

Book Review: Pyrooz, David C. and Scott H. Decker, *Competing for Control: Gangs and the Social Order of Prisons*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 2019. ISBN: 978-1-108-73574-2 (Paperback). 297 Pages. \$34.99.

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In their book, *Competing for Control: Gangs and the Social Order of Prisons*, David Pyrooz and Scott Decker examine 802 interviews conducted with Texas inmates in order to explore a variety of issues related to gangs and the incarceration experience. This work is part of the “Lone Star Project,” which is the culmination of a five-year research undertaking funded by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ). In 2016, the lead author, David Pyrooz, won the coveted Ruth Shonle Cavan Young Scholar Award from the American Society of Criminology. Though he received his Ph.D. less than eight-years ago, Pyrooz is already known as one of the leading authorities on prison gangs and has contributed more literature to this topic than most established prison researchers, including those who have been active for twenty, thirty,

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even forty years. Scott Decker, the book's coauthor, is the 2011 recipient of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences' Bruce Smith, Jr. Award, an honor which has only been bestowed upon forty-three criminologists throughout the organization's fifty-seven year history. Given all of the expertise and accomplishments of both authors, it is no surprise that this work provides readers with an evocative and in-depth scholarly analysis of prison gangs in Texas.

As Pyrooz and Decker write in the opening of their book, their study began in 2014, when they came across an NIJ announcement soliciting proposals to study gangs and gang violence. During this time, the lead author was working as a faculty member at Sam Houston State University's (SHSU) College of Criminal Justice, an institution which is highly regarded for its strong commitment to prison research. The authors point out this may be due, at least in part, to the fact that SHSU is located in Huntsville, Texas (also known as "Prison City, USA" to many of its residents). On any given day, 13,000 inmates reside in one of seven correctional facilities located within miles of the Huntsville city limits, giving it the dubious distinction of having more inmates per capita than any other municipality in the United States, perhaps even the world (Alexander, 2012; Clear, 2009; Perkinson, 2010; Roth, 2016). In response to the NIJ announcement, Pyrooz and Decker put together a research proposal to interview both inmate gang members and non-gang members. To their delight, the proposal was approved by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and ultimately, they received a large federal grant. This funding made it possible for the authors to hire and train dozens of graduate and undergraduate students to conduct interviews with inmates. The authors employed a longitudinal research design in that their sample of inmates was interviewed first in prison and then re-interviewed upon being released. *Competing for Control* focuses primarily on the first batch of interviews which was conducted with incarcerated offenders in one of two prison facilities.

After reading the first few chapters of this book, it was obvious to me that the TDCJ provided an enormous amount of support and assistance to Pyrooz, Decker, and their research team. While correctional agencies, in general, are not known for being overly receptive to researchers (see Fox, Lane, and Turner, 2018), it was evident that TDCJ worked closely with the authors from start to finish.² Every week, Texas prison officials

² In spite of the literature which portrays correctional facilities as institutions which seldom grant entrée to researchers, I was not completely surprised that TDCJ officials went out of their way to help Pyrooz and Decker. Over the years, this organization has done an excellent job of accommodating the needs of prison researchers, especially those

provided the authors with a list of inmates who were scheduled to be released. The list contained relevant information, such as, each prisoner's custody level, race, marital status, criminal history, prison disciplinary record, and gang affiliation (or non-affiliation). In order to ensure that an adequate number of prison gang members were included in their sample, the authors used this weekly list to employ a disproportionate stratified random sampling technique. They oversampled former, suspected, and confirmed gang members (by a factor of five) and then *weighted* the responses to make more accurate inferences to the general prison population.

By and large, most of the inmates who the authors reached out to consented to be interviewed for this study. As Pyrooz and Decker note in their book, there were only forty-four refusals, as well as four additional cases, where the inmate did not complete the interview—which made it ineligible. Whenever a refusal occurred, the research team used their sampling technique to find a suitable replacement. In the end, the final sample of 802 prisoners consisted of 346 inmates who claimed to be involved with a prison gang and 454 inmates who stated they had no prison gang affiliations. It was particularly interesting to me that the respondents' self-reported prison gang affiliation closely resembled the official data that was provided to the researchers by the prison agency. In some cases, the inmate respondents did not admit to being involved in a prison gang, but in most instances, they were truthful. Interestingly enough, 86% of the respondents who were affiliated with a prison gang even named the gang they were a member of—though they were not, in any way, required to do so. To me this was quite impressive, given that many prison researchers (not to mention the popular media) tend to portray prison gang members as secretive and unwilling to cooperate with outsiders. I also found it intriguing that the participation rates between prison gang and non-prison gang members were roughly the same. In fact, a close reading of this book reveals that prison gang members were, indeed, slightly more likely to participate in the study than non-prison gang members. This, in and of itself, makes Pyrooz and Decker's book extremely unique, and I found myself yearning for even

affiliated with SHSU. I learned this firsthand in 2001 when the agency allowed me (who was, at the time, an unpublished Master's student) to singlehandedly conduct face-to-face interviews with thirty-two inmates who had *inappropriate relationships* with TDCJ staff members. These inmate manipulators spoke candidly with me about how they lured prison employees into having sex and smuggling drugs, money, and cell phones into the prison (see Worley, Marquart, and Mulling, 2003).

more discussion as to how the researchers were able to so successfully build such a strong sense of rapport with their subjects.

As Pyrooz and Decker write in their book, all 802 of the interviews were collected over an eight-month period in 2016. The researchers used computer assisted personal interviewing (CAPI), a method which reduces coding error and generally ensures more standardized responses among research subjects (Hagan, 2018). As the authors state in their book, CAPI also “allowed us to drill down data to the keystroke level of entry. And unlike paper and pencil, we encrypted the data immediately upon completing a survey” (60-61). The interviewers, of course, needed to have computers to enter their data during the course of each interview. Each day, the completed interviews were scrapped from laptops and uploaded to an outside secure server to safeguard the participants’ confidentiality. It is worth noting that prison agencies typically do not permit researchers to bring computers into the research site. The fact that TDCJ officials accommodated the researchers in this respect, again, illustrates the agency’s unwavering commitment to this project.

While it would be next too impossible to fully discuss all of the significant findings of *Competing for Control* in this very short review essay (there are simply too many), I found it quite remarkable that when asked, the majority of respondents *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the statement: “Gangs get a cut of contraband profits” (131). What was particularly insightful here is that even inmates who were affiliated with a prison-gang tended to *disagree* (58% likelihood) with the above assertion. This finding is, in my opinion, quite significant because it is one of many examples throughout the book which debunks the popular notion that prison gangs tightly regulate the sale of contraband (such as, illicit drugs, money, and cell phones). We know that prison gangs may have an important role to play in the underground prison economy (for example, see Sharbek, 2014); however, as the authors eloquently write, “...it hardly rises to the iron-fisted and monopolistic control often ascribed to gangs” (137). To me, this finding will likely be of interest to most prison scholars for many years to come.

While most of this book is quantitative in nature, *Competing for Control* also includes some qualitative data where interviewees responded to a series of open-ended questions. In some cases, respondents indicated that gangs closely controlled the flow of contraband. As one inmate reported, “If you’re not in the gang, you’re not going to sell nothing” (145). The authors explain this discrepancy between the qualitative and quantitative data may “lie in the *mythologizing* done by gang members regarding the control over

contraband exercised by prison gangs” (146, italics added). I found this to be a very astute observation. Most inmates are narcissists. And, they also know the value of a good story. It is likely that some of these research subjects may have magnified the dangers associated with prison life, perhaps as a way to inflate their own egos or sense of importance. Still, in virtually any type of qualitative research endeavor, this type of embellishment is to be expected. As qualitative research extraordinaire, Heith Copes, once told me in an *ACJS Today* interview six years ago, “We all exaggerate stories for dramatic effect. Stories that only relay the truth are not as engrossing as those with exaggerations” (Copes and Worley, 2014: 31).

Overall, *Competing for Control* is a very important work which will surely generate significant discussions in virtually any classroom. It is a must-read for those of us in academe, as well as anyone who works in a correctional facility (or perhaps even resides in one). One of the major takeaways from this book is that prison gangs, at least those in Texas, currently do not pose anywhere near the same level of danger, to either inmates or prison staff, that they did, say, twenty or thirty years ago. This is consistent with official statistics which overwhelmingly indicate that, today, Texas offenders are significantly more likely to be killed on the streets rather than behind the prison walls. However, as Pyrooz and Decker remind their readers, this has not always been the case. The authors lament that during a 21-month period from the beginning of 1984 to the end of 1985, there were about seventy-eight murders per every 100,000 prisoners in Texas. While some scholars may understandably disapprove of the usage of solitary confinement, the evidence suggests that the TDCJ has been effective in using this controversial method of incarceration to considerably weaken the power of prison gangs—which has ultimately resulted in a prison system that is stable and relatively safe.

I am delighted to recommend *Competing for Control* to others. I believe it is a strong contender for the ACJS Outstanding Book Award; and if it wins, it will be Decker’s second time to win this prestigious award—which is pretty cool.

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