# Prison gangs: Re-examining their existence, reframing their function

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This chapter considers prison gangs by outlining definitional challenges that concern this social phenomenon before examining the importance of accounting for the specifics of prison environments. As a consequence, the chapter presents a social eco-system approach to understanding prison gangs, and in doing so, accounts for theories of importation, strain and deprivation, incorporating these into a proposed Gang Social-Ecosystem Model (G-SEM). Adopting the core principles of such theories, consideration is given to both 'pull' and 'push' variables and how these may apply to the G-SEM. In conclusion, the chapter draws to a close by challenging the more pejorative approach to defining and understanding gangs, particularly in prisons.

The term 'gang' can invite a view of violence, broader criminality and a range of dissocial acts designed to drive forward a shared group agenda. This is, however, arguably a populist view that resides within media depictions and helps drive myths and misunderstandings. It is, nevertheless, the case that gangs have been associated with violent and illegal acts (e.g. Fortune, 2004; Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffran & Suppa, 2001), including within the confines of a prison (e.g. Pyrooz, Decker & Fleisher, 2011; Drury & DeLisi, 2011; Griffin & Hepburn, 2006). The relationship between aggression and prison gang membership is certainly not in dispute (e.g. Griffin & Hepburn, 2006; Scott, 2001). Scholars have argued that gang members are responsible for the majority of prison violence (Cox, 1996; Camp & Camp 1985), with some estimates indicating that 50 percent of prison violence is driven by gangs (Camp & Camp, 1985). These estimates are dependent on how gangs are defined, and as such, there is a need to recognise the considerable complexity in this area. This includes accounting not just for the negative aspects of gangs but also the positives; a recognition that can be considered troubling by some practitioners, researchers and policy-makers. Nevertheless, acceptance of *all* aspects of gang membership becomes important as we proceed to outline their role in potentially stabilising changing, chaotic and threatening environments, such as prisons.

## Defining prison gangs

Defining prison gangs is complex and trying to fix on a definition of gangs has, without doubt, served to complicate the area (Ireland & Power, 2012). It has served to distract from the true focus of work, namely understanding why gangs operate and using this to intervene in neutralising and/or limiting their negative impacts. At the most basic level, gangs are perhaps best described as social groups (Decker, 2004), labelled by some sectors as ‘gangs’. The concept of a gang is certainly not new although other terms have been used to describe them such as ‘Security Threat Group’ and ‘Inmate Disruptive Groups’ (Fleisher, 2011). The conceptualisation of the term gang has also been aligned to prison bullying (Ireland, 2017). Indeed, a predecessor to the term bullying was ‘mobbing’, a sociological term specifically described as the targeting of an individual by a group, regardless of context. The term ‘ganging up’ has a basis here and, across time, appears to have developed into other terms, such as harassment. ‘Mobbing’ is not a human specific term, however, and has a basis in the work of Lorenz (1966) who described such behaviour among birds and other (non-human) animals as a collective attack driven by hate. The latter aspect was removed from the original German translation, with the sole focus becoming that of a *collective* attack. This has had increasing application to human behaviour, including to ‘ganging up’ in the workplace, where it is described as a form of group bullying (Leymann, 1996).

Regardless, the origins of the concept of a group attacking, seemingly for a shared aim, are clear. It was originally attributed to animals attempting to *thrive*, a Darwinian concept underpinned by a need to survive by *protecting* yourself and those connected to you. *Thriving* and *protection* are crucial components to acknowledge since it is accepted that gangs commonly engage in behaviours connected to thriving, whether this be via turf (area) acquisition, other material acquisition and/or to protect or grow their membership. Protection and avoiding deprivation through material acquisition have been recognised as important driving features for gang membership, both of which appear key to prison environments and commonly described as variables 'pushing' individuals to join a gang (Decker, 1996).

The term 'gang' is perhaps a more media-friendly term, however, serving to provide a certain image that appears attractive to a populist readership; if gangs were instead referred to as a 'group' then perhaps it would garner less interest. The function of gangs can also be lost as there is focus on the symptoms of their presence. Take for example the following definition:

> *"a social division in a traditional society consisting of families or communities linked by social, economic, religious, or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect, typically having a recognised leader"*
>
> (Oxford Dictionary, 2019).

Aspects of a community link, culture and leadership all resonate with the definition of a gang. However, the definition presented above is that of a tribe and yet the similarity to a gang description is notable. Nevertheless, it has different connotations and is arguably less pejorative. Interestingly, the term gang appears to have become aligned more with a *moral* description focusing on the dissocial behaviour thought primarily linked to it. Consider, for example, the following definition of a gang offered by the Eurogang network;

> *"A youth gang, or troublesome youth group, is a durable, street-*oriented *youth group whose involvement in illegal activity is part of their group identity"*
>
> (Weerman et al, 2009. p.20).

This clearly focuses on the negative aspects of gang membership. Illegal activity is a judgment by a State in terms of what constitutes an offence and is arguably influenced by morals. Such a definition automatically assumes that all gang members are criminals. Thus, there appears a moral layer placed over earlier aligned definitions (e.g. tribes) that makes no mention of the more positive elements that would be expected with a tribe (e.g. community, family, other related ties). This point is made since definitions are important; they have a developed history that evolves over time and allow us to draw differences between what is a 'gang' and what has the same organised structure, and yet is described using distinctly different terminology. Lost within the definitions is, perhaps, the impact the environment has within which a gang is operating, with a need to adopt a more neutral stance with descriptions and not one loaded towards negative connotations. However, Weerman *et al.* (2009) make a strong argument for the inclusion of the word 'illegal' in their gang definition, on the grounds of policy. They argue that, without this inclusion, the attention given to gangs by policy-makers would diminish. Thus, it would appear the definition is a strategic decision and not one driven by the specifics of an empirically based definition. The importance of accounting for policy in definition development may have been lost as the term 'gang' takes on an ever-developing pejorative label. Focusing on definition alone perhaps becomes more futile, with a need instead to shift towards understanding their presence as a group with a shared social identity. Thus, the issue that academics, and increasingly practitioners, are aiming to address with regards to prison gangs is their structure, how they develop and are maintained, as well as how this can be positively impacted on. To do this, there needs to be less focus on the popularised symptoms of gang *membership* (e.g. aggression; drugs; indiscipline) and a greater understanding of their *organisation* and function within certain environments, for example, the ability of gangs to foster and enable discrimination and prejudice, which feeds into gang behaviour (Smithson, Ralphs & Williams, 2012).

The words membership and organisation are chosen deliberately; both suggest a degree of entry requirement, similar to employment, to a group that has both structure and performance indicators. Thus, they operate as we would expect a business. We know that gangs, including prison gangs, are highly organised (Orlando-Morningstar, 1997) and, yet, the organisational structure and more positive elements of gang membership, namely affiliation, friendship and community that it brings are not as well considered. However, these positive elements are increasingly being recognised (Skarbek, 2014), including within prisons (Irelad & Power, 2012). Membership to a group is in itself is protective (Ireland & Power, 2012) and required for group-living species, such as humans. The term ‘gang’ fails to give credit to the deeper level of organisation and adaptive function that a gang can present with. Indeed, if we focus briefly on the definition applied to prison gangs we find ones such as: *“…social organizations that resist authority, violate rules, and promote violence”* (Griffin & Hepburn, 2006, p. 444). Focus does not move towards the words ‘social organisation’ but rather the symptoms – resist, violate, promote violence. There are many ways in which to question these definitions; for example, do gangs really promote violence or are they just violent to acquire their aims? The *promotion* of violence falls within the domain of other groups, or perhaps forms part of initiation processes to join a group where prowess to both administer and tolerate aggression is judged. Or is the promotion simply part of an image that is cultivated in order to protect?

The point being made here is that focusing on a simple association between aggression/indiscipline and gang membership may lead to assumptions being made when in fact the association is more complex. Successful species have the ability to adapt to surroundings and to demonstrate the *potential* to aggress if required; this potential should not be confused with actuality since a highly aggressive species is more than likely to be selected out of existence, usually a result of a high-risk lifestyle where their risk for injury and/death is simply enhanced. Put simply, to create a perception of being aggressive has more advantages than to actually be highly aggressive if the ultimate aim is one of survival. This arguably places the development of all gangs into a social ecosystem, which in a prison is perhaps magnified by the specifics of the environment and the need to adapt. The term ecosystem is deliberately chosen since focus is on a community *co-existing with non-living aspects* of their environment, in this instance a prison environment, to which they are unavoidably linked. Essentially they are interacting as a system comprising of non-living (i.e. physical/organisational) and living (i.e. social) aspects.

We certainly should not be surprised by the existence of ‘gangs’ within prisons. Prisons are threatening environments, where membership to a named group is likely to confer protection (Egan & Beadman, 2011) but also provide a social identity (Fong & Buentello, 1991), which perhaps becomes lost when described merely as a ‘prisoner’. Add to this the economic advantage of being in a group in an environment that is materially deprived compared to the community (e.g. Egan & Beadman, 2011; Scott, 2001) and a recipe for gang creation starts to emerge. Understanding the development and maintenance of gangs is perhaps of more value in managing them than becoming too focused on definition, prevalence and symptoms. The ensuing section thus focuses on the development and maintenance of gangs, presenting them as part of a social ecosystem within prisons.

## Understanding how prison gangs form: Introducing the Gang Social-Ecosystem Model (G-SEM)

The development of prison gangs remains poorly understood, with research limited, descriptive and largely atheoretical. There is a need to avoid focus on myths concerning development (Biondi, 2017) and more on the specifics of the environment and the role of direct importation (and life course importation; DeLisi *et al.,* 2011) and adaption/deprivation. Importation reflects the characteristics that prisoners bring with them to the prison and represents commonly referred to theories in this area (DeLisi, Berg & Hochstetler, 2004). There is a need to apply these models more broadly, by exploring membership characteristics on a group/network and not individual level, and reflecting on how these groups have been imported into prisons and adapted. This is also in keeping with the prison bullying literature, which moved away some decades ago from the concept of individual pathology to consider the wider environment and how prisoners are attempting to adapt to this (Ireland, 2017). It is only through understanding development via the lens of the environment individuals find themselves housed within, that a fuller understanding of gangs can perhaps be considered. Understanding their development also allows us to focus more on holistic approaches to management that account for the group and not just the individual.

Before introducing the theoretical model that aims to understand how gangs are embedded within a wider social ecosystem structure, we will first consider some grounding principles that apply to how individuals become involved in indiscipline within prison settings. These principles underpin the model that will be presented. Key elements include avoiding individual conceptualisations; deprivation and importation; avoiding a strained environment; and consideration of the drivers underpinning the decision to join a prison gang.

### Moving away from individual conceptualisations

There is increasing acceptance, both empirically and theoretically, that prisoners become involved in challenging behaviours as a result of an interaction between what they bring with them to the environment (e.g. intrinsic factors) and the environment. A salient illustration is the *Multifactor Model of Bullying in Secure Settings* (MMBSS: Ireland, 2012), which highlights how pre-existing individual factors (e.g. attitudes supportive of aggression, prior history of violence) interact with social aspects of prisons (e.g. presence of dominance and power hierarchies among prisoners; a prisoner code supporting aggression), to encourage involvement in aggression, either on an individual or group level. Custodial experience, and thus prison social experience, has represented the only distinguishing factor repeatedly recognised in the literature, with bullies presenting with more experience of institutional care than non-bullies (Ireland, 2017). This shares some similarities with prison gang research, which also reflects the importance of custodial experience (Wood, Moir & James, 2009), extending it to further capture pre-existing family gang connections (Rufino, Fox & Kercher, 2012). Custodial experience and/or prior family experience with gangs are noted correlates of familiarisation with societal rules and expectations, within a gang, that are then transferred to a prison setting. ‘Gang codes’ are well recognised as is the ‘inmate code’ (Ireland, 2017). They are both products of groups forming with an identity, even if the membership routinely alters. In prisons, the ‘inmate’ code comprises a range of expectations, such as the need to protect, to use aggression when necessary and not to inform (to ‘grass’) on others (Ireland, 2005). These elements are shared with gang codes. The formation of codes is a further indication of the role of the wider social environment that begins to operate, extending beyond the individual. Adoption of codes, either explicitly or implicitly, is recognised as a survival mechanism (Paterline & Petersen, 1999) and form parts of prisonisation (Thomas & Petersen, 1977), where an individual becomes *assimilated* into prison culture. Part of this culture, it is argued, includes gangs and could represent a natural assimilation into an environment where membership to a gang develops as a means of meeting a range of needs, including survival and a sense of protection (Ireland & Power, 2012).

## Countering deprivation and the pains of imprisonment

*Deprivation theory* (Goffman, 1961; Sykes, 1958) describes how, when an individual is placed into an environment as restrictive as a prison, their needs have to be met through maladaptive means (Sykes, 1958). Lack of resources, crowding and increased risk of aggression exposure, are just examples of factors that form part of the ‘pains of imprisonment’ (Morris & Worrall, 2014; Sykes, 1958), which a prisoner will seek to manage. The development of gangs in such a situation becomes clearly adaptive on the grounds that it is a means of organising access to increased resources, developing territory to protect the little space available, offering protection against aggression and ensuring all of this is protected via a ‘code’ that is consolidated by a social identity being afforded to a gang. Thus, there is a clear advantage in a deprived environment to join a named group that can off-set some of the pains, even if the cost of membership is notable. None of this is new: the concept of a 'gorilla role' was first proposed by Sykes (1958) where a prisoner overcame deprivation at the expense of other prisoners, through exploitation. Although this role has been aligned to the concept of a prison bully, it equally applies to the head of a gang. An issue that is not, however, addressed with deprivation is the role of wider society factors; it is suggested that gang development can mirror a state structure and essentially represent a response to wider societal issues (Biondi, 2017), which are then transferred into a prison, where the gang structure simply continues. This consideration lends itself to examine the role for pre-existing factors. Societal factors can be offered as an illustration of such pre-existing factors, including social exclusion. However, individuals factor should not be overlooked, factors such as family gang membership prior to imprisonment (Rufino et al, 2012). Pre-existing factors cannot be downplayed, since some prison gangs are a clear extension of community based gangs. The characteristics thus imported into the environment become key.

## Why is importation important?

*Importation theory,* a valuable consideration at this point, refers to the pre-existing characteristics of prisoners (e.g. Irwin & Cressey, 1962). As noted, with gang membership there are pre-existing connections that can be transferred to the prison setting (Rufino *et al.,* 2012). This aligns with the notion of importation, which further recognises that culture is not a sole product of the environment but influenced by pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Importation theory has been one of the most commonly applied theories to understanding the development of prison gangs (DeLisi *et al.*, 2011; DeLisi, Berg & Hochstetler, 2004). At its simplest application is the notion that you bring your connections with you into an environment that allows for the gang to continue, to have a presence and/or flourish. What is essentially being considered, however, is the *life course importation model*, where you are bringing with you a generation of deprivation experiences and delinquency (DeLisi *et al.*, 2011). This could extend to a *state* importation model in those environments where deprivation and challenges are not family-restricted but state-specific, leading to prison gangs essentially mirroring the structure of a state (Biondi, 2017). This is an important consideration since what is being argued here is that gangs in prison can be an importation not just of the individual but of a culture that is responding to wider societal issues (e.g. poverty, reliance on crime to survive). Thus, what enters a prison is far more entrenched in its development, which begins to suggest that an intervention approach focused on tacking attitudes and beliefs underpinning membership is futile in the absence of addressing the wider environmental and societal issues.

## Avoiding a strained environment

Although deprivation and importation can offer some explanation as to why gangs may start to operate in prisons, on their own they are too simplistic to account for the continued development and reinforcement of gangs. Casting gangs as an adaptive approach to managing the strains of prison life becomes valuable. Viewing them perhaps as a means of bringing order to a chaotic social structure, where the risk of uncontrolled aggression and/or misconduct is raised, becomes important.

*General Strain Theory* (GST, Agnew, 1992, 2001) considers exposure to *strain* in prison as a likely risk factor for involvement in prison indiscipline, including aggression. Strain includes the deprivation of the environment, risk of harm, residing with threatening others, having an inability to acquire what you need in order to function (e.g. access to drugs), and losing a sense of identity and belonging. Gangs become a solution to this strain by providing an antidote; they offer a means of providing goods (governed by a code of conduct), a sense of belonging, identity and protection. The costs for belonging to and/or seeking the support of a gang may be high but this may outweigh the overall strain a prisoner is trying to manage. Indeed, strain theorists argue that it is the exposure to strain that produces a drive to offend (Agnew, 1992, 2001) and to cause an individual to exceed their usual responses. Consequently, it could be argued that you may not be a member of a gang in the community but the specific strain of the prison environment pushes you towards gang membership in a prison. Protective factors against strain include supportive relationships and coping resources (Steiner *et al.*, 2014), both of which could arguably be obtained via gang connections in prison.

### Deciding to join a prison gang: Pull or push?

Two core principles are commonly referred to in the street gang literature, namely ‘pull’ and ‘push’ variables in motivating membership to a gang. Pull variables reflect drivers, such as a need to join a gang to obtain a sense of fulfilment, respect or for stimulation (e.g. excitement), or for a sense of networked belonging, as you would achieve with a family (Gibson *et al.,* 2012; Sutton, 2017; Valasik & Reid, this volume). Pull variables capture more individually led motivators and argue for membership as a means of achieving positive reinforcement (i.e. a gain). Conversely, push variables are more environmentally driven and attempt to replace or repair a feature of the social or wider environment that is missing or insufficient. These include a need to acquire a shared social identity (Decker, 1996), to make advancements financially (Stephenson, 2015), as a solution to residing in a materially deprived area (Thornberry *et al.,* 2003) and/or to afford protection from an actual and/or perceived threat, thereby enhancing safety (Hill *et al.*, 1999). The latter has been described as the most significant of the variables pushing membership (Valasik & Reid, this volume).

The application of these principles to a prison environment would appear a logical one considering all that has been outlined. Although reputation, excitement and a sense of belonging are important (i.e. pull variables), it would appear that the push variables may be more significant. The principles of strain and deprivation theories support a role for push variables, with pull variables arguably informed primarily by importation. However, a prior history of exposure to abuse, deprivation and economic disadvantage, which are not uncommon within prisoner samples, would suggest that *life course importation* variables of this nature will actually serve to present as push variables. Thus, it would seem push variables, namely circumstance, are the primarily driving features in comparison to pull variables. This is an important consideration since it points to a focus on circumstances as a means of intervening with gang membership. It is not suggesting that pull variables are not important; they are, but pull variables are more likely to appear further down the gang development line, perhaps as a facilitating factor to determine continued involvement in an established gang where a sense of belonging and reputation is well-developed. Rather, it is being suggested here that push variables are particularly important drivers for the initial joining and assimilation into a prison gang.

## Gang Social-Ecosystem Model (G-SEM)

Bringing all of these features together into a model that can begin to offer an understanding as to the genesis of prison gangs becomes of value, both in offering an understanding but also in directing future research. What is undoubtedly missing from the research to date is any attempt to outline the *pathway* of gang development, accounting for its formation and organisation, integration into a prison, avenues for growth and how it adapts. The G-SEM attempts to do this by nesting these aspects into a social-ecosystem context out of which the gang journey is born and then reinforced as a continued product of the social-ecosystem it finds itself in. A key factor to acknowledge, however, is that gangs differ in their development and whereas some may be an extension of a gang from the community, others are not. The G-SEM draws on circumstance and situational factors, importation, deprivation and evolutionary influences. It is shown in Figure 1.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

G-SEM outlines the wider context within which a prison gang may form and be maintained, noting the role of wider circumstance contexts, such as state influences and prior factors of relevance. These are then imported into a prison and include prior gang membership and the experience of being victimised. Processes of importation, deprivation, strain, mirroring and a need to maintain an identity are all key background factors before prison placement, with these processes serving as a bridge between the wider context and the prison facilitating variables.

The prison environment then serves to facilitate gang development/ maintenance through the continuing presence of deprivation and strain, with importation variables allowed to further manifest. The concept of push and pull variables become important within a discussion of these facilitators. Push variables are the most prevalent in comparison to pull and appear as a continuation of the wider pre-prison environment. Push variables that then facilitate within the prison include deprivation and fear of/risk of harm and chaos, all of which occur within the context of a restricted regime, and arguably push for the further development of prison gangs. The pull variable of ‘few bonds’ should not be lost within the push variables, however, since G-SEM argues for a need to compensate for this as a crucial component for gang development, particularly in an environment where bonding can serve as a means of protecting against harm and thereby creating a pull-push variable. Indeed, it is well recognised that gangs will thrive where there is a threat of/actual violence (push variable) since this serves to promote bonds and group cohesion (Decker, Pyrooz *et al.*, 2014; Howell & Griffiths, 2018), making an argument for a closer push-pull association and returning us to the Darwinian concept of thrive and protection as important for the collective action of groups.

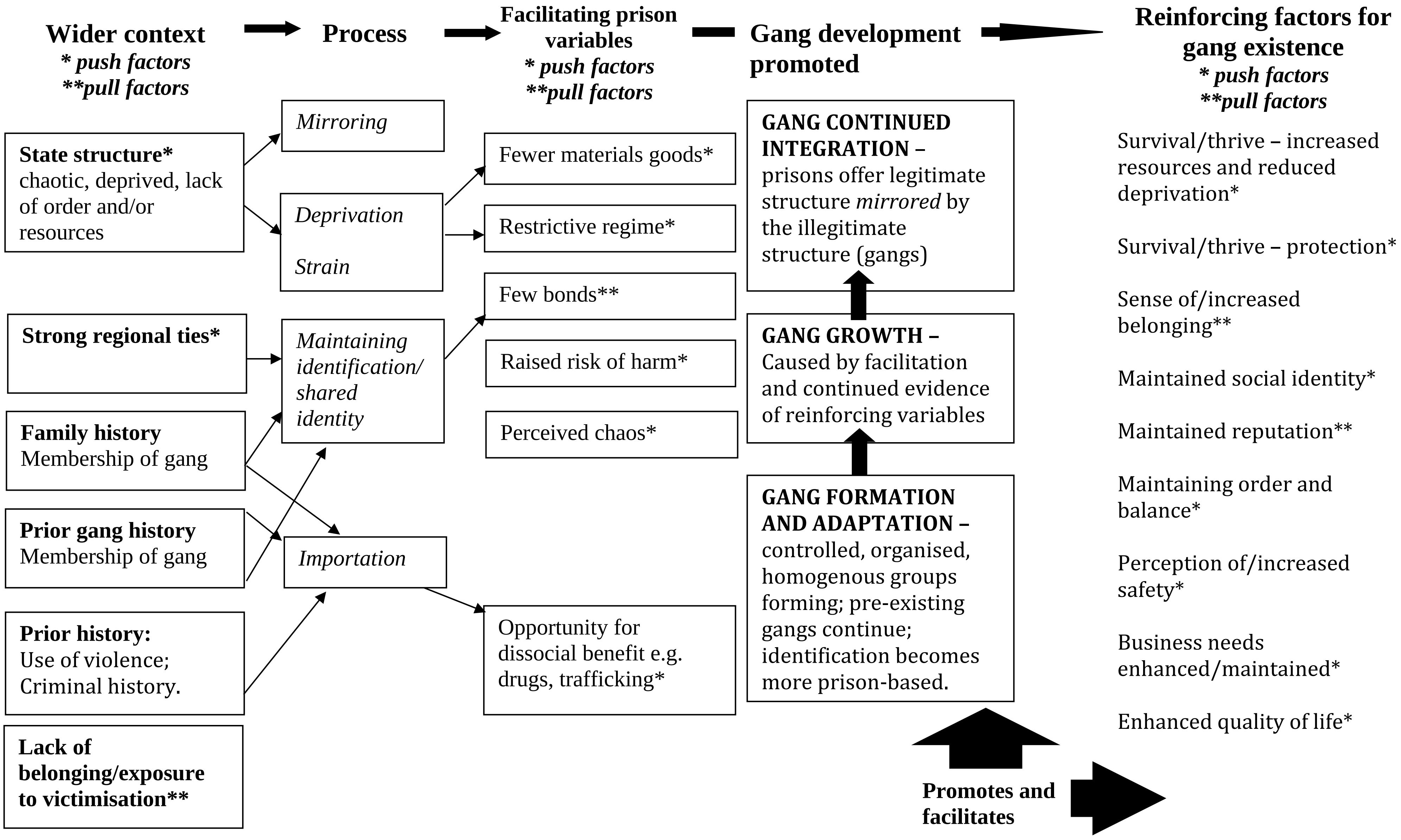
G-SEM provides further argument that the majority of reinforcing factors connected to gang development are push factors. It presents prison gangs as serving as a *solution to unpleasant circumstances* by either removing these or moderating them. They could, for example, be providing a solution to material deprivation by making goods more accessible to those connected to the gang; they could be removing the perceived fear of being harmed; and/or providing order to an arguable chaotic environment, to name but a few. Nevertheless, pull factors are also indicated as reinforcing, where the gains of gang membership focus on reputational enhancement and/or a sense of belonging. In this sense, pull factors are acting as positive reinforcers and thus as ‘gains’.

What G-SEM cannot explain is how these reinforcing factors can be weighted. For example, are the push factors, although greater in number, more significant than the pull factors, or do certain pull factors over-ride push factors? Regardless, both push and pull factors relate to prison gang membership, with the G-SEM embedding its model in a more circumstance driven model of understanding prison gang membership, which attends to the processes of importation, deprivation and strain. It does not, however, discount the potential for factors that have *both* a push and a pull component. This is an area that future research could perhaps focus attention on to determine in more discrete terms the distinction between these components and their dynamic interplay within the specifics of a prison environment.

## Conclusion

The current chapter has highlighted difficulties in the definition of gangs and how these are informed by a changing history. Labels are never of value and focus should instead be fixed on the notion of a group forming with a shared social identity and shared aims. Shifting focus from definition also allows us to centre attention more on the role and function of gangs, particularly in prison environments, where importation, deprivation and strain become key, coupled with the role of a wider social and circumstance context that is often neglected. The G-SEM is presented as an initial theoretical model that aims to bring together these concepts and to recognise also what moves an individual towards gang membership. It further avoids any discussion of the symptoms of gangs. It is accepted that they play a role in aggression and indiscipline, including illegal acts, but equally that any attempt at intervention needs to focus less on the symptoms and more on the factors driving their formation and facilitation. Within this understanding of (prison) gangs, there needs to be an acceptance that humans are a group living species and we will attempt to gravitate towards groups, particularly those that will protect us and assist us to thrive. This accounts again for the more positive elements of gangs. The G-SEM argues that in a threatening and sometimes chaotic environment, such as a prison, there is a clear argument for the adaptive elements of a gang to be acknowledged. Without the presence of a ‘gang’ another named group would simply appear. Consequently, attention to ‘gang intervention’ should acknowledge all aspects of their function, both negative and positive. Focus should perhaps move instead to fostering more of a ‘community’ than a ‘gang’ to drive prosocial aims. Removing gangs may not be the answer but reframing their presence and role may.

Figure 1: Gang Social-Ecosystem Model (G-SEM).


Wider context
* push factors
**pull factors
Process
Facilitating prison variables
* push factors
**pull factors
Gang development promoted
Reinforcing factors for gang existence
* push factors
**pull factors
State structure* chaotic, deprived, lack of order and/or resources
Strong regional ties*
Family history Membership of gang
Prior gang history Membership of gang
Prior history: Use of violence; Criminal history.
Lack of belonging/exposure to victimisation**
Mirroring
Deprivation
Strain
Maintaining identification/ shared identity
Importation
Fewer materials goods*
Restrictive regime*
Few bonds**
Raised risk of harm*
Perceived chaos*
Opportunity for dissocial benefit e.g. drugs, trafficking*
GANG CONTINUED INTEGRATION – prisons offer legitimate structure mirrored by the illegitimate structure (gangs)
GANG GROWTH – Caused by facilitation and continued evidence of reinforcing variables
GANG FORMATION AND ADAPTATION – controlled, organised, homogenous groups forming; pre-existing gangs continue; identification becomes more prison-based.
Promotes and facilitates
Survival/thrive – increased resources and reduced deprivation*
Survival/thrive – protection*
Sense of/increased belonging**
Maintained social identity*
Maintained reputation**
Maintaining order and balance*
Perception of/increased safety*
Business needs enhanced/maintained*
Enhanced quality of life*

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