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# In search of the “Tossed Salad Man” (and others involved in prison violence): New strategies for predicting and controlling violence in prison

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## Abstract

This article addresses two fundamental questions: 1) Can we accurately identify a subgroup of high risk inmates who will likely be involved in various forms of prison violence; and if so, 2) Is there an empirical research supporting the contention that current classification systems *reduce* the risk posed by those offenders predicted to be violent (such as gang/security threat group members)? Based on a review of the empirical evidence from the past two decades, we conclude that current classification strategies do not predict prison violence very accurately and perhaps more importantly, they do not appear to reduce the risk of violence in prison. New classification systems focusing on changing – rather than controlling – offenders while in prison represent one possible alternative strategy, given recent evidence that participation in prison programming/treatment is the most effective prison violence reduction strategy currently available.

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*Keywords:* Prison violence; Prison gangs; STG (Security Threat Groups)

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## 1. Introduction

Comedian Chris Rock has a “funny” story he tells about a guy he calls the “Tossed Salad” man, who may hold the key to offender reform in prison. He begins his story by telling the listener who the “Tossed Salad Man” is (a prisoner in a state prison) and what he likes to do to other prisoners (for those unfamiliar with Chris Rock, a quick perusal of the *Urban Dictionary* under the term, tossed salad, should suffice) (Rock, 1997). Chris Rock contends that the existence of the Tossed Salad Man in prison should act as a strong general deterrent to crime, because many offenders would rather face the death penalty (Rock says the electric chair) than endure a session with the Tossed Salad Man (“Please, I’ll be good, I promise, but don’t let him get me”) (Rock, 1997). On the one hand, many listeners – like us – believe that this is a funny skit based on an outrageous proposition: one way to reduce violence is to threaten potential offenders with time in prison that just may include violent sexual victimization. However, the reason many listeners find this story funny is that (1) they kind of like the idea of the violent *offender* in the community becoming the *victim* of violence in prison, (2) they are unsure whether the Tossed Salad Man exists in prison today, which makes the outrageous scenario possible, and (3) if he does exist, they are not that upset about the possibility that prison line staff and administrators will do nothing to protect violent offenders from violent victimization. It is a funny story that draws attention to the dark side of our recent incarceration binge: the view that, at its core, prison should infuse offenders, particularly violent offenders, with “equal pain” for their criminal behavior. In this regard, visions of the Tossed Salad Man fit nicely into a punishment package that includes the death penalty, three strikes laws, and sexually dangerous offender statutes.

The genius of Chris Rock is that he uses humor to raise important, but often troubling, questions about what the public expects – and indeed hopes – will happen to offenders in our federal and state prison system today. Do we want our prisons to be violent places where violent offenders are allowed to continue their violent behavior in prison and where the perceived risk of violent victimization is considered an acceptable component of a prison sentence? Or do we want our prisons to be in places that reinforce the legitimacy of existing laws prohibiting certain criminal acts in both the community and in prison and where prisoner protection becomes an extension of community protection?

The answer to these questions will *not* be found in the public statements of corrections commissioners or even in the latest mission statements plastered on the walls of institutions and highlighted on their web pages. Invariably, inmate protection, safety and control concerns are emphasized by corrections administrators in their various public forums. However, a somewhat different picture emerges from an examination of the nature and extent of prison violence, focusing specifically on the strategies we currently use (1) to identify offenders who are likely to be violent while in prison, and (2) to respond to various forms of violent victimization when it does occur.

There is considerable debate on the nature and extent of prison violence and disorder (Byrne & Hummer, 2007; Fleisher & Krienert, 2006; Hochstetler & DeLisi, 2005; Useem & Piehl, 2006). There is also an ongoing debate on both the accuracy (Austin & McGinnis, 2004; Byrne & Pattavina, 2007) and the risk reduction effects of current inmate classification systems (Austin, 2003; Berk, Krieglner, & Baek, 2006). Recently, it has been suggested that our current prison system’s emphasis on developing classification systems that essentially targets a subgroup of “high risk” offenders for increased levels of institutional control (in order to reduce the risk of prison violence) is misplaced, and that prisons would be less violent places if we developed classification systems that focused on offender change rather than offender control (Gibbons & Katzenbach, 2006; Byrne & Pattavina, 2007).

The purpose of this article is to review the existing body of research on the classification of prisoners and the prediction of prison violence, focusing on the following two questions: (1) can we accurately predict various forms of prison violence (interpersonal, collective, institutional, and intrapersonal)? And if so, (2) is there empirical research supporting the contention that current classification, location, and reclassification systems *reduce* the risk posed by those offenders predicted to be violent? We also examine the research linking specific individual-level offender characteristics (e.g. age, race/ethnicity, and gang/security threat group membership) to episodes of prison violence.

### 1.1. Exploring the link between risk classification and risk reduction

One of the underlying assumptions of the U.S. prison system is that prison violence and disorder is affected by decisions we make each day, not only about *who* should be in prison and for *how long*, but also *where* offenders will be housed within the prison system and *when* they should be moved from one level of security to the next. The U.S. currently has over 5000 adult prison and jails, each with its own unique design features, staffing ratios, design and operational capacity, offender population, and resource level. In each of these facilities, classification decisions are

made that directly affect the level of violence and disorder in that prison. According to the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons:

“Reducing violence among prisoners depends on the decisions corrections administrators make about where to house prisoners and how to supervise them. Perhaps most important are the classification decisions managers make to ensure that housing units do not contain incompatible individuals or groups of people: informants and those they informed about, repeat and violent offenders and vulnerable potential victims, and others who might clash with violent consequences. And these classifications should not be made on the basis of race or ethnicity, or their proxies (*Johnson v. California*, 2005)” (2006:29).

In a recent nationwide review of prison classification systems, [Austin \(2003\)](#) highlighted the difference between external and internal classification systems:

“External classification places a prisoner at a custody level that will determine where the prisoner will be housed. Once the prisoner arrives at a facility, internal classification determines which cell or housing unit, as well as which facility programs (e.g. education, vocational, counseling, and work assignments) the prisoner will be assigned” (2).

[Austin \(2003\)](#) points out that we currently are further along in the development of external than internal classification systems. However, a recent review of the research on the effectiveness of current classification schemes reveals limitations for both external and internal classification systems, especially in the mechanisms used to identify the subgroup of offenders who are “high risk” for either offending or victimization, and who are in need of special prison location/management strategies ([Austin & McGinnis, 2004](#)).

## 2. Data and method

Most discussions of the problem of prison violence and disorder first identify the likely “causes” in U.S. prisons as jumping off points for recommendations for changes in the U.S. prison system's policies and practices. In a separate review ([Byrne & Hummer, in press](#)), we have examined the research on several of these factors, using the established criteria for review offered by the Campbell Collaborative for evidence-based reviews of this kind, along with the specific study identification and classification protocol developed by researchers at the University of Maryland (see Appendix A). We decided to focus our review on all studies completed between 1984–2006, because we are most interested in assessing the impact of recent prison policies and practices during a period of unprecedented prison buildup. To identify this group of research studies, we searched all published research articles, reports, and reviews included in *Criminal Justice Abstracts* that met our minimum review criteria, supplementing the list with studies identified from other sources (e.g. meta-analyses, government documents, etc.).

For the review of the research on prison classification and prison violence presented in this article, we examined all studies which included prison violence and disorder (intra-personal, inter-personal, institutional, and collective violence and disorder) as a dependent variable and either classification/assessment practices or inmate characteristics as independent variables in their analyses. A total of 14 studies were identified that met our minimum review criteria (see summary [Tables 1 and 2](#)). While the overall quality of the studies we reviewed was quite low, our review provides the framework for an aggressive research agenda for policy-makers to consider as they debate the inevitable call for a new wave of prison reform in this country ([Byrne & Hummer, in press](#)).

## 3. The impact of prison classification practices on institutional violence and disorder

[Table 1](#) presents the results of our review of the research on the impact of classification decisions on the level of violence and disorder in prison. Only seven research studies were completed on the relationship between classification decisions and inmate behavior in prison during our study review period (1984–2006), including three randomized field experiments and four non-experimental (levels 1 and 2) studies. Focusing first on external classification, we looked at two randomized field experiments that asked deceptively simple questions: what would happen if we placed a high risk, maximum security inmate in a medium security housing unit? And similarly, what would happen if we placed a medium risk inmate in a low risk environment? If *where* we place inmates affects their behavior – and more specifically, if such placement has a mediating effect on their behavior – we would expect higher rates of inmate misbehavior in lower risk settings.

Table 1

Highlights of recent research on prison classification/placement practices and institutional violence and disorder

Author (year)	Scientific method score	Key findings	Quantitative Evidence
Camp and Gaes (2005)	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Percentages of inmates with misconduct violations not significantly different between lower and higher security facilities</li> <li>Inmate misconduct not more prevalent in higher security facilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>% of inmates receiving any misconduct violations: Level 1=64, Level 3=60</li> <li>% of inmates receiving serious misconduct violations: Level 1=33, Level 3=36</li> </ul>
Bench and Allen (2003)	5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Randomized experiment in which the ‘experimental’ group was inmates classified as maximum security and then reclassified to medium security facilities. Two control groups of medium security inmates remaining in medium security and maximum-security classifications remaining in maximum security.</li> <li>Mean differences in number of disciplinary actions for the three groups not statistically significant.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mean weighted disciplinarys: Experimental group=2.30</li> <li>Control group 1 (medium sec.)=2.02</li> <li>Control group 2 (max. sec.)=2.12</li> </ul>
Berk et al. (2006)	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9662 inmates from California Department of Corrections randomly assigned to either the traditional CDC classification scheme or a revised classification system to better predict serious misconduct. Inmates records of misconduct were then followed for a two-year period following intake</li> <li>Results indicate that only 3% of inmates in the study committed a serious misconduct during the study period and that the new classification scheme had a rate of “false positives” ten times higher than “false negatives”. The overall accuracy rate for the predictor model was 50%</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Model error for predicting serious misconducts: 1–0.487=51.3% accuracy</li> <li>Model error for predicting no serious misconducts: 1–0.216=78.4% accuracy</li> </ul>
Bullock (2003)	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A small minority of sampled inmates (<math>n=302</math> pretest, <math>n=227</math> posttest) who underwent mandatory drug treatment while being incarcerated in Great Britain reported that the program deterred them from using drugs while in custody</li> <li>Slight decrease in post-release drug use among offenders who served a short term of imprisonment vs. pre-incarceration levels</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>100% reported drug use prior to entering prison; 59% reported using drugs while incarcerated; 77% reported drug use post-release</li> </ul>
Warren, Hurt, Loper, and Chauhan (2004)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Findings suggest that a two-factor measure best measures the prison adjustment of female inmates as opposed to the three-factor model forwarded by Wright (1985). Prisoners with close interpersonal ties to the ‘outside’ (such as a spouse, visits from children, and a supportive family) adjusted more readily to prison life than women without such ties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Correlations between those inmates reporting a high degree of ‘conflict’ (HC) within the institution vs. those reporting low ‘conflict’ (LC) and various misconduct violations: Violence-HC= .22, LC= .02; Nonviolent-HC= .29, LC= .02; Rule violation-HC= .32, LC= .07.</li> </ul>
Hardyman, Austin, and Tulloch (2002)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Study examined classification schemes from ten U.S. state departments of corrections. Results indicate similar risk predictors for both male and female inmates — seven factors were significant at the 99.9% level of confidence with prison assault irrespective of gender</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Significant multiple regression betas for (risk predictors) male and female inmates: Severity of prior offense—0.47</li> <li>Severity of current offense—0.61</li> <li># of prior felony convictions—0.37</li> <li>Current age—0.30</li> <li>Stability factors—0.14</li> <li>Escape history—0.14</li> <li>History of institutional violence—0.10</li> </ul>
Harer and Langan (2001)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data from federal prison inmate populations between 1991 and 1998 allowed a comparison of classification schemes for male and female inmate. Results indicate that while females are significantly less likely to receive a violence-related misconduct, the same risk classification instrument is equally predictive for both genders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Violence-related parameter estimates (<math>n=202,532</math>): Type of detainer—0.048</li> <li>Severity of offense—0.083</li> <li>History of escapes—0.051</li> <li>History of violence—0.086</li> <li>Precommitment status—0.224</li> </ul>

Table 1 (continued)

Author (year)	Scientific method score	Key findings	Quantitative Evidence
Harer and Langan (2001)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk predictors at intake include educational attainment and (possibly) substance abuse history, work history, relationship skills, and peer associations</li> </ul>	Age at admission—0.417 Criminal history category—0.165 Education at admission—0.090

Camp and Gaes (2005) randomly assigned medium security inmates to minimum security facilities, while Bench and Allen (2003) randomly assigned maximum security inmates (based on the external risk classification) to medium security facilities; both studies found no significant differences in either overall misconduct or serious misconduct violations across experimental and control groups. The implications of these findings for external classification systems are straight-forward: (1) contrary to expectations, placement of higher risk offenders in more restrictive prison settings does not lower their rate of institutional misconduct, while placement of higher risk offenders in lower risk settings does not raise their rate of misconduct and, (2) alternatives to control-based placements should be field-tested to determine their effect on inmate misconduct. Unfortunately, we currently know very little about the link between inmate classification level and prison classification level (minimum, medium, maximum, supermax) outside these two well-designed, but narrowly focused, studies.

Once the results of external classification determine where an offender should be located within a federal or state system, an internal classification system is employed to determine where in that prison each new offender should be housed and, equally important, which programs they will have access to while in that prison. Essentially, these internal classification systems focus on three separate, but related, issues: (1) risk (of escape), treatment (for mental health, physical health, educational/vocational deficits, substance abuse, multiple problems, etc.) and control (of intra-personal, intra-personal, and collective violence and disorder).

A review of Table 1 reveals that very little quality research has been conducted over the past two decades on (1) how to identify the potential high risk (or high rate) offenders (i.e. high risk for institutional violence and/or disorder) at the internal classification stage (Berk et al., 2006), and (2) how to respond proactively (and programmatically) to offenders with identified risk factors associated with institutional misconduct. For example, age (younger), gender (male), history of violence (known), history of mental illness (known), gang membership (known), program participation (low), and recent disciplinary action (known) have been identified by Austin (2003) as variables included in risk classification systems because of their known correlation with inmate misconduct. The question is: once these risk factors have been identified, how should prison managers respond programmatically?

Berk et al. (2006) offer one possible model for predicting “dangerous” inmate misconduct (defined as assault, drug trafficking, and robbery), based on data from 9662 inmates assigned and classified (between November 1, 1998 and April 30, 1999) by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, with prison misconduct monitored during a twenty-four month follow-up (from intake). While they caution that predicting a rare event (only 3% of inmates had one serious misconduct during the review period) such as serious prison misconduct will necessarily involve selecting 10 false positives for every 1 true positive, this is a cost they are willing to pay, because “false positives have a configuration of background characteristics that make them almost sure bets to engage in one of the less serious forms of misconduct” (2006:ii). According to Berk and his colleagues, “The high risk inmates tend to be young individuals with long criminal records, active participants in street and prison gangs, and sentenced to long prison terms” (2006:9). Given the researchers’ questionable decision regarding the “acceptable” level of false positives (10:1), the very low base rate for serious misconduct (3%), and the 50% accuracy rate for the forecasting model, it appears that discussion of the application of this technique to inmate classification levels is premature.

Finally, it is disappointing that few quality research studies have been conducted that focused on how effective current internal classification systems have been at classifying offenders for appropriate treatment while in prison. Are we getting drug dependent inmates into appropriate drug treatment programs? Are we getting mentally ill inmates the mental health care they need? What about the offender with deficits in education/vocational skills and the multiple problem inmates? Research linking classification, prison program placement, and inmate in-prison behavior has simply not been conducted. Although a few high quality research studies on *external* prison classification systems have been conducted on the link between classification and control (it appears tenuous at best), we have to conclude that we

Table 2

Highlights of recent research on inmate profiles/composition of offenders and institutional violence and disorder

Author (year)	Scientific method score	Key findings	Quantitative evidence
Berg and DeLisi (2006)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Random sample of over 1000 inmates from one southwestern state's correctional population. Each inmate's risk assessment was examined and information relative to their background, criminal history, substance abuse history and disciplinary reports of violent incidents committed while in state custody. 'Violence' was operationalized as encompassing five serious offenses while incarcerated: rioting, hostage taking, homicide, rape, and aggravated assault.</li> <li>• Results indicate that among male inmates, Hispanics and Native Americans were far more likely to have infractions on their disciplinary records than were African-American, White, or Asian inmates. Further, inmates with fewer social ties and familial support, who had a history of violent behavior, had multiple prison stints, more time served, and less education were more likely to be disciplinary problems.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant negative binomial regression coefficients – predictors of violent misconduct among male inmates:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hispanic=1.23</li> <li>Native American=1.13.</li> <li>Residency (ties)=.380</li> <li>Violence history=.379</li> <li>Confinement history=.253</li> <li>Time served=.416</li> <li>Education=.320</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Cunningham et al. (2005)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study examined records of institutional violent misconduct (retrospectively over an 11 year period) for three different groupings of maximum security inmates (<math>N=2595</math>) at one state facility. The groupings included: inmates serving parole-eligible terms, life-without-parole-inmates, and death-sentenced inmates mainstreamed into the general prison population</li> <li>• &gt;Results show that younger inmates, inmates with fewer years of formal schooling, prior prison confinement, and serving a term sentence were associated with higher risk of violent misconduct. Being sentenced to a life sentence or death sentence were risk-reducing factors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant logistic regression coefficients — predictors of violent misconduct:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Age less than 21=1.131</li> <li>More than 12 years of education=-0.579</li> <li>Prior prison term=0.341</li> <li>Life sentence=-0.701</li> <li>Death sentence=-0.577</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Borrill et al. (2003)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey of drug and alcohol use among White and non-White female inmates randomly selected from prisons across Great Britain found that a majority of the inmates were drug dependent upon entering into custody</li> <li>• White inmates were more likely to report chemical dependency vs. non-Whites. The 'drug of choice' for White inmates was heroin, crack for the non-White sub sample.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Percentage of inmates drug dependent upon entering into custody=66</li> <li>• Chemical dependency upon entering into custody by race:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>White inmates=60%</li> <li>Non-White=29%</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Gaes et al. (2002)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study examines a sample of 7445 male federal prison inmates with gang affiliation and their subsequent prison misconduct. Using a measure of gang 'embeddedness', results show that 'core' gang members receive the largest amount of violent misconducts, 'peripheral' gang members committed more violent offenses than non-gang members.</li> <li>• Being an active gang member significant increases the likelihood of all measured forms of misconduct; the increases remain significant after controlling for individual level factors such as classification and previous history of violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discrete changes in probability of misconduct, holding all other variables constant at their mean:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Active gang members:                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Violent misconduct=.207</li> <li>Serious violent misc.=.079</li> <li>Drug violations=.059</li> <li>Total misconduct=.259</li> </ul> </li> <li>Suspected gang members:                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Violent misconduct=.156</li> <li>Serious violent misc.=.014</li> <li>Drug violations=.034</li> <li>Total misconduct=.129</li> </ul> </li> <li>Gang associates:                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Violent misconduct=.102</li> <li>Serious violent misc.=.009</li> <li>Drug violations=.022</li> <li>Total misconduct=.114</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Fischer (2001)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Survey of correctional managers, staff, and inmates in Arizona details the correlation between gang membership and institutional violence. The effectiveness of Security Threat Group program aimed at reducing institutional violence is also examined</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentration of gang members in a housing unit explains:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>40% of variation in assault rates</li> <li>36% of variation in all violent incidents</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Table 2 (continued)

Author (year)	Scientific method score	Key findings	Quantitative evidence
Fischer (2001)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Key findings include a significant association between gang membership and assault, as well as gang membership and violence in general. Prison gang members are also nearly twice as likely to commit a serious violation than non-gang members.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prison gang members are 74% more likely to commit a serious violation than non-gang members</li> </ul>
McShane and Williams (1990)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disciplinary records of elderly inmates in one facility were not predicted by a number of individual level variables such as physical health, previous incarcerations, and mental health issues, but associations were found between years in custody, length of sentence, number of visitors, and medical history</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Significant findings:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mean years in custody:                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>non-disciplined inmates=3.02</li> <li>disciplined inmates=4.86</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Mean length of sentence:                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>non-disciplined inmates=36.78</li> <li>disciplined inmates=52.33</li> <li>problem inmates=60.24</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Number of visitors on list:                   <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>non-disciplined inmates=5.73</li> <li>disciplined inmates=7.30</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Porporino et al. (1987)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homicides in Canadian prisons between 1979–1984 were more likely to be carried out by multiple assailants and for revenge motives as compared to homicides occurring between 1967–1978.</li> <li>• Victims of homicides in Canadian prisons during the latter time period more likely to have a violent criminal record/background</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most prevalent reasons given for committing homicide in prison, 1979–1984:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Drugs—17.3%</li> <li>Revenge—15.4%</li> <li>Altercation—5.8%</li> <li>Debt—5.8%</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

“don’t know” whether classification, treatment/programming, and control decisions made in conjunction with *internal* classification systems are effective.

Given recent reviews highlighting the over-classification of female inmates (Austin, 2003), and the expansion of protective custody, administrative and disciplinary segregation (Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons, 2006), it appears that the primary purpose of current external and internal classification systems is the short-term control of our inmate population. There is no evidence that our current emphasis on control-based classification systems makes prisons any safer; but there is a mounting body of evidence that we can reduce violence and disorder in prison by increasing inmate program participation rates (Byrne & Hummer, *in press*).

#### 4. Inmate profiles, gang membership and prison violence and disorder

A variety of inmate characteristics have been linked to higher levels of prison violence and disorder. Based on this purported link, prison classification systems are designed to identify those inmate characteristics (age, race, prior incarceration, prior record, instant offense, mental health history, etc.) that are likely to be associated with an inmate’s risk level while incarcerated—risk to self, risk to other inmates, risk to the community (due to escape), and risk to prison staff. The one factor most often discussed as a possible “cause” of prison violence and disorder is gang involvement (Byrne, 2006; Fleisher, 2006). In addition to individual risk assessment instruments targeting violence, intake classification units are also expected to conduct a threat assessment, focusing on the gang affiliation—if any—of incoming inmates, as well as the inmate’s connection with known radical/terrorist groups. Focusing first on gang classification and security threat group (STG) membership, a recent review by Austin and McGinnis (2004) revealed that while almost 90% of all prisons screen for gang/security threat group membership, there is significant variation in the percentage of the inmate population (male and female) actually identified as gang/STG members. In some states, such as Wisconsin (43%), New Mexico (36%), and Minnesota (30%), a large proportion of the incoming inmate population is identified; but in several other prison systems the initial screening results in the identification of a much smaller proportion of the inmate population. In California and Michigan, for example, only 1% of the inmate population was classified as gang/STG members (Austin & McGinnis, 2004). While it is likely that gang/STG group membership varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, we agree with Austin and McGinnis that “this variation may be the

result of differences in classification methods or definitions of gang/STG membership used by the responding states” (2004:44).

Gang/STG membership can be determined from a range of sources, including inmate interviews, official police and court records, and evidence of inmate tattoos identifying gang affiliation. In Florida’s department of corrections, for example, an inmate would be classified as a gang member if he/she met any two of the following criteria:

- Admits to criminal street gang membership;
- Is identified as a gang member by a parent/guardian;
- Is identified as a gang member by a documented reliable informant;
- Reside/frequents a gang’s area, adopts their style of dress, hand signs, or tattoos, and associates with known gang members;
- Is identified as a gang member by an informant of previously untested reliability and such identification is corroborated by independent information;
- Was arrested more than once in the company of identified gang member for offenses which are consistent with usual criminal street gang activity;
- Is identified as a criminal street gang member by physical evidence such as photographs or other documentation;
- Was stopped in the company of known criminal street gang members four or more times (as summarized in Byrne & Pattavina, 2007).

Prison systems classify the gang affiliation and/or STG membership of incoming inmates based on the notion that the prison violence—and disorder—can be directly linked to gang/STG involvement. However, a number of recent reviews have indicated that the influence of *gangs* on both community *and* institutional violence and disorder has been exaggerated (Byrne, 2006; Byrne & Hummer, *in press*). In addition, there is no current empirical evidence identifying a link between radical, *security threat group* membership and prison violence (Cilluffo & Saathoff, 2006). Despite this research shortfall, gang/STG status may potentially result in placement in administrative segregation and/or location in a high security facility (maximum security or super-max prison). In some prison systems, it may even affect offender location during the initial prison classification process or upon transfer to a new institution.

Advocates of importation theory would argue that gangs are responsible for a disproportionate amount of both community *and* prison violence and disorder (e.g., DeLisi, Berg & Hochstetler, 2004). If this view is correct then the determination of gang membership is a critical step in the initial inmate classification process. Once gang membership is determined, it will likely affect both external (i.e. security level) and internal (i.e. location and movement within a particular prison) classification decisions. Of course, if gang membership is *not* associated with prison violence and disorder, we would be wasting valuable time and resources on a problem we don’t need to solve. This general caveat about gangs affiliation can be applied to other inmate characteristics as well. The question is what—if anything—do we actually know about the link between/among various inmate characteristics and institutional violence and disorder?

Table 2 highlights the results of our review of the research on the link between inmate profiles, gang membership and prison violence and disorder. Only seven level 1 research studies were conducted during our review period (1984–2006), which leads us to conclude that contrary to public perception, the relation between inmate characteristics generally, and gang affiliation in particular, and prison violence and disorder, is unknown. Given the emphasis on identifying gang affiliation, and post 9/11, radical group membership (and/or conversion/enlistment while in prison) as a critical first step in the initial external classification process (Austin & McGinnis, 2004), it is remarkable how few quality research studies have been completed on the link between gang/STG membership and prison violence.

Although we recognize that the quality of the research is poor, we would be remiss if we didn’t briefly summarize the results included in these studies. A review of the seven studies included in Table 2 suggests that there may be inmate characteristics associated with various forms of institutional violence and disorder, which is not surprising given our earlier discussion of inmate classification systems generally and attempts to predict the “violent” inmate in particular. In a study of just over 1000 inmates in one state correctional system, Berg and DeLisi (2006) found that Hispanic and Native American inmates were far more likely to have a record of serious disciplinary infractions compared to White, Asian, and Black inmates. Other determinants of violent and/or disorderly behavior were: fewer social ties and familial support, a history of violent behavior, multiple prison stints, more time served, and less education. Interestingly, the authors found no significant relationship between street gang affiliation and misconduct in prison — a finding the authors also reported in a similar study done in a different correctional setting (DeLisi et al., 2004). Similarly,



Cunningham, Sorensen, and Reidy (2005), found that younger inmates, inmates with less education, inmates with a prior prison term, and inmates serving a term sentence had a higher probability of violent misconduct, while inmates who were either lifers or sentenced to death actually had lower risks of violent misconduct. It should be noted that an earlier study by DeLisi and Munoz (2003) initially indicated a relationship between inmates on death row and prison misconduct that generated spirited debate with Cunningham et al. (Cunningham, Sorensen, & Reidy, 2004; DeLisi & Munoz, 2004).

In addition, one other study found a direct connection between gang membership and violence in correctional facilities. Gaes, Wallace, Gilman, Klein-Saffron, and Suppa (2002) examined the relationship between gang affiliation and prison misconduct in a sample of 7445 male federal prison inmates and found that “active” gang membership was associated with significant increases in the likelihood of various forms of institutional violence and disorder, including violent misconduct, serious violent misconduct, drug violations, and total misconduct. This heightened risk level remained even after the researchers controlled for such individual level factors as inmate classification level and the inmate’s previous history of violence. Similar results were reported by Fischer (2001) in a study examining gang affiliation and interpersonal violence and disorder in Arizona’s prison system. According to Fischer (2001), prison gang members are significantly more likely to be involved in a serious incident (74% more likely) than non-gang members. Finally, Porporino, Doherty, and Sawatsky (1987) reported that homicides in Canadian prisons were more likely to involve multiple assailants in the early eighties than in the 1970’s, which may indicate increased gang involvement during this period. Taken together, these studies offer an agenda for future research—using better designs—on the link between inmate characteristics and prison violence and disorder. However, we must emphasize that at the present time, there is simply insufficient scientific evidence from which to draw an accurate profile of those prisoners most likely to engage in various forms of prison violence. Without such evidence, the efficacy of current control-based prison violence reduction strategies can and should be challenged.

## 5. Conclusion

Our research provides support for initiatives that recognize the difficulty of predicting the violent offender during the initial external classification stage, as well as the negative consequences of over-classification on the level and type of violence in prison. If the primary purpose of risk classification is risk *reduction*, then classification systems designed to link risk classification to level/type of treatment (and other services) provided to offenders in prison need to be considered. We suspect that classification strategies focusing on changing—rather than controlling—offenders while in prison (through treatment, education, skill development, etc.) may actually offer the most effective prison violence reduction strategies currently available (Byrne & Hummer, *in press*). However, much more research needs to be conducted on the links between initial classification decisions, which are only partially risk-driven, subsequent risk reduction strategies (utilizing various combinations of treatment and control), and the level of various forms of prison violence and disorder. As Sparks, Bottoms, & Hay (1996) pointed out over a decade ago, control-based strategies designed to reduce one type of prison violence (e.g. interpersonal violence) may actually increase other forms of violence (e.g. intrapersonal violence, collective violence). They also observed that similar results are likely for various treatment-based violence prevention initiatives, in that treatment-based strategies designed to reduce intrapersonal violence may actually increase levels of interpersonal violence (Sparks, Bottoms, & Hay, 1996). Given these findings, it appears that the key to reducing overall prison violence may be quite similar to the key to reducing community violence: finding the optimal “tipping point” between formal and informal social control mechanisms (Byrne, Taxman, & Hummer, *in press*).

Current efforts to reduce prison violence by identifying “high risk” inmates, separating them from the general population, and/or placing them in higher levels of institutional control, have not worked particularly well. If we are serious about reducing prison violence, then it certainly appears that alternatives to control-based classification systems need to be developed, field tested, and rigorously evaluated. Until that time, corrections managers will not have the evidence necessary to refute media portrayals of prison violence, dispel urban myths such as the “Tossed Salad” man, and to challenge the notion (held by many prisoners) that prison officials simply do not care about inmate safety and security (Fleisher & Krienert, 2006). As Liebling (*in press*), and others have recently observed, the “moral performance” of prisons can be measured, at least in part, by the balance between care and custody found in prisons today. Ultimately, the moral performance of *prisons* will affect the moral performance of *prisoners*, not only while in prison, but also in our communities (Byrne & Hummer, 2007).

## Appendix A. Study inclusion criteria for review of Strategies to Predict and Control Prison Violence and Disorder

According to the University of Maryland research review protocol, “The scientific methods scale ranks evaluation studies from 1=weakest to 5=highest on overall internal validity:

1. Correlational evidence (low offending correlates with the program at a single point in time);
2. No statistical control for selection bias but some kind of comparison (for example, program group compared with nonequivalent control group; program group measured before and after intervention, with no control group);
3. Moderate statistical control (for example, program group compared with comparable control group, including pre–post and experimental–control comparisons);
4. Strong statistical control (for example, program group compared with control group, with control of extraneous influences on the outcome, by matching, prediction scores, or statistical controls); and
5. Randomized experiment: units assigned at random to program and control groups prior to intervention” (as summarized in [Welsh & Farrington, 2001: 169](#)).

### Definition of key terms used in the evaluation review

[Welsh and Farrington \(2001:169-170\)](#) provide the following description of the key terms used in the University of Maryland review of evidence-based crime prevention:

“*What works*. These are programs that the authors ([Sherman et al., 1997](#)) were reasonably certain prevent crime or reduce risk factors for crime in the kinds of social contexts in which they have been evaluated and for which the findings can be generalized to similar settings in other places and times. For a program to be classified as working, there must be a minimum of two level 3 studies with significance tests demonstrating effectiveness and the preponderance of evidence in support of the same conclusion.

*What does not work*. These are programs that the authors were reasonable certain fail to prevent crime or reduce risk factors for crime, using the identical scientific criteria used for deciding what works. For the classification of not working, there must be a minimum of two level 3 studies with significance tests showing ineffectiveness and the preponderance of evidence in the same direction.

*What is promising*. These are programs for which the level of certainty from available evidence is too low to support generalizable conclusions but for which there is some empirical basis for predicting that further research could support such conclusions. For the classification of promising, at least one level 3 study is required with significance tests showing effectiveness and the preponderance of evidence in support of the same conclusion.

*What is unknown*. Any program not classified in one of the three above categories is considered to have unknown effects.”

Source: [Welsh and Farrington \(2001:169-170\)](#), originally included in [Byrne and Hummer \(in press\)](#).

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## Further Reading

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