

The Security Imperative: Establishing a Proactive System for Gang Management in a Jail

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Gangs are largely responsible for criminal activities within today's correctional institutions, including the trafficking of narcotics, the commitment and/or ordering of violence against staff and inmates, and the direction of criminal activity between correctional institutions and the community.

Jails are especially vulnerable to internal disruption by criminal gang members who, through their patterns of repeated violent behavior, routinely victimize each other, uninvolved offenders, and staff. Gang activity creates a heavy demand on the personnel and fiscal resources of many correctional agencies.

This article describes how we have been addressing the challenges posed by gang-involved inmates in the Clark County Detention Center (CCDC), a facility operated by the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) in Las Vegas, Nevada, with funding from the Clark County government.

A Problem Emerges

In the latter months of 2008, CCDC's Gang Special Investigations Unit (the "Gang Unit") began seeing an increase in fights within multiple housing units. The fights were occurring between various races, primarily among blacks and Hispanics. When Gang Unit officers began investigating the causation of these altercations, one reason became painfully evident: the gang members in our facility were not being properly validated and documented into the inmate management system.

A data query was completed. It found that, in a facility that housed upwards of 3,200 inmates of various classifications, only 218 gang members were documented in our system. This number was noticeably low for a large, multi-bureau, pretrial detainee facility that sits only hours away from California, a state which houses the largest prison system in the nation. Couple that with the transient nature of Las Vegas and the ability for criminal gangs to maneuver within the faceless crowd of "Sin City," and the truth was clear. The Gang Unit needed to strategically and tactically identify the inmate gang population.

Our jail's process for classifying gang members followed a traditional model during intake into the facility: classification officers with very basic gang identification training asked the traditional gang

questions and filled out the usual Field Interview documents. Information from this document would then be inputted into the main inmate management database when clerical staff had time. Gang identification did not become a priority until multiple incidents erupted between rival gang members in the facility.

Between 2001 and 2005, the detention staff had begun to recognize a new level of sophistication that gang members were bringing into the facility. Issues were precipitated by race-on-race conflict, state-on-state friction, local street rivalries, and jail and prison gang politics. The scale and variety of gang-related activity led our administration to listen to our experts rather than turn a blind eye to the growing situation. The liability burden to the agency also was growing, as more and more predatory gang members were finding their way into general population housing units. Up to this point, we had been reacting to the situation. We needed to become proactive in our gang management approach.

Making a New Start

In 2008, I took over CCDC's Detention Services Division Intelligence Unit, which soon was renamed as the Gang Special Investigations Unit, or Gang Unit for short. Four Corrections Officers were assigned to the unit. Knowing that our gang population was growing more violent, I set a course of action that has allowed us to evolve into the nationally recognized unit that we are today.

The unit previously had a mission, but it wasn't "jail-centric," as I like to say. Gang Unit officers were tasked with various law enforcement requests that took time away from managing gangs inside the facility. Working for LVMPD as a Corrections Officer in an investigative/information gathering unit places a tremendous burden on the staff, which impacts the safety and security of the facility. Because of the critical safety and liability issues in the jail, it was time for a higher priority to be placed on the jail's gang management needs. Our Gang Unit officers needed better tools.

After an initial strategic planning session, the unit team sat down and laid out a plan for handling our jail gang issues and at the same time assisting our agency and other law enforcement entities as time allowed.

Goal #1 — Hone Gang Unit Officer Expertise

The first strategic goal for the unit was making sure the gang officers were considered experts if called upon to testify during gang cases. The officers in the unit all have gang knowledge above what typical staff members have. Gang Unit officers are unique in that they have spent time (a lot of it on their own dime) to learn the various nuances to the threats that gangs pose in the jail and on the streets. Gang work—whether on the streets or in a correctional facility—is a passion that fuels these officers.

My officers were already well versed in most gangs from the West Coast. To hone their knowledge, each officer chose a specialty, i.e., a gang or race-based group they wanted to become an expert in. This direction has fostered long-term rapport with source inmates from specific gangs or races.

Goal #2 — Assess the Scope of Gang Participation in the Jail

Our unit then set about finding out just what level of gang involvement we had in our facility. Just walking through the housing units, we saw tattoos and gang indicia in cells that spoke volumes about the consistent lack of identification. We knew that the violence would continue to escalate in the housing units when gang members were housed improperly. We came to the conclusion that we needed to go inmate by inmate, cell by cell to gauge accurately who we truly had in our custody.

In conjunction with detectives from the LVMPD Gang Crimes Bureau and officers from the CCDC Special Emergency Response Team (SERT), we hosted Operation: Find Them. We chose one complete floor of approximately 320 inmates to contact and interview. We paired up two street gang detectives with one Corrections Officer, while SERT officers were on hand to provide extra security in case any inmates were non-compliant. The results were staggering—of the 320 inmates interviewed, 86 new Field Interview cards were filled out for entry into the inmate database. That equates to one out of four inmates having been an unidentified gang member.

We continued to conduct Operation: Find Them on a quarterly basis until the inmates in all of the housing units had been contacted. This included quite a few female inmates. We currently have upwards of 800 inmates that are identified as street gang members, roughly 25% of our jail population.

A few prison gang members and their known associates also were identified among the inmate general population. (See more about our definitions of gang member classifications on page 7.)

Figure 1. Sergeant Lapore conducts a briefing with Gang Unit and SERT officers to launch Operation: Find Them.



Goal #3 — Enhance Information-Sharing

One of the biggest changes that came up through our strategic planning was the necessity for the Gang Unit to be transparent in regards to information-sharing. Because of its past practices, the intelligence unit was considered a “black hole” of information. It was very common for information to flow into the section with no follow up or response back to the reporting jail staff. The Gang Unit has created a new reporting mechanism that closes the loop by demonstrating to line officers how their intelligence helps build a “paper trail” on individual gang-involved inmates.

Not only was information-sharing important for the jail staff, but it was necessary for inclusion in the intelligence shared by the various jail and prison gang units from agencies in California, Arizona, and our own state. Since our willingness to share information with both internal and external partners has been reciprocated, we are better able to make housing choices based on multiple layers of information. This effort has limited the big incidents in our facility. We validate our administrative segregation decisions

through the information we receive from other law enforcement agencies on dangerous prison gang members and associates. Without this give and take of information, a lack of knowledge of these high-level shot-callers would leave our officers vulnerable and our inmates susceptible to violent prison gang politics.

Goal #4 — Train Classification and Line Officers

To best obtain information from the line officers, we needed to give them gang training above and beyond what they had previously received during their academy training. Classification officers also needed to be given this additional training because they make contact with and interview each inmate who is booked into CCDC.

Our unit created a 40-hour Gang Identification Officer training course that focuses on key indicators, such as tattoos, and keeps officers up to date on trends for the prevalent gangs in our area. Those who complete the training are designated as Gang Resource Officers (GROs). Classification officers can voluntarily pursue additional training, schedule permitting. To ensure that as many line officers as possible are trained as GROs, we are currently aiming to offer the Gang Identification Officer course on a quarterly basis. The LVMPD Corrections Academy also has given us a 40-hour block of time to teach all incoming recruits, which reduces the number of line staff we will need to train in the future. LVMPD also has been asked by our neighboring agency, the Henderson Police Department, to teach in their academy.

To help officers stay current, Gang Unit officers will train on platoons when invited to do so. The unit also receives incoming gang information from our national partners, which is stored in various internal databases for access by all CCDC officers.

The training has produced better housing decisions, which helps the line staff to better manage the housing units. Having the line staff attend the Gang Identification Officer training course has given them better skills in identifying the problems that gang politics bring to the custody environment and in reacting sooner to problems when they arise.

Goal #5 — Improve Access to Information

With only four officers assigned to the Gang Unit, information flow from trained line staff has always been very important. At this point we had a majority of the line staff trained specifically to identify manifesting gang problems in the housing units, but we still needed a way for the officers to convey the information to us. We specifically wanted a way to establish a record linking incidents of gang activity to the problematic inmate.

The facility's ITAG inmate management system tracks all written incidents, so utilizing what we already had in place was the easy, inexpensive solution. Previously all reports were written as incident reports, with no way to track gang-specific issues tied to individual inmates. Gang Unit officers would have to go

to the specific inmate history in ITAG and read each report to find out which ones were gang-specific. Sifting through incident reports written on our inmates to find gang-specific information was inefficient.

We worked with the system administrator to develop a report tagging system that officers could utilize to get the information to the Gang Unit. An incident tag ("IH-Intelligence") was installed into the inmate management database for officers to use as the header. This enabled the Gang Unit officers and an analyst to pull the specific gang incident reports as compared to having to read each one. We also had the system administrator give us the ability to search the text of reports written under this subject tag.

Each day, the gang officers now pull a list of reports written the day prior and tagged with the "IH" tag. Reports are assigned to each officer based on their specific areas of gang expertise. Predominately we receive these reports from classification officers when they come into contact with inmates who will not admit to gang membership even though various indicators suggest otherwise. Classification officers will only document gang involvement on the Field Interview card when they know what the gang is. If the inmate refuses to answer or acknowledge gang membership or association, they document the possible gang involvement into the inmate management database, tagged directly to us for follow-up. Gang Unit officers also may be called in to interview an inmate on the spot during classification.

In keeping with the need to be transparent, we also wanted to show the line officers what we did with the investigative information they took the time to write. The system admin added another incident tag ("SIR"/Special Investigative Report") that only the Gang Unit can utilize. This gives our Gang Unit officers a way to document that we looked at the original report and did something with the information. It allows us to document our response based on our findings established through the investigatory process and is intended to be the response to the original report submitted by the classification or line officer.

All these reports remain in the inmate's file, which gives us the paper trail to utilize when we need to recommend administrative segregation housing for the dangerous and active gang members who pose the biggest threat to the safety and security of the facility. The paper trail showing the inmate's continuous gang behavior justifies our decision to elevate him from the level of known gang member to classification as an inmate whose gang activity warrants special management, including placement in maximum custody.

These internal reports are the basis for our gang investigations. We supplement this information by using our connections in the national gang investigation community, which have been built by networking and attending conferences and gang intelligence-sharing meetings. Because of these relationships, the unit can reach out to multiple law enforcement sources in various agencies in multiple states. We often contact other agencies to acquire inmate histories that assist us in making recommendations to Classification on housing decisions.

Goal #6 — Define Policies for Gang Member Management

To ensure the utmost in facility security within CCDC, we needed a policy that would establish guidelines for the identification and validation process of known or suspected gang members. A clear and appropriate policy was needed to protect LVMPD from litigation relating to the administrative segregation of dangerous, gang-involved inmates.

Our policy defines how we identify and manage three categories of the gang-involved inmate population:

- **Security Threat Group (STG) Members**—jail inmates who have been validated through Law Enforcement intelligence as former prison gang members;
- **STG Associates**—jail inmates who have been validated through Law Enforcement intelligence as having direct ties to STG Members or other prison gang members; and
- **Disruptive Group Members**—jail inmates who are members of street gangs, but not a prison gang, and who do not have a validated, direct tie to an STG Member or other prison gang member.

The CCDC inmate population also has gang members who comply with rules and regulations and generally stay “under the radar.” I tell people you can be a gang member in our custody as long as you do our program, not the gang program.

Member Management Rationale

Because they pose the greatest threat to the safety of officers and other inmates and the operational security of the facility, STG Members and Associates remain classified as maximum restricted for their entire duration of incarceration within CCDC. Taken together, these groups are a small portion of the inmate population—about 30 STG Members or Associates at any given time, or 1% of inmates.

STG Members are considered to be the most dangerous gang members within the corrections environment. They can establish a criminal organization that extends from inside the secured perimeter of the facility to street gang members in the community, and they pose a high risk of violence in the jail, up to and potentially including murder. STG Associates are influential within their gangs and are responsible for much of the day-to-day criminal activity observed both in custody and on the streets, as they work to build a reputation within the gang. Most Associates control the activities of subordinate gang members, up to and including attacks on gang enemies and or gang defectors.

Disruptive Group Members can participate in the maximum custody step-down process if their behavior is in compliance with facility rules and regulations. The jail is managing about 30 Disruptive Group Members at any point, or 1% of inmates. Disruptive Group Members band together within the confines

of a correctional facility to conduct continuing criminal activities, and they disrupt the normal safe and orderly operations of CCDC. They often receive and carry out orders from the STG Members and/or Associates. Their arrival on a general population housing unit begins to be felt immediately by line officers who observe a changed and polarized inmate social structure, even if the officer is not initially aware of the source.

Validation of Gang Involvement

Identification of STG Members and Associates is validated through a law enforcement investigation that utilizes multiple criteria to confirm membership or association. Validation criteria are predominately standardized throughout the law enforcement community.

Examples of these criteria and their internal and external sources include:

- Self-admission
- Prison de-brief information
- Gang tattoos
- Use of gang signs and symbols
- Law Enforcement information
- Independent source information
- Direct links to other members
- Jail classification interview.

Documentation is paramount in assigning the proper classification status, especially when an agency is administratively segregating STG Members, STG Associates, or Disruptive Group Members. Thorough and complete investigatory documentation protects the agency from potential litigation that agencies always must be prepared to defend against when limiting certain rights based on safety, security, and the orderly operation of the facility.

Goal #7 — Promote Safety and Security Through Housing

The major remaining challenge to all of the proactive gang work that is being done in the facility is how and where to house gang-involved inmates, to reduce the incidence of violence and criminality. Most facilities have a limited amount of single-cell administrative segregation housing, and it is no different in CCDC. Our gang management processes have filled all of our special housing units, and Classification is always looking to find openings for newly arrived special management inmates. CCDC has five housing units that are designed for administrative segregation housing. We also have disciplinary and isolation housing where STG inmates can be moved temporarily if necessary.

Currently, the CCDC administration is looking at ways to step down Disruptive Group Members who show they can follow the institutional rules while locked down in an administrative segregation unit. In

my experience, however, those few Disruptive Group Members whom we have released out of administrative segregation have continued to gang politic in their new housing unit; ultimately all have found their way back to administrative segregation. It is a continuing balancing act between inmates' rights and the safety and security of the facility.

Big Picture Meets Bottom Line

Since CCDC launched its focus on gang-involved inmates a few years ago, many more of them have been identified at intake or early in their jail stay and have been managed appropriately. As a result, the number of major incidents such as riots and large, multiple-inmate fights has gone down.

Some individuals still slip through our screening. We continue to see some fights that have a gang nexus within our general population units. These fights primarily happen in the individual cells or during meals in the open dayroom. They are best controlled by identifying and removing the inmate who is influencing the unit, so jail officers are again in charge and the climate returns to normal. Within our administrative segregation units, staff assaults are up since the number of STG inmates there has increased. Overall, we are convinced that our focus on identifying and managing influential, dangerous gang members is keeping our facility safer for staff and inmates.

The Gang Unit has gone and continues to go through various changes induced primarily by the same budgetary woes that most agencies are facing today. Despite these various administrative decisions and budget concerns, the Gang Unit has evolved beyond providing just gang identification and investigations. We have been brought to the table as a partner with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Southern Nevada Counter-Terrorism Center, where we assist with jail Terror Liaison Officer (TLO) program management and the Fusion Information Sharing Team (FIST). This program assists our agency and the nation to a certain degree with potential identification of inmates who may be in the first stages of jail/prison radicalization.

As the Gang Unit strives to meet the varied needs of patrol investigations, district attorneys' offices, and other partners, our main focus always will be "jail-centric." Our top priority is to assist in the protection of the line staff through our extensive gang knowledge and gang contacts from around the nation.

Smaller jails or those in different parts of the country may have, or perceive, less of a need to anticipate and manage potential gang member activity than we do here in Las Vegas. However, I am convinced that most jails today need a mechanism to recognize gang members and gang activity—be it a dedicated gang unit or at minimum some specially trained officers. Facility administrators who do not take prudent, preemptive measures are risking increased liability. Failure to properly identify gang members in jail and to deal with them appropriately will be reflected in more incidents, assaults, and contraband, and less control of the jail. Don't risk the death of an inmate or a serious injury to or loss of an officer caused by an active gang member who could have been identified and classified properly. Ensuring our jails are safe and well run is our highest imperative.

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Document available at:

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