

Book Review: David C. Pyrooz and Scott H. Decker, *Competing for Control: Gangs and the Social Order of Prisons*. Cambridge University Press. 2019. ISBN: 9781108735742 (Paperback): 310 Pages. \$36.99.¹

Reviewed by Daniel P. Mears²

[Article copies available for a fee from The Transformative Studies Institute. E-mail address: journal@transformativestudies.org
Website: <http://www.transformativestudies.org> ©2022 by The Transformative Studies Institute. All rights reserved.]

In recent decades, the advent of powerful computers, secondary data sets, “big data,” the ability to run statistical analyses with the press of a button, and more have raised problems for the social sciences that were anticipated long ago by Robert Merton (1968, 1973). One in particular is the pursuit of facts for facts’ sake, or empiricism. The concern has long-standing roots. In an essay written in the early 1900s, Max Weber (1949) wrote disparagingly of “subject matter specialists” and “interpretative specialists.”³ “The fact-greedy gullet of the former,” he wrote, “can be filled only with legal documents, statistical worksheets and questionnaires, but . . . is insensitive to the refinement of a new idea” (112). Committing a different sin, the “gourmandise of the latter dulls [their] taste for fact by ever new intellectual subtilities” (112).

Scholars can and will debate his Weber’s precise meaning and Merton’s views of science. For the purposes here, I will emphasize the idea that science advances not through endless descriptive fact or grand

¹ This review first appeared in *ACJS Today*, vol. 49, issue 1, pp. 7-9. I thank *ACJS Today* and its Editor, Dr. Ráchael A. Powers, for permission to reprint this review.

² **Daniel P. Mears**, Ph.D., is a Distinguished Research Professor and the Mark C. Stafford Professor of Criminology at Florida State University’s College of Criminology and Criminal Justice, Eppes Hall, 112 South Copeland Street, Tallahassee, FL 32306-1273, e-mail (dmears@fsu.edu), phone (850-644-7376). A Fellow of the American Society of Criminology, he conducts research on crime and policy, and has published in criminology, criminal justice, law, and sociology journals. He is the author of *American Criminal Justice Policy* (Cambridge) and *Out-of-Control Criminal Justice*, each of which won the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences’ outstanding book award.

³ The Weber (1949) book is a compilation of essays that Edward Shils and Henry Finch compiled and published three decades after Weber’s death.

theoretical ideas devoid of reference to empirical data, but rather a blending of the two. In this view, the goal of science is not description or theory, but explanations that span the general and the specific and that can be and are evaluated with relevant data. Data, methods, and theory are simply a means to an end, nothing more. That “end” is knowledge—always provisional—about how the world works.

The field of criminology and criminal justice itself constitutes a form of subject matter specialization. That puts it in a tenuous position. Like many fields, it can devolve into endless empirical description as well as theories that cannot be tested, and thus amount to philosophical speculation or ideological posturing. It risks chasing topics that have little relevance for creating knowledge, and orients attention to headline-grabbing “findings.” At its best, though, this field creates knowledge that sheds light on the general and the specific, leads to new questions, and provides insights relevant to societal debates and policies (Mears and Cochran 2019).

Enter David Pyrooz and Scott Decker’s *Competing for Control: Gangs and the Social Order of Prisons* (2019). It won the Academy of Criminal Justice Science’s Outstanding Book Award, and for good reason. The book stands as an exemplar of social science. Grounded in theory and the collection of data specifically suited to stimulate and test theoretical arguments, it hits on all pistons—generating knowledge about social order in general, social order in prisons more specifically, and then, still more specifically, gangs. But not gangs for the sake of studying gangs. The book examines gangs for what we can learn about social order in prisons and the connections between prisons and society. It is illuminating and insightful. It identifies connections between individuals, groups, institutions, and society. More, it exemplifies excellence in social science research, and—bonus—the book is a fun read. We learn new facts, yes, but we learn so much more.

Competing for Control fills a tremendous void in existing work. It is comprehensive, with chapters that provide historical and theoretical context (chapters 1 and 2), description of the different data sources, which included surveys and administrative records (chapter 3), characteristics of gang members in prison (chapter 4), characteristics of gangs in prison (chapter 5), the role of gangs in the social order of prisons (chapter 6), gangs and prison misconduct and victimization (chapter 7), joining and avoiding gangs in prison (chapter 8), and continuity and change in prison gang membership (chapter 9). The richness of the data on prison gangs marks a signature achievement of the study. Another significant achievement is the identification of how

gangs create a connection between prisons and the outside world. Gangs are shaped by prisons and communities, but they also affect them. They constitute a type of network influence that connects two seemingly disconnected universes.

Although the book makes many contributions, this insight arguably stands out the most. A tendency in many theories and policies is to reduce behavior to individual characteristics. *Competing for Control* avoid this over-simplification, identifying that, for example, prison system classification decisions influence how staff and inmates view and act towards individuals, and how these individuals view themselves. As Pyrooz and Decker observe, “We found again and again that identity and classification were key elements of prison life. Identity was built not only on affiliations that were chosen (gangs, religious group, cell block) but also on ascribed characteristics such as race and ethnicity and city of residence” (254).

At the same time, the authors highlight that prison constitutes but one moment in an individual’s life. It is, though, one that may have profound consequences. Entering prison, for example, can be viewed as a turning point that requires individuals to exert agency if they wish to successfully navigate the challenges of incarceration. Decisions they make, such as joining or exiting gangs, are shaped by the contexts in which they reside and influence both life in prison and after release. Such consequences tie directly to another major insight from the book—street gangs influence prison gangs, and prison gangs influence street gangs. There are, then, simultaneous forces at play. Individuals make decisions within the context of social networks and contexts, and they also influence these networks and contexts. More broadly, Pyrooz and Decker show that multiple forces—including organizational structure, group dynamics, and prison and gang culture—shape gang behavior.

The book illuminates another level of analysis: social order in prisons. Contrary to what they expected, Pyrooz and Decker’s analyses reveal that “the ascendancy of gangs is seen as much more powerful among gang members and may not extend fully to non-gang members,” and, in fact, “non-gang members responded that rules set by the staff were of more importance than those set by gangs” (151). As the authors highlight, that finding likely reflects reliance on data from non-gang members, enabling the study to correct a potential bias that arises from relying primarily on prison gang members or officials’ accounts of gang influence. Social order in prisons thus does not likely stem primarily from gang activity, but gangs clearly play an influential role.

That fact matters for policy. If prisons are to operate safely, and if they

are to reduce harmful community influences on prison life and those of prisons on communities, they must address gangs. That entails tackling the thorny problem of prison gang life originating in part from outside the prison walls. It also means treating gang members as a distinct population in need of specialized programming, not least because of their potentially greater risk of offending and victimization. The book offers few policy recommendations, but that is entirely understandable given that it does not evaluate any particular policy. Even so, identifying a problem and its causes—which the book does—constitutes a first step in designing effective responses. This contribution warrants underscoring: Continued policymaker and correctional system emphasis on framing inmate behavior and prison order as an individual-level problem, one reducible to controlling the most risky individuals, will likely and substantially miss the mark. Any effective approach will require attention to systems, structures, operations (including adequate staffing and training), group processes, community conditions, specialized programming, and more.

Competing for Control provides one of those rare gifts. It provides insights about something fundamentally intriguing—prison gangs—but also about prison life, communities, and the role and importance of social groups. In so doing, it illuminates the significance of individual agency and institutional and societal forces. Not least, it provides insights into the nature and possibilities of research. That includes the possibilities for doing research in prison settings and, more than that, the importance of theory, mixed methods, and thoughtful analysis.

REFERENCES

- Mears, Daniel P., and Joshua C. Cochran. 2019. *Fundamentals of Criminological and Criminal Justice Inquiry: The Science and Art of Conducting, Evaluating, and Using Research*. New York: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108149815>
- Merton, Robert K. 1973. *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.184.4137.656>
- _____. 1968. *Social Theory and Social Structure*. New York: Free Press.
- Weber, Max. 1949. *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Translated and edited by Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.