

# Not bowing down : gang resistance to prison co-governance in Southern California

Autor(en): **Contreras, Randol**

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# NOT BOWING DOWN

## Gang Resistance to Prison Co-governance in Southern California

*Randol Contreras*

### **Abstract**

In the United States, some prison gangs control not only inmates, but also what happens on the street. Since most gang members eventually get detained and incarcerated, prison gangs will victimize or kill any resisters in jail and prison. In this paper, I examine such a case between the California prison gang, La Eme, and the rebel Maravilla gangs of East Los Angeles. La Eme controls almost all the Latino gangs in Southern California and enforces prison and street rules that “Southsider” gangs must follow. Between 1993 and 2006, the Maravilla gangs resisted La Eme’s prison co-governance and then experienced a violence and victimization perhaps unrivaled in the gang world. Through field research on the Maravilla gangs, this paper reveals how some gangs defy prison co-governance, which then makes them feel meaningful in the gang world.

**Keywords:** *gangs, prison, jail, crime, ethnography*

### **Introduction**

Research on prison governance has shown a variety of outcomes (Sozzo 2022). In the past, northern-hemisphere researchers stressed how prisons stripped inmates of their human rights and dignity (Foucault 2012; Goffman 1961; Rhodes 2004; Scraton, Sim, and Skidmore 1991). More recently, southern-hemisphere researchers, especially in Latin America, have countered those perspectives. Since the 1990s, the Latin American inmate population has grown dramatically, creating overcrowded conditions and fewer resources – all prime conditions for inmate disorder. However, inmates have responded by creating their own order. Prison authorities support such efforts since they are unable to micro-manage inmates (Sozzo 2022). Thus, a co-governance situation has emerged in which prison officials collaborate with inmates to maintain safety and provide services (see Sykes [1958] 2007 for an early account of this).

For instance, in Nicaragua, the state authorizes inmate prison councils (elected by fellow inmates) to act as go-betweens. They simultaneously surveil inmates and represent inmate grievances (Weegels 2022). Yet in Brazil, prison gangs not only control inmates, but also illegal street activities (Darke 2014; Dias and Darke 2016). Specifically, the prison gang called PCC, or Primeiro Comando da Capital (First Command of the Capital), formed in São Paulo

prisons in the early 1990s, when violence and disorder were rampant and inmate regulation often collapsed (Dias and Darke 2016; Dias and Salla 2013). The PCC then used its members' organized crime skills to establish order (Dias and Darke 2016).

For example, the PCC implements rules that manage inmate life, deliver goods and services to inmates and their families, and resolve problems through its own inmate court system (Dias and Salla 2013). It also controls drug markets in both prisons and on the streets, determining who can sell or traffic drugs. And if the state fails to provide resources, it can organize riots across prisons and stage attacks on state symbols, such as police stations and banks (Dias and Darke 2016). Lastly, the PCC enforces its regulations by killing non-conforming inmates, which keeps their peers in line (Dias and Salla 2013).

Regardless of the governance approach, inmates and prison authorities endlessly negotiate rule-breaking and punishment to maintain order (Bruce 2022). But only some inmates negotiate the governance. Most inmates do not elect inmate leaders or embrace prison gangs. The most violent inmates force them into compliance. This is even the case outside of the Brazilian example. For instance, in South African prisons, the Numbers gangs terrorize inmates, robbing and killing them, even forcing the weakest inmates into sexual relationships – all while providing order for a neglectful and ineffective prison administration (Lindgaard and Gear 2014; Steinberg 2004). However, research has yet to reveal or analyze inmate resistance to co-governance. To date, it has only made general references to non-conformists as victims of prison gangs. So, the unanswered questions remain:

1. How do inmates organize to refuse governance by prison gangs?
2. How do resistant inmates make meaning of their opposition to governance by prison gangs?

To answer these questions, I will document a case from the California correctional system. In southern California, the Mexican street gangs, even rival ones, unite under one banner: The Southsiders. This unity expresses itself in California jails and prisons, where race-based prison gangs control inmates. Specifically, the Mexican-American prison gang called the Mexican Mafia, or La Eme, controls the Southsiders, not only in prison, but also on the streets. Each distinct *barrio*, or Mexican neighborhood, abides by La Eme's jail and prison rules, and pays it a cut of their street-level drug profits. True, La Eme's regime has reduced Southsider violence in the correctional system (Skarbek 2014; Weide 2022a). But it got that way through terror.

For instance, a few Southern Californian gangs once resisted La Eme. The Maravilla gangs were among them. These Mexican gangs reside in East Los Angeles, which long-time residents affectionately call Maravilla ("marvelous" in English). Close to twenty different gangs make up the Maravillas, each named after an area or street: Lopez-Maravilla, Marianna-Maravilla, El Hoyo Maravilla, Ford-Maravilla, Arizona-Maravilla, and so forth. Though some of these gangs are bitter rivals, they had once organized to oppose La Eme. La Eme then placed a "greenlight" (or target) on them, unleashing a wave of violence and victimization perhaps not rivaled in the U. S. gang world.

## Methods

I first met the Maravillas through a French colleague doing gang research in Los Angeles. He introduced me to the director of the Maravilla Historical Society, which was at the Maravilla Handball Court. The handball court was once a community institution, especially for young men between the 1930s and 1970s, who used it to play *rebote*, or handball. During the 1980s, though, the handball court became a drug den, where heroin and crack-cocaine were sold and used, and violence occurred. It then attained a criminal stigma, and locals avoided it. But in 2008, the Maravilla Historical Society formed to restore the handball court to its former glory.

It was there, in 2012, that I met the organization's director, an aging Maravilla *veterana*, or former gang member. She agreed to let me do research at the handball court, where I eventually met other aging Maravillas. Most of them were current or former alcoholics and drug addicts, with lots of health issues. Over time, the Maravillas volunteered stories about their greenlight years, or when the Maravillas warred against La Eme. Despite the violence and victimization, they enjoyed recounting the event. In fact, once they felt comfortable with outsiders, they brought up the greenlight on their own. Reliving the war made them feel important within the gang world.

In all, I digitally recorded the interviews of thirty-eight participants, many of whom I interviewed more than once. I also did intensive field observations on four participants, and accomplished deep immersion as I followed them in their attempts to recover from drug addiction, overcome homelessness and mental health issues, and gain sanctuary in religion. They often spoke about their greenlight experience in everyday conversations with me and among friends. They all recounted similar prison stories, which were often corroborated by their "homies" or friends who spent time with them in prison. And they showed me scars (and I saw the missing teeth) that gave credence to some their stories.

But I must clarify the following: I had no journalistic aims, such as finding out whether a particular fight happened on a particular yard in a particular prison in 1995 or some other year. As an ethnographer, I was interested in how they made meanings of their violence as they reflected on their lives. I was also generally interested in how they understood their marginality in relationship to their drug use, drug rehabilitation, family and friendship relations, political leanings, homelessness, church participation, and street life (Contreras 2024). And I aimed to link all these meanings and their everyday behaviors to shifting social structures and shifting institutions, such as changing prison gang dynamics in California correctional facilities.

I must also clarify the following: I did not interview members of La Eme. I gathered historical information about the prison gang from secondary sources. I present this material in the next section to help readers understand how La Eme came to co-govern Mexican inmates from Southern California. This information also clarifies how and why the Maravillas resisted La Eme.

## The Iron Hand of La Eme

Sociologist Rebecca Trammell (2012) and economist David Skarbek (2014) posit that mass incarceration during the 1970s created prison disorder in California (see also Hunt et al. 1993). The lock-up of more minorities also created large-scale Black, Latino, and White divisions (Goodman 2008). Race-based prison gangs then used race identity politics to organize inmate life. They enforced racial segregation and reduced violence against prison staff and rivals. Such measures avoided race wars or fights that harmed their underground profits. Inmates who broke rules faced a range of punishments, from making a public apology, to receiving physical punishment, to getting killed. For Skarbek (2014), prison gangs filled the governance void, or provided the order that prison authorities no longer offered. In fact, sociologist Robert Weide (2022a) credits prison gangs, such as La Eme, for drops in deadly inmate violence, and argues that their removal would create disorder.

Despite their capacity to reduce violence, most prison gangs govern inmates with an iron hand. So even though Skarbek (2014) expertly details prison gang violence, especially of La Eme (Mexican Mafia), he still places their rise within a rational framework. In other words, he makes it seem as though most inmates saw a need for rule by prison gangs. And though Weide (2022a) lauds prison gangs for accomplishing order, he does not delve into the harms of forced compliance. In the U. S., inmates do not democratically elect the prison gang leadership; inmates do not cheer their ascendancy. Prison gangs are comprised of violence-experts, who implement a violent regime.

We can examine the case of the prison gang, La Eme. In the late 1950s, La Eme was started by about a dozen Mexican youths at the Deuel Vocational Institute (DVI), a juvenile detention center in Northern California (Camp and Camp 1985; Enriquez and Mendoza 2021; Hunt et al. 1993; Rafael 2007; Skarbek 2014). The youths, who were from the Los Angeles area, banded together to protect Mexican inmates from the numerically strong Black and White inmates. They also aspired to reach the glorified status of Italian gangsters, so they named themselves the Mexican Mafia. Later, they shortened the name to La Eme, which is the pronunciation of the letter M in Spanish. Like experienced statesmen, they united most Mexican inmates at DVI from Southern California (Camp and Camp 1985). They also did extra-ordinary violence, which made their peers comply to their demands (Enriquez and Mendoza 2021).

As they were transferred to prisons across California, the Mexican Mafia struck fear in every prison yard. They showed ruthlessness by swiftly stabbing or killing inmates who opposed or disrespected them (Mendoza 2012; Morrill 2013; Weide 2020). They also took control of most underground activities, especially the drug market (Enriquez and Mendoza 2021). To gain support of Mexican inmates, La Eme weaponized the Chicano identity (a political and cultural Mexican-American identity that resists white oppression) to emphasize racial and cultural differences – an “us versus them” distinction that not only blocked class consciousness, but also raised ethnic tension among inmates (Enriquez and Mendoza 2021; Weide 2022b). In response, Black inmates formed the Black Guerilla Family and white inmates, the Aryan Brotherhood (AB). These raced prison gangs would ignite the future race wars – or race riots, as inmates called them.

Released members from La Eme also started dealing drugs on the streets (Blatchford 2009; Morill 2005). By the 1980s, La Eme was a street force to be reckoned with, especially since it retaliated against street enemies when the latter were eventually jailed or imprisoned. It also grew more powerful when mass arrests and convictions for drug-related offenses increased the number of Southern Californian Latino inmates (Weide 2020). So, by the early 1990s, it had all lined up for La Eme: it controlled drug dealing in prison and on the streets, and it had numerical ethnic support in correctional facilities. It could now take the final step in securing absolute dominance: solidifying the Southsider, or Sureño, identity.

La Eme forced all Mexican gangs in Southern California – from Bakersfield to San Diego – to pledge allegiance to it (Blatchford 2009; Enrique and Mendoza 2021). In fact, it made these barrios hyphenate their gang name with the number “13” since the letter M is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet. It also enforced its prison-based race rules. Southsider inmates could not interact with Black inmates – could not smoke, eat, or speak with them; could not share or gift items, such as snacks, food, clothes, or drinks; could not enter Black spaces; could not allow Black inmates to enter Mexican spaces – could only keep segregated tables, showers, dormitory areas and cells (Goodman 2008; Lopez-Aguado 2018; Walker 2016, 2022).

La Eme also implemented an organizational hierarchy and regulations to order daily life (Enrique and Mendoza 2021). Problems had to be discussed with superiors, and individuals could not do violence without approval (Weide 2022a). In addition, healthy Southsiders had to participate in military-like physical exercises; street rivalries had to be suspended in prison; and Southsiders had to protect each other.

La Eme also implemented street rules. To reduce police attention on drug deals, Southsiders could no longer do drive-by shootings. This helped avoid the harm of innocent bystanders (Blatchford 2009). The most significant rule required Southsiders to pay a tax on their street-level drug sales (Blatchford 2009; Enriquez and Mendoza 2021). The prison gang had already enforced such a drug tax in jail and prison. Doing so on the street showed how La Eme believed that Southsider identity came before local gang independence and loyalty. In all, La Eme framed its demands as a security measure: the Southsider identity, rules, and taxes were needed for protection against other race-based prison gangs.

True, La Eme has made California jails and prisons safer and more predictable for Southsiders (Weide 2020, 2022a). But La Eme’s main tool for compliance is an iron hand. For rule violators, the punishment ranges from a warning for a minor infraction, to a physical beating for a medium infraction, to being wiped from existence for a major infraction. On the street, released La Eme members or aspiring members attack rebel gangs and kill defiant individuals (Blatchford 2009). Mainly, they victimize rebels when they land in jail or prison (Enriquez and Mendoza 2021). Or they attack the rebel’s homeboys, or fellow gang members, who are already there. It is a clear message to Southsiders: they have no choice. They must comply or exist with a “green light,” or a target on their back.

## The Rebellion of Maravilla

Some gangs, though, took offense to La Eme's demands. Demands of recognizing La Eme's leadership. Demands of a Southsider identification. Demands of accepting the new rules, regulations, and disciplinary measures. Demands of giving up autonomy and independence. Demands of bowing down or else experience a tsunami of violence and victimization. Defiance is a characteristic so entrenched in gang members (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991) that some of them hold their ground, stubbornly, despite knowing that they face great harm. So, the most defiant gangs during the 1990s stood their ground. Such gangs, like the Opal Street Locos in Boyles Heights and Lowell Street in Northeast Los Angeles, were slaughtered (see StreetTV 2021). Though still respected for their resistance, these two gangs almost became defunct or non-operational. Other gangs, however, were more successful.

In 1993, the Maravilla gangs gathered in Belvedere Park in East Los Angeles. It was a meeting in which well-respected Maravillas spoke about maintaining honor and loyalty; about how they were the original Mexican barrios (or gangs) of Los Angeles, which made them special; about how outsiders could not tell them how to organize their affairs or demand a drug tax on their earnings. As one Maravilla, now in his fifties, remembered:

*We had our meeting in Belvedere Park, and more than four hundred, five hundred vatos [guys] showed up there. Homies [gang members] from all the neighborhoods were there. From Arizona, from Marianna, from El Hoyo, from Lopez, from all the [Maravilla] barrios. They talked about Maravilla honor and respect, and that there was no way that we were gonna pay taxes to the Mexican Mafia. East LA was our territory. Nobody was gonna tell us what to do here. Nobody was gonna make us pay renta [rent] to deal drugs here. Chale! [No way!]*

Unity was the meeting's main theme. The Maravillas understood La Eme's power in jail and prison. In fact, some Maravillas were part of the original Mexican Mafia, and more had joined throughout the last couple of decades (Enriquez and Mendoza 2021). La Eme members were bold, courageous, and unrelenting killers, who figured out ways to attack enemies even while handcuffed and in the presence of correctional guards (Blatchford 2009). So, it was risky to take on the mighty prison gang. A Maravilla in his early sixties explained the following:

*You see, we had nothing against the organization [La Eme]. We respected those guys. Like I told you before, those guys are smart, intelligent, no nonsense. They got serious heart and they handle their business. They're nothing to play around with. Now all that said, Maravilla got heart too. I can tell you this, some of the guys that started the organization [La Eme] were from here, from Maravilla. And we had lots of our guys join them from a few our neighborhoods [gangs]. So, when the organization [La Eme] told us that we had to fall in line, pay [drug] taxes and all that, we said, "Chale!" [No way!]. The guys talking in the meeting told us that we had to put aside our conflicts and stand together. Because there were a lot of wars going on between some of the Maravilla neighborhoods. We were going to a lot of funerals because*

*we were killing each other left and right. But in that meeting we decided to end the wars because we had a bigger war coming up with the [Mexican] Mafia. We needed every [Maravilla] neighborhood to fight for the cause.*

### The Greenlight Experience

The Maravillas were right to be concerned about La Eme. Almost all the Southern Californian barrios had accepted their leadership. This meant that their enemy was not only the prison gang, which had about four hundred members across California jails and prisons, but also La Eme's soldiers, the Sureños, or Southsiders, which numbered in the tens of thousands. But the Maravillas wanted to defend their neighborhood independence. So, they courageously walked into, metaphorically speaking, a lion's den when they were arrested and transported to the Los Angeles County Jail. There, La Eme had Southsiders stab or physically beat them. As one Maravilla in his late forties explained:

*Going to [Los Angeles] County jail was like a death sentence. You had all these Sureños who bowed down to those guys [La Eme] just coming off on [attacking] us. As soon as you were put in a cell with other guys, you knew what was going down. One of them would ask you, "Where you from, ese?" You go, "Soy Maravilla [I'm Maravilla]," and that was it. They would rat pack you. Just beat you down. One time, I got put in a cell with a bunch of Sureños [Southsiders] and I knew what was coming. But when you're from Maravilla, you can't back down. I just prepared myself for what was going to happen. So one of the guys in the cell asked me, "Orale, where you from, ese [guy]?" I go, "Soy de Maravilla [I'm from Maravilla]." And that was it. About four or five guys started swinging on me, and I started swinging on them back. They got the best of me. They broke my jaw, broke my ribs. They were kicking me while I was down. But I didn't back down, Randy. I got carried out that cell, but I didn't back down.*

According to a few Maravillas, some Southsiders felt terrible about attacking them on sight. In moments alone, they told individual Maravillas that their assaults were not personal, but just in line with La Eme's new Southsider program. They also did not want to face La Eme's wrath if they failed to carry out its orders. As one old-timer Maravilla in his mid-fifties explained:

*One of my homies [friends] from youth authority [detention center] was a Southsider later on. He wasn't a Maravilla, but from a neighborhood near downtown L.A. We saw each other in the county [jail], and when no one was looking, he greets me and tells me that there's no hard feelings and not to feel any disrespect, but that he's gotta follow the Southsider rules and go after neighborhoods [gangs] on the [La Eme's] greenlight list. He told me that they gotta listen to these guys because that's the new program and that neighborhoods that don't listen will get their own greenlight [targeting]. I respected that he let his feelings be known, and that he respected me enough to tell me. But I told him that I wasn't gonna follow those guys [La Eme]*



*because in Maravilla we're different. He told me that he respected that and then we went our separate ways.*

Resistance, again, meant getting harmed. Possibly killed. Several Maravillas recounted being knifed in prison or jail. Inmates often made knives out of pieces of metal from their bunks, from plastics, such as toothbrushes and window shades, or from random pieces of wood. They would grind the material on concrete until it seemed sharp enough to penetrate someone. Then they would keister it, or put in their rectum, to smuggle out to recreation areas, where they secretly expelled them, wiped them down with a towel, and then hid them around the yard. Upon orders, they attacked enemies, stabbing them for a kill. Maravillas were often targets of such attacks. A Maravilla in his late sixties told me the following:

*I got stabbed a couple of times in prison. The first time, a shot caller [Southsider leader] called me over to speak to him. He told me that he knew I was from Maravilla, but that he was trying to keep his yard quiet and with no pleitos [conflicts]. That fucker basically told me that if I wanted stay on the yard, I would have to cross out my Maravilla tattoo. So, he wanted me to dishonor my neighborhood [gang] so that I could stay alive. He told me that it was my choice. Fuck that puto [gay prostitute]! I wasn't going to cross out my Maravilla tattoo for nobody. Sure enough, about a week later, I'm walking in the yard and these two vatos [guys] just rush me. Voom, voom, voom! They shanked me three times, just like that. The jura [correction officers] came, they took me to the medical unit. A few months later, I got better, and I'm in another prison and back on the yard. Here, we go again. This fuckin' vato [guy] comes from behind me and stabs me in the back this time. I go, "Arghh!" I turn around and I tried to grab the shank from him. La jura [guards] came and I was back in medical again.*

Despite being outnumbered, Maravillas felt compelled to resist. But sometimes they only had two or three other Maravillas on their side. Sometimes, they were all alone. So, they were always hyper-alert of all inmates around them. Sometimes, the shot-caller, or La Eme's appointed yard leader, played mind games by delaying the attack, creating either high mental anxiety or a false sense of security. Regardless, the assaults eventually came, as a Maravilla in his mid-forties explained.

*Randy, the thing was that if they don't attack you on sight, then you don't know what to expect. You walk on the prison yard, and you think that at any time somebody's gonna come try to stab you or something. So, you're standing with your Maravilla homies just looking around, watching for any moves. You walk to chow hall [cafeteria] and you don't know if it's gonna come then. You go take a shower, you don't know if it's gonna come then. You just gotta be prepared. If they don't come get you, after a while you think the yard is safe [for Maravilla]. Cause it's the shot-caller that handles the greenlight. Whenever he feels like it, he gives the order and you gotta protect yourself. You just don't know when. Sometimes the [Maravilla] homies relax and go about their business. But that's their downfall. You could never relax. It could happen on any day that the shot-caller tells a Sureño [Southsider] – fucking*

*weak Sureños who only know how to follow orders – tells that fucker to get you. And there's about a hundred Sureños around you and you don't know which one's gonna go after you.*

It appeared that the Maravillas fought a losing cause. Clearly, not a losing cause in terms of honor. Fighting for sovereignty and independence was noble indeed. It seemed like a losing cause because they did not have the numbers to win against the Southsiders. But they had enough numbers to create a stalemate, especially if they no longer fought defensively, but offensively. Thus, the Maravillas fought back, attacking Southsiders on sight. If they were placed in a cell full of Southsiders, they did not wait for them to ask, "Where you from?" Rather, they viciously attacked the one closest to them, aiming to knock him out, so that the odds got better when he faced the rest of them. They also turned the interrogation on its head. When they were in the yard, in chow hall, or in a cell awaiting arraignment, they asked those around them, "Where you from?" and then attacked the first person that mentioned a Southsider gang. A Maravilla in his early fifties explained the following:

*We just started fucking them up whenever we saw any of them [Sureños] anywhere. It didn't matter if it was four or five of them and only one or two of us. You gotta understand that one Maravilla is equal to three or four of them anyways, that's how much heart we have. We're not going down easily. We have a reputation for that. So, it didn't matter that we were outnumbered. We just started cracking their heads when we got a chance. Some of the Maravilla homies even started waiting outside the County [jail], so that they could beat up Sureños [Southsiders] that were getting released. Just fucking them up bad when they weren't around other Sureños. I remember one time it just so happens that they put four or five of us [Maravillas] in a cell and they put a Sureño in with us. The guards must have not known about how many Maravillas were in that cell. We got that vato good to send a message. You do it to us, we gonna do it to you right back. We're Maravilla.*

The war between the Southsiders and Maravillas worsened. Both sides suffered casualties, both sides suffered knifings and severe beatings. LA County Jail officials did something about it. They created a special module that only housed Maravillas. Now, upon entry, if a detainee's record, verbal admission, or tattoos indicated that they were from a Maravilla gang, they were placed in the module – whether they wanted to be or not. It did reduce the jail's violence, and both Maravillas and Southsiders suffered less victimization. Still, some resistant Maravillas purposely did not claim a Maravilla status and were placed in the general population. As soon as they encountered a Southsider, they beat them up. Then after serving time in isolation, they were placed in the Maravilla module, with the rest of their homies. A Maravilla in his early forties described it as the following:

*We didn't ask to be segregated. We were forced to be separate from everybody because we were going off on [attacking] the Sureños [Southsiders]. We weren't backing down from them. It didn't matter how many of them there were. We were going to fight back. You had some of them [Southsiders] tell us as soon as we got to the dorm, "Roll it up!" [pack your things and leave]. We would go, "You know what, ese, why don't you make me roll it up. I ain't going nowhere."*

*And right there we fought. They got their lumps. We got our lumps. The jail saw that no matter what, we weren't backing down. So, they created the Maravilla module. If you were from Maravilla, you were going to that module no matter what.*

### The Greenlight's Meaning

Maravilla's fight against La Eme's regime lasted from 1993 to 2006 or 2007. In the end, the Maravillas and La Eme reached a peace agreement (Enriquez and Mendoza 2021). Now the Maravillas could exist in jail or prison without victimization or doing violence against Southsiders. They are all united. There is no documented reason for how the peace happened. Some participants say that it was because the Maravillas agreed to become a partner in La Eme's drug business. Some participants say that the Eme member responsible for the Maravilla's greenlight went into protective custody, which erased all his policies. Some participants say that it was because a Maravilla became an Eme member and later convinced the group to remove Maravilla's greenlight if the latter made some concessions (see also Enriquez and Mendoza 2021). And others say that La Eme realized so many Southsider losses that it preferred to find ways to integrate Maravilla rather than continue fighting them. All these reasons are speculations. No one provides evidence or proof for the assertions. The real reason will perhaps remain secret until one of the actual peace negotiators reveals how the decision was reached.

Regardless, the greenlight still means a lot to the aging Maravillas who experienced it. They see themselves as a tiny force of brave soldiers, who courageously stood up to La Eme, a prison gang that had an unending supply of Southsider soldiers. They were tough, brave, and rebellious. They saw themselves as special. As one Maravilla in his mid-fifties explained:

*You have to understand that most gangs bowed down to La Eme. They put their loyalty to La Eme over their loyalty to their neighborhood [gang]. It shouldn't be that way. You should have loyalty to your neighborhood over anything else. You have your homies in your neighborhood who got your back and you got their back. At the end of the day, you could only trust them. You grew up with them and fought wars with them. Your neighborhood means something because of what everybody did for the neighborhood. Then somebody just comes and says, "You have to bow down to us." Chale! [No way!]. That's what makes Maravilla so special, Randy. We have honor and we don't take orders from nobody. We don't pay rent in East LA.*

Other Maravillas recounted stories in which they encountered Southsiders outside of jail and prison post-greenlight. They claim that they mostly receive praise for showing determination in the face of persecution. Whether they really experienced compliments in such encounters, it is hard to say. However, the Maravillas interpreted them in ways that raised their status in the gang world. A Maravilla who is now a recovering heroin addict gave the following account.

*When I was a dopefiend, I sometimes used to score carga [heroin] in Orange County. That was more than an hour away from East LA. When the connections [drug dealers] asked me out of curiosity, "Where you from?" I would say "Soy de [I'm from] Maravilla, East Los Angeles." Telling them I was from Maravilla would get a reaction from them. You could see it in their face, like, 'Wow.' One of them even told me, "Orale, Maravilla! You guys got a lot heart. I got nothing but respect for you guys." He said that because he understood that we did something that few gangs had the heart to do. I'm telling you, when you grow up in Maravilla, you're schooled [in gansterism] the right way. You learn how to hold your head up high and hold your own. If you're from Maravilla, you're a different breed. You have more honor.*

The reality, though, is that the Maravillas now participate in the Southsider program. According to some participants, when they go to jail and prison, the young and healthy among them do the Southsider military-style exercise routines; include themselves in the Southsider roll calls; and join the Southsider cause in any conflicts. Some aging Maravillas are angry at how all their suffering as greenlighters – all the wounds they received, all the violence they inflicted – seemed all for naught. One disappointed Maravilla noted the following:

*After everything we went through, now we're Southsiders. Let me correct that. We're not Southsiders. We're still Maravilla. But we do everything like we're Southsiders. We don't stand on our own anymore. We call the shots in some prisons. But La Eme is putting us in place to call the shots. We're basically under La Eme now.*

Others, though, like the following Maravilla in his early fifties, saw joining the Southsider program as desirable.

*A lot of us suffered during the greenlight. Sometimes you go to a [prison] yard and you and someone else are the only Maravillas. You're outnumbered a hundred to one. They just keep attacking you and attacking you. You get up in the morning, and you don't know if it's gonna keep coming. All you think about is how you're surrounded by the enemy. Imagine, doing three or four years [of prison time] like this. Getting blind-sided, stabbed, and whatnot. I have a [Maravilla] homie who was in that situation. He had to lock it up [go into protective custody]. But I can't judge him. I can't criticize him. He had to do what he had to do. He's a solid guy, too. He only ever showed his big heart. But he was just in a tough situation. He had to do what he had to do to stay alive. I still have a lot of respect for him and don't judge him. He did the right thing for his situation.*

## Conclusion

La Eme's prison regime is now entrenched in California's jail and prison system. Despite its many regulations and drug tax, it provides structure and organization to barrio gangs from Southern California (Weide 2022a). Doing time has become easier for Southsiders.

Solid rules guide their interactions. Violence has lessened and predictability has increased. Everyone has a great idea of what to do and not to do. Everyone identifies strongly as a Southsider, a label that homogenizes its members, that when in jail and prison, makes them see themselves as one.

But we cannot forget that La Eme coerces and represses inmates. It demands allegiance to its rule. No one can say a word against it. Inmates in and out of prison fear saying its name – *La Eme* or *Mexican Mafia* – referring to it instead as “the organization” or “those guys” just in case someone hears them and passes their name up the chain of command (Contreras 2018). They do not want to die. Moreover, there is no room for political opposition or diversity, no room for anarchist-like messages about dismantling hierarchies or libertarian-like messages about individual sovereignty or freedom. A Southsider must follow the rules or else face a greenlight that could kill them or exterminate their gang. In short, La Eme creates social order through forced conformity.

In many ways, the Southsider situation supports the classic work of sociologist Gresham Sykes ([1958] 2007), who argued that prison order does not result from coercive prison measures. Rather, prisoners also exert power, a power that forces the prison to negotiate with them about its governance. It also resonates with Dias and Salas’ (2013) research in Brazil, which shows that inmate governance often involves the most violent inmates killing their way to establishing a prison regime.

Yet the historic Maravilla case reveals how co-governance in prisons is not just a negotiation between prison authorities and inmates. Inmates must agree to be governed by their peers. After La Eme made its power move, the Maravillas refused to surrender their independence and primary gang identity. Thus, they organized to resist La Eme’s non-democratic dominance. Their eventual greenlight showed how La Eme aimed to do more than provide resources and safety for Southsider inmates. It aimed to suppress inmates to achieve higher profit from its illegal and illicit activities.

The greenlight also revealed that organized inmate rebellions against prison gangs can succeed, even if for a time. The bloody battle lasted long enough to have LA County Jail officials step in and create a separate Maravilla module. Thus, the Maravillas exerted a tremendous amount of group agency that allowed them to eventually govern themselves, at least in jail. And some participants claimed to have lied to prison authorities about their Maravilla status in order to be placed in the general population. This allowed them to attack Southsiders before being put in the Maravilla module. In such moments, they not only resisted prison gangs, but also prison authorities – a resistance to both arms of co-governance.

In short, future research should document the cases of inmate subgroups that refuse to fall under the rule or umbrella of prison gangs. Not all inmates want prison gangsters to negotiate with prison authorities on their behalf. Their eventual resistance, and the violence that results, is crucial to understanding how prisons achieve co-governance. Mainly, it shows that co-governance is not a smooth process that rationally results from inmates wanting social order under overcrowded and low-resourced prison conditions. Multiple negotiations occur, ones that often lead to a revolt, whether at the individual or group level, against prison gangs who impose terror. Detailing such rebellions complicate and clarify how prison co-governance is ultimately achieved.

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## Author

**Dr. Randol Contreras** is the author of the multiple-award winning book, *The Stickup Kids: Race, Drugs, Violence and the American Dream*, which captured how the transformation of an illegal drug market in the South Bronx shaped and influenced drug dealers to become violent drug robbers. Currently, he has published a book entitled *The Marvelous Ones: Drugs, Gangs, Violence, and Resistance in East Los Angeles*. This book documents the violence and hardships of the aging Mexican Maravilla gang members in East Los Angeles. A common theme in his work is the critical intersection of history, social structure, and biography, an intersection that sheds light on how crime emerges and shapes and influences the behavior and meanings of people.

*randolc@ucr.edu*

*Department of Media and Cultural Studies  
University of California*