know if he didn’t recognise my face, doesn’t know what’s happening, but yeah. So there’s disorganisation with staff.’

(Prisoner interview)
Section 7: Managing gangs and encouraging gang exit

The second theme that emerged relates to the perceived control and autonomy that prisoners feel able to exercise over their day-to-day lives. Whilst overwhelmingly prisoners experience prison as a painful and challenging environment, there are aspects of the regime that were praised by participants for being flexible and giving prisoners a sense that they had some control over their lives whilst in custody.

For example, prisoners have telephones and computers in their cells. Having telephones means they are able to speak with family and friends in the community when they choose to and are not required to wait for phones to become available on the wings at set times of the day, as is generally the case in prison. The computers are used to send prisoner information about things going on in the prison and to communicate between staff and prisoners. These features provide flexibility and opportunities for prisoners to exercise choice and control. Prisoners also often spoke about having showers in the cell, which is different to most other prisons where showers are provided in the wing to be shared with other prisoners at set times. Having showers in the cell means prisoners can exercise choice and achieve a sense of privacy.

Rehabilitation and preparation for release

As well as reducing the likelihood of gangs forming within custody, prison establishments have a role to play in encouraging gang exit upon release to the community. As discussed, many prisoners wish to leave their gang, although there are variations in terms of how committed prisoners are to this and their perception of the other options available to them. For those prisoners for whom prison is a respite from gang activity in the community (regardless of strength of affiliation), prison may represent an opportunity to challenge the attributes and beliefs that lead to gang involvement and to prepare and equip prisoners for gang exit.

The barrier to effective practice with gang-involved prisoners in terms of preparation for release is the level of control that the prison staff perceive they have over the environments to which prisoners will be being released. Staff members recognised that prisoners may wish to change and leave gangs; however, they see that this will be very challenging for them when they return to difficult environments in which their gang is operating.

Section 7: Managing gangs and encouraging gang exit

‘We’ve done group sessions with them, we’ve discussed with them what they think of the prison, do they feel safe and the majority of them do feel safe. It’s been said many times and I think it’s maybe because of how it’s a new prison, it’s not an old establishment, so a lot of the things here are new. So they probably feel a bit more comfortable with that’ (Staff interview)

A clean environment in which prisoners feel a sense of control and autonomy over their lives may act to pull prisoners away from involvement in gangs in custody as it can reduce feelings of resentment and powerlessness. Similarly to the discussion above about prisoner-staff relationships, this can help counter some of the more disempowering and constraining aspects of the regime. It may mean that prisoners feel less inclined to form problematic groupings against the regime and as a mechanism to display power and masculinity.

‘Yeah, not complaining. And you got showers in your cell so … you can get gym when you want.’ (Prisoner interview)

In addition, the prison building is relatively new compared to many other prisons. The modern nature of the establishment was praised as this means that the environment is cleaner and more comfortable. Prisoners spoke of previous experience in run-down, unhygienic prisons. This can be demoralising and can make the prison experience more difficult and unpleasant to manage.

‘So it’s about relocation and having enough places so when they do come out of jail they can start afresh and they don’t have to go back into that environment where they feel, “Here we go again. No one believes I can achieve anything so I might as well live up to what the system thinks I am.” So I think that’s one of the most important things!’ (Staff interview)

‘Well, I’ve been stabbed nine times over a course of about six years. So my area’s full of drugs, crime, everything you can imagine. Someone literally died two days ago getting shot. So it’ll always happen though.’ (Prisoner interview)

From discussions with prisoners, it is clear that they are coming from and likely returning to very challenging living environments. Prisoners often described their area as a ‘ghetto’ with few opportunities and high levels of crime and violence, sometimes to an extreme level.

‘I would describe it as like, it’s hard because you’re too used to it, but you couldn’t get on. It’s a low-income area. Kind of moderately high-crime’ (Prisoner interview)

Despite these experiences, prisoners reported feeling their area was ‘normal’ and feeling very attached to where they are from. This is particularly the case for those who have lived in the same area for a long time and less so for those with a weaker attachment to a given area, for example foreign national prisoners or those who had moved around a lot. Regardless, the level of violence experienced in the community and lack of opportunities is often normalised for prisoners.
‘Because I grew up there, it’s just normal living to me basically.’[Prisoner interview]

‘I’m used to it so home is home, home is where the heart is. So yeah, that’s how it is really. I don’t see anything different about my area that could happen in Essex or Chelsea or whatever.’[Prisoner interview]

Prisoners in the main described very strong peer groups with roots in childhood and family connections. Prisoners are very attached to these groups and have often been through stressful and unpleasant experiences with them, which serves to increase group cohesion. Some prisoners spoke of their involvement in gangs in the community and the violence associated with this. For some with stronger gang affiliations in the community, defending territory from perceived ‘outsiders’ and those from rival gangs is a key part of their lives in the community. As one prisoner described with reference to what would happen if a rival gang member came into his area:

‘… most of the time it ends up with someone getting shot, that’s pretty much it’[Prisoner interview]

Experience of prison is common among prisoners’ peer groups and this has become normalised and expected in their communities.

‘All my brethren are in prison, every single one’[Prisoner interview]

‘When you’re in a gang, expect prison to come in the package really because you are going to end up going to prison, you know.’[Prisoner interview]

For those with stronger affiliations, the notion of ‘respect’ to their relationships in the community and how they behave and treat others is central.

‘Obviously that’s the way it has to be if you ain’t got a name for yourself then you’re no-one. And from a young age I decided yeah I wanna be known. When I die I want to be remembered and that was pretty much it.’[Prisoner interview]

Regardless of strength of affiliation, prisoners tended to report not being engaged in constructive activities whilst in the community. Most described just ‘hanging around’ and substance misuse and work and educational failure was common among participants. Some reported trying to address these issues and change their lives. As discussed previously, some are developing more pro-social friendships and starting to engage in positive activities. However, opportunities appear limited, helping to explain the ‘drift’ back into offending peer groups regardless of one’s commitment to gang involvement.

“You know, just taking drugs, drinking every day. That’s it really, just drinking and taking drugs, which really pushed me over the edge, do you know what I mean?”[Prisoner interview]

‘I wanna be known. When I die I want to be famous. When I’m 40 I want to be the man. I ain’t got a name for yourself then you’re nothing. Obviously that’s the way it has to be if you want to be known. And from a young age I decided yeah I wanna be known. When I die I want to be remembered and that was pretty much it.’[Prisoner interview]

‘I was involved in it but I thought to myself it’s not worth it. I don’t want to be part of that. My girlfriend’s pregnant, I just want to live my life like normal. That’s not a normal way of living, every day you’re with friends, this one gets stabbed, you got to do this, it’s just a headache.’[Prisoner interview]

‘I think I just keep myself to myself… I do socialise with people in [a] gang and everything like that yeah, but when I know they’re gonna do their thing I say, “Yo, I see you later, mate!”’[Prisoner interview]

‘I got kicked out of school when I was younger, didn’t go back to school. I recently went back to college about two years ago. … At least I got a job, so I was trying to change the pattern of the way I’d been living.’[Prisoner interview]

However, despite these challenges, some prisoners felt they had effectively moved away from gangs after observing the costs associated with gang membership. However, for some they still have connections to these groups and it appears that it would be easy for them to drift back into group offending.

Conclusions

There are clear teachable moments in custody as prisoners realise that they do not want to come back to prison. For those who associate their offending with involvement in gangs and recognise that they may need to exit the gang in order to avoid coming back to custody, there are opportunities to capitalise on this and encourage gang exit. Prisoners vary in their understanding of these issues and some are vaguer in their plans and their commitment to avoiding reoffending.

Aspects of prisoners’ experience of the prison regime may discourage gang association whilst in custody; however, the prison system also has a role to play in supporting gang exit upon re-entry into the community. This is applicable to all prisoners, including those with weaker connections or who intend to just ‘keep their head down’ whilst in custody. For these prisoners, failure to address their gang involvement or encourage successful resettlement represents a missed opportunity for rehabilitation whilst gang associations remain on the outside ready to be taken up upon release. However, efforts at encouraging gang exit need to take into account the environments from which prisoners are coming and to which they will return on release. Facilitating links to the community can assist with the journey out of the gang, enhancing the likelihood of gang exit upon release and supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of gang-involved prisoners into the community.
Section 8: Conclusions and recommendations

This aim of this research was to develop an understanding of the nature and impact of gang involvement in prison to support the further development of policy and practice relating to understanding, managing and addressing gang-involvement among prisoners. By exploring how prisoners considered involved in gangs in the community form and develop relationships and allegiances in prison, and their experiences of prison, this research project has added to the existing evidence base and has revealed implications for policy and practice in the UK.

The process of forming and developing relationships and allegiances in prison is complex. Prison can be considered a specific social world in which attitudes, allegiances and loyalties developed in the community are imported to act as guiding frameworks for developing functional relationships and associations in response to the conditions encountered.

Prisoners considered to be involved in gangs in the community are far from uniform. For some, they have strong connections and affiliations with gangs and display fierce loyalty to these. This can be seen in the development of exclusive affiliations with other prisoners, developed in opposition to perceived ‘enemies’ and ‘rivals’. However, this process is fluid and dynamic; there was no evidence that gang-involved prisoners are recreating formal, structured gang associations mimicking entities found on the street.

For other prisoners, whilst they are labelled as gang-involved, these connections are looser and weaker. They do not identify strongly with a gang in the community, although may drift in and out of group offending. These prisoners are often older and have previous experience of stronger gang associations. For these prisoners, the notions of territory and area that guide relationships and allegiances in prison are more flexible and involve less hostility towards other prisoners.

The hostile and oppositional groupings that can develop in custody among some gang-involved prisoners can be associated with conflict as those from competing groups seek to establish dominance and status over one another. The effects of this can be wide-reaching, as fellow associates are drafted into conflict out of a sense of loyalty. This, as well as the bribing of fellow prisoners to carry out conflicts, can extend the reach of gang-related conflict in custody, leading to tit-for-tat retaliation among increasing numbers of prisoners.

However, not all conflict is gang-related. Conflict arises in prison for various reasons, often rooted in the day-to-day tussle for respect and status within the constraining prison environment. Despite this, gang-involved prisoners are over-represented in violence-related incidents in prison, suggesting gang involvement may increase the risk of involvement in conflict. Furthermore, even prisoners with weaker connections to gangs, who tended to wish to avoid conflict whilst in prison, nevertheless recognised they have a breaking point at which they may be pushed into conflict. This further reveals the risk that gang association places on individuals in terms of involvement in conflict.
The vast majority of prisoners do not want to come back to custody. There are clear teachable moments in terms of the association between being in prison and gang involvement made by prisoners (i.e. that they recognise that their being in prison is directly related to their membership and the activities carried out with a gang). Also the realisation that friends and associates from the gang may not be as loyal or dependable as once imagined.

Therefore, as well as managing the impacts of gangs in prison, the prison system has a role to play in discouraging gang association among prisoners, and by acting on the recommendations in this report may be able to capitalise on teachable moments and encourage gang exit. Individual establishments may need to consider how these findings and recommendations apply to them based on the nature of the institution and custodial population. For example, establishments holding young offenders or less transient populations (for example, high security prisons) may find that gang involvement manifests and impacts in different ways. The recommendations have been designed to be sufficiently broad to support all types of establishment in understanding and tackling gang involvement in custody. However, further research within different types of establishments and with different prisoner populations would be worthwhile to further understand how prison establishments can seek to manage and address gang involvement among prisoners.

**Recommendations**

### 1. Identify gang-involved prisoner

To effectively manage and address gang involvement among prisoners, prison establishments need to accurately identify prisoners who are involved in gangs. This process should distinguish between those prisoners involved in group-related behaviour and those who are involved in structured gang collectives.

- The National Offender Management Service (NOMS) should develop a standardised assessment process with respect to the features of gang involvement that prison systems should be seeking to identify. This assessment tool should include a checklist of factors and should follow a standardised definition.

- Prison establishments should develop multi-agency information-sharing arrangements with external criminal justice agencies that hold information relating to whether a prisoner is involved in a gang in the community. Key agencies include the police, probation service and youth offending service. Information should be shared as prisoners enter the prison, for example through the Offender Assessment System (OASys). This information should be used to flag prisoners who are known to be gang-involved.

- NOMS should extend the information-sharing agreement between the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and 80 prison establishments. The MPS shares information from the Trident Gangs Matrix with 80 prison establishments to enable the identification of gang-involved prisoners. This should be expanded to include police forces across the country and all prison establishments.

- Information-sharing agreements should be established across the prison estate so that information on gang-involved prisoners can be shared as prisoners are transferred around the estate. This should be used to ensure that appropriate decisions are made on where to place prisoners.

- The prison National Offender Management Information System (p-NOMIS) should be used to record gang involvement. Prison establishments should use the information on this system to identify gang-involvement among transferred prisoners.

- Prison establishments should appoint a dedicated worker or team to aid in the process of identifying gang-involved prisoners and share this with other prison establishments. This worker or team should have connections to external criminal justice agencies and should be trained and experienced in identifying the signs of gang involvement.

### 2. Conduct a needs assessment to establish the nature and impact of gang involvement in different establishments

To effectively select and deliver interventions to manage and address gang involvement in prisons, establishments need to assess the nature of the problem and impact of gang involvement in custody.

- NOMS, in partnership with the Home Office Ending Gangs and Youth Violence (EGYV) team, should develop a standardised process for assessing the impact of gangs that can be applied across establishments. This assessment should be based on factors that affect how gangs form and the likely impact they have. This includes the type of prison (for example high security, local, training), the type of prisoner (for example young offenders, life sentenced prisoners, sex offenders), the type of accredited programmes delivered in the prison and so on. These factors will provide an indication of the issues a prison is likely to have. The Home Office EGYV team can support in this process by providing expert knowledge relating to gangs.

- The assessment should be conducted locally, by a trained and experienced worker or team who understands the local context. The completion of these assessments should follow a similar process to the EGYV peer review process and be lead by NOMS and the Home Office.

### 3. Take pre-emptive action to manage and address gang involvement among prisoners

Prison establishments should use the information obtained from the identification of gang-involved prisoners, and the assessment of the problem to manage and address gang involvement before issues are able to manifest and have an impact in prison.

- Prisons should draw together the information from different parts of the establishment to ensure that appropriate pre-emptive action can be taken.

Staff in different parts of the establishment, e.g. violence reduction, security, wings, visits and so on, will hold different information and perspectives. By sharing this, all parts of the prison can maintain awareness and take action to reduce risk. This pre-emptive action to reduce risk includes separating and monitoring prisoners (i.e. ensuring that rival gang members are not placed on the same wing).

- This process should involve monitoring events occurring in the community so appropriate action can be taken in prison. The research showed that events in the community are imported into prison and can manifest as conflict between prisoners. Therefore, for example, if an assault occurs between rival gang members in the community, action can be taken to reduce risk among prisoners who may be connected to these gangs.
• A dedicated worker or team should be appointed to act as a point of contact for different parts of the prison. This worker or team should have links to the community and an understanding of the local context and historical and current events in the community.

• Prison establishments should appoint professional mediators to address issues between prisoners from rival gangs, challenge misperceptions and break down barriers. As prisoners discussed in the research, conflict manifests differently in prison and there may be opportunities to break down barriers between prisoners, which would not be as possible in the community. When the prison establishment knows there is historic or current dispute between prisoners, mediation can be used to address the issues before conflict occurs.

• NOMS should develop gangs training for prison officers, to improve their understanding of the underlying mentality and drivers of gang involvement and related behaviour. The research revealed the importance of the quality of relationships between staff and prisoners. This training, therefore, should include treatment of prisoners and should encourage positive, pro-social staff-prisoner relations to counteract an ‘us and them’ atmosphere and discourage the formation of hostile, oppositional groupings as a mechanism to display hyper-masculine conceptualisations of dominance and strength.

• With the introduction of resettlement prisons, a dedicated local expert gangs worker or team should be appointed to address the impacts of gang involvement when they arise

4. Take action to address the impacts of gang involvement when they arise

Where pre-emptive action fails to prevent conflict arising between prisoners, the prison system can take action to address this and share the information to reduce the likelihood that future issues occur.

• Prison establishments should seek to immediately separate conflicting prisoners and take action to encourage mediation following the dispute. A trained mediator should be appointed to draw out the causes of the conflict and encourage prisoners to address the conflict in a positive manner.

• Prison establishments should take action to reduce the likelihood of conflict occurring again by exploring who is involved and how incidents are linked. The research has shown that prisoners can become involved in conflict vicariously and increasing numbers of prisoners can become involved in issues, with the potential for escalating retaliation. Prison authorities should, therefore, investigate who was involved in each incident and how others may be linked to the incident and how incidents may be linked together. The dedicated gangs worker or team, with expertise in understanding group dynamics, should coordinate and lead this investigation, drawing upon information from various parts of the prison.

The results should be used to address the underlying issues between all relevant prisoners.

5. Develop rehabilitation programmes to encourage gang exit upon release

Prison establishments should seek to capitalise on teachable moments in which prisoners may be questioning their gang involvement and considering gang exit in order to encourage gang exit upon release.

• In their development of accredited programmes for gang-involved prisoners, NOMS should incorporate principles relating to working consistently with prisoners on an individual level to uncover the underlying causes of gang involvement for that individual.

• A dedicated worker or team should be appointed to deliver one-to-one and group work programmes to strengthen the teachable moments and encourage gang exit. This work should focus on understanding what gang involvement means for prisoners on an individual level and should challenge the value and belief systems that support and promote gang involvement and related behaviours. For example, this could include drawing attention to whether relationships with gang acquaintances are maintained in custody to highlight the weakness of these relationships.

• The dedicated worker or team should assess the rehabilitative needs of all prisoners flagged as gang-involved, regardless of their behaviour in custody. Prisoners who are quieter or who do not engage in outwardly problematic behaviour may nevertheless still require support to strengthen their teachable moments and encourage gang exit, helping them to avoid drifting back into group offending upon release. The worker or team should intervene with prisoners based on their individual needs.

• Older prisoners with weaker gang involvement should be placed in role model positions. Older prisoners were found to be more likely to be questioning their gang involvement and to have taken steps toward gang exit. Appointing them as role models will enable them to model positive, pro-social behaviours and attitudes for younger prisoners and provide examples of gang exit for prisoners whose involvement in gangs is more entrenched. This will also support the rehabilitation of older prisoners by providing them with positive opportunities.

• The introduction of resettlement prisons should be used to aid in the rehabilitation of gang-involved prisoners. Prison staff perceived that a key barrier to working effectively with gang-involved prisoners was the lack of control they feel they have over the communities from which prisoners are arriving and to which they will be released. This can be ameliorated through the one-to-one relationship between prisoners and a single provider through custody and into the community that will be provided as part of resettlement prisons.

Providers working with prisoners through custody and into the community should be informed of prisoners’ gang involvement so that prisoners can be appropriately supported and provided with realistic alternatives to gang involvement upon release. To enhance the transition to the community and to ensure this is managed well, this should involve linking with relevant partners in the community (probation, youth offending teams, local authorities, the police and so on).
Appendix I: 
Prisoner interview schedule

Catch22 Dawes Unit Prisons Research

Why are we here?
Catch22 is a national charity working throughout England and Wales. I work for the Dawes Unit, which helps young people who get involved in crime to stay out of trouble and reach their potential. We also do research on why young people get into trouble and how best to help them stay on the straight and narrow.

This study focuses on people who have been involved in group offending before coming to prison to try and understand why they get involved with this sort of group and what would help them to stay out of trouble when they get back into the community. The questions today will be about your community and your life back at home, how things have changed for you in prison, particularly looking at the new relationships you have made.

What will we do with the data?
The information you give us during this interview will be recorded and used to inform the study. However, we will treat everything you tell us as confidential and will not pass on the information unless you talk about an extremely serious crime unsolved by or unknown to the police, or indicate that some future very serious harm may happen unless we take action. When we use the information in the final report everything will be reported anonymously with your name and any other identifying features taken out.

If you have any queries or concerns, or feel distressed during or after the interview please contact a member of the Catch22 team or Safer Custody.
Interview guide

1. Interview number

2. Date and time of interview

Prison

3. Expectations: what were their expectations of what prison would be like? What did they know about it? What were they most worried about?

4. Day to day: what is it like in here? What is a typical day like? What things do they enjoy doing most?

5. Safety: do they ever feel unsafe? Why? When? What do they do to keep themselves safe? What advice would they give to someone coming in for the first time?


7. Existing relationships: who did you know before you came here? How did you know them? Where is the friend from? What’s good about this friend? Why are you friends?

10. Staying involved: how long have you been friends with them? Have you been in trouble for anything before with other people from the group? Have you got into trouble with this group? Have you committed any crimes with this group?

11. Prison: have any of those involved in the group of friends ended up inside before? What happened to their connection with the group? Have you maintained these connections despite this? Have you lost any friends coming into prison?

12. Keeping in touch: Are you still keeping in touch with these friends? How do they keep in touch and how often?

Community

7. Area: How would you describe your local area in your own words? What is there to do there? What did you get up to in your spare time? How long have you lived there? Do you spend most of your time in your local area? Do most of your family friends live in your local area?

8. Do you have a main group of friends? Yes/No

9. Getting involved: how did you end up hanging out with them? What made you want to hang out with them?

13. Existing relationships: who did you know before you came here? How did you know them? Where is the friend from? What’s good about this friend? Why are you friends?

14. New relationships: who is a new friend? How did you get to know them? Where are they from? What’s good about them? Why are you friends?

15. Conflict: is there anyone here who you can’t associate with? Why is that? Have you been in any fights since you have been in Thameside/Dovegate? What caused them? What are some of the main reasons people get into fights here?

16. Community: where will you go when they leave here? Where do you think you will live?

17. Work/ studying: what are your plans for when you get out? What do you want to do in the long term?

18. Staying in touch: Will you speak to people you made friends with in here? Is there anyone you’ll stay friends with long term?
Appendix II: 
Prison staff interview guide

Catch22 Dawes Unit Prisons Research

Why are we here?
Catch22 is a national charity working throughout England and Wales. I work for the Dawes Unit which helps young people who get involved in crime to stay out of trouble and reach their potential. We also do research on why young people get into trouble and how best to help them stay on the straight and narrow.

This study focuses on people who have been involved in group offending before coming to prison to try and understand why they get involved with this sort of group and what would help them to stay out of trouble when they get back into the community. The questions today will be about your views and experiences as to how prisoners adapt and behave whilst in custody, as well as your experiences working with gang-involved prisoners.

What will we do with the data?
The information you give us during this interview will be recorded and used to inform the study. However, we will treat everything you tell us as confidential and will not pass on the information unless you talk about an extremely serious crime unsolved by or unknown to the police; or indicate that some future very serious harm may happen unless we take action. When we use the information in the final report everything will be reported anonymously with your name and any other identifying features taken out.

If you have any queries or concerns, or feel distressed during or after the interview please contact a member of the Catch22 team.
Interview guide

1. Interview number

2. Date and time of interview

The prison experience
3. How do prisoners adapt and behave when they arrive in custody? What are their expectations? What do they find difficult/easy about starting a custodial term? How are prisoners assisted through this process?
4. How do prisoners’ behaviours, attitudes and experiences change as they go through their custodial term? Do things become easier/more difficult? Do you use isolation with prisoners? How do prisons adapt and manage isolation? What do you find are prisoners’ intentions for leaving custody? How does the prison experience appear to have an impact on prisoners?
5. How do you maintain order, safety and control in the prison? What do you think prisoners feel about order, safety and control? How do prisoners attempt to keep safe? Do things differ based on the time of day? Do things differ based on what is happening at the time, e.g. movements, association etc.

Relationships and conflicts
6. Do prisoners create and/or continue relationships, associations and allegiances in prison? What are these relationships based on? What are the purposes of these relationships? What types of relationships do prisoners wish to maintain?
7. Do prisoners keep in contact with the outside world? Is this important to them? How do they do this? How do relationships in the outside world affect relationships in prison?
8. Is there conflict between prisoners? What underlies this conflict? What types of conflict occur? How do you and/or prisoners attempt to deal with conflict? Is conflict affected by things that go on in the outside world? How does information travel between prison and the community?

Gang involved prisoners
9. How do you know when a prison is gang involved? What signs are there? What information do you rely on?
10. Are there gangs in this prison? What forms do gangs take? What is the relationship between gangs in the community and custody? Do they migrate into custody? Is it gang-involved prisoners in the community who tend to be in gangs in prison, or can anyone get involved with gangs in prison?
11. What issues and challenges are posed by gangs in prison? Are they involved in conflict? What impact do they have on the regime? What impact do they have on the ability to maintain safety, order and control?
12. How do you work with gang involved prisoners? What does this work focus on? What types of gang involved prisoners do you work with? Are there any ‘teachable moments’ when working with a gang involved prisoner? What is the aim of this work? How effective do you think this work is? Could anything be changed or improved about how you work with gang involved prisoners? Are there any differences between working with a gang involved and a non-gang involved prisoner?

Individual differences
13. How do the associations, allegiances and conflict differ according to the type of prisoner? Does it make a difference if the prisoner is on remand or sentenced? Does it make a difference if a prisoner has previous experience of custody or is new to custody? Does the age of the prisoner make a difference? Does it make a difference how far through the custodial term a prisoner is?
14. How do you manage and deal with any impacts of these differences?
Appendix III: Prisoner demographic, offending and sentence characteristics

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<th>Entry (arrived within last two to four weeks)</th>
<th>Later (arrived within last three to six months)</th>
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<td>Any Asian</td>
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<td>Violence</td>
<td>Drugs</td>
<td>Other (e.g. driving offences)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Self-identify as gang-involved (Eurogang Survey)</th>
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<td>Under 21</td>
<td>Over 21</td>
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* Some prisoners charged with multiple offences

References

15. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
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45  Wintorydyke and Ruddell (2010)

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47  Wood, Alleyne, Mozova and James (unpublished)


50  bid.


53  Alleyne and Wood (2010)

54  HMICCP (2010)


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58  Ibid.

59  Ibid.

60  Fleisher and Decker (2001)

61  Fleisher and Decker (2001)

62  McGloin (2007)

63  Ibid.


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67  Jewkes (2005)

68  Evans and Wallace (2008)

69  Cesaroni and Alvi (2010)

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71  HMICCP (2010)

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