Prison gangs in Iran: Between violence and safety

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Abstract
This article aims to bridge the gap in our knowledge about Iranian prisons and the sociodynamic relations that animate them by illuminating the characteristics and activities of prison gangs in Iran. The interaction between gang affiliation and drug networks, security and violence will be discussed in detail. The in-depth qualitative research, which is informed by grounded theory, serves as the first academic study of gangs in Iranian prisons. Research participants included 38 males and 52 females aged 10–65 years. They were recruited in several different settings, both governmental and non-governmental organizations. The study employed theoretical sampling and in-depth, semi-structured interviewing. Results show that gang-affiliated inmates in Iranian prisons gain monopoly over the drugs market inside prison networks, which leads to inevitable extortion of both prisoners and correctional officers. Gang affiliation blurs the lines between violence and safety, while providing a sense of identity, belonging and financial and emotional support. Prison gang membership also offers some benefits to prisoners and staff, as their existence underpins an informal social order that can be used to govern prisoners. The article discusses this less well-known and unexplored dimension of the topic.

Keywords
Iran, prison gangs, violence and safety, familial groups

Introduction
Mass incarceration and a lack of solitary confinement usage have resulted in enforced proximity, an overarching inmate culture and a narrowing of the ability to avoid unwanted interactions. These factors, in turn, increase the possibility of gang involvement during incarceration (Irwin, 1980; Stevens, 1997). Prison gangs have become a controversial phenomenon in many correctional

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jurisdictions, as the number of gang-affiliated inmates is increasing around the world. As Winterdyk and Ruddell (2010) report, 19.1% of prisoners in US jails and prisons are involved in gangs, and these gangs are responsible for an excessive amount of the violence in prisons (Pollock, 1997; Trulson and Marquant, 2010). In 2011, approximately 9.96% of offenders under the responsibility of the Correctional Service in Canada were gang-affiliated, which poses several challenges in terms of drug distribution, power struggles among gangs and the prevalence of violence, extortion and intimidation (MacKenzie, 2012).

After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Iranian prison population increased from 14,019 in 1980 to 296,565 in 1986 (Abdi, 2011), or from 118 prisoners per 100,000 total population in 1988, to 232 prisoners per 100,000 in 2010, to finally 294 per 100,000 in 2018 (World Prison Brief, 2018). The increasing number of incarcerated people in Iran is due to the perception of imprisonment as a substitute to other types of punishment (e.g. flogging), the increase of the severity of laws relating to some crimes (e.g. drug-related crimes) and the growing number of political prisoners.

According to the Regulation of State and Security and Corrective Measures Organization in Iran, in 1993, criminals who have a record of previous incarceration must be held together. Prisons conform to one of the three different models based on their level of security: they could be a closed prison, mid-closed prison or open prison. Closed prisons are the most common and pervasive prison model in Iran; it is only in large cities that the other two models are used and they are still rare. In 2001, vocational training and occupational camps were added, and in 2005, based on the amendment of the Regulation, prisons were divided into two comprehensive groups: closed prisons and vocational training and occupational camps, which still imply group imprisonment. Noting the prevalence of detention in groups is important, as mass incarceration and group imprisonment are highly influential in shaping prison gangs in a penal system governed by a punitive discourse and suffering from insufficient rehabilitation programmes, as is the case in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Literature review

Much of the existing literature has focused on prison gangs in different countries, such as in Russia (Oleinik, 2003), Brazil (Dias and Darke, 2016), South Africa (Steinberg, 2004) and the United Kingdom (Wood, 2006). These works have highlighted not only the existence of such groups but also their critical impact on the prison system. Gangs have been defined differently by various scholars (Fong and Buentello, 1991). According to Maitra (2020: 133), a gang is ‘a collective of individuals in prison whose collective identity within prison involves the following: committing illegal activities; identifying with their “home” area; exclusivity of membership; and engaging in violent conflicts with other gangs/groups within prison’, while Wood (2006: 606) defines a gang as ‘a group of three or more prisoners whose negative behaviour has an adverse impact on the prison that holds them’.

Several studies have been conducted on the formation and function of gangs in prisons (Fong, 1990; Stevens, 1997) as well as the correlation between gangs and violence (Drury and DeLisi, 2011; Trammell, 2012; Worrall and Morris, 2012), offending behaviours (Drury and DeLisi, 2011; Wood et al., 2010), recidivism (Huebner et al., 2007; McShane et al., 2003; Olson et al., 2004), the failures of prison-based treatment programmes (Decker and Pyrooz, 2015) and drug trafficking (Buentello et al., 1991). As Weide (2020) states, most of the scholarly literature on prison gangs evolved around the pathological perspective and presented prison gangs as violent and
criminogenic. For instance, Camp and Camp (1985: 39) described gang-affiliated prisoners as ‘psychologically amoral and psychopathically oriented’, and Fong et al. (1992: 66) defined prison gangs as ‘vicious, ruthless, violent, dangerous, anti-authority, terrorist’. Ruddell and Gottschall (2011) used the term ‘security threat group’ as a synonym of prison gangs throughout their article. However, prison gangs offer some benefits to prisoners and staff, as their existence underpins an informal social order that can be used to govern prisoners (Butler et al., 2018; Gundur, 2018; Johnson and Densley, 2018). Prison gangs provide staff with assistance in day-to-day management and prisoners with emotional and financial support, an identity, safety and a sense of belonging. The research from which this article is drawn examines Iranian prisons and characterizes gang affiliation as a double-edged sword, which embraces violence and safety simultaneously.

**Context**

Although Iranian prison gangs play a significant role in the management of prisons, underpinning drug business outside and inside prisons, and blurring the line between security and violence, their internal organization and operation remain unexplored. However, the absence of information and statistics regarding gang-affiliated inmates or gang categories in Iranian prisons does not mean that they are non-existent. Based on the interviews in this study, we can assume that gangs emerged in the Iranian prison system more than 40 years ago, before the 1979 revolution. One participant who has been a drug trafficker for nearly 30 years in northern Iran declared

> I was in prison when Shah was around. I was powerful, and rich drug traffickers, everybody around knows me well. Once I was incarcerated, I created my own gang in prison. I smuggled drugs in prison and made my team big to the extent to which nobody could beat me.

Most of our knowledge and understanding of prison gangs and gang-affiliated inmates stem from the American penal system, which has different social, cultural and juridical dimensions compared to non-western countries, including Iran. The interaction between gang affiliation and drug networks, security and violence will be discussed in detail. This in-depth qualitative inquiry serves as the first academic research study on gangs in Iranian prisons and is unusual in examining gang membership among imprisoned women as well as men. Also, the results of this study are not based on the perceptions of staff members about the gangs in prisons or based on prison records; instead, prisoners’ perceptions are the sole data resource. Although it might be assumed that prisoners are not interested in being involved in this type of research (Fong and Buentello, 1991), Stevens’s study (1997) proved that prisoners are willing to disclose information on the sensitive activities of gangs. In my study too, participants were willing to speak about sensitive topics and to share information regarding gangs in prisons.

**Research method**

The study that this article draws on examined the complexity of gang-affiliated inmates’ lives in Iranian prisons. Qualitative methods value the importance of context in gathering and analysing data and emphasize participants’ lived experiences (Manuel, 2007: 185). Therefore, I use grounded theory (GT) in my research. Accessing the field of study, in this case, is not just about finding the most appropriate and informative location and initiating the interviewing process. Since exploring lives inside a ‘total institution’ in Iran is a complex and potentially sensitive political issue, gaining access to participants and institutions involved struggling with the
‘nuance of power’ (Goffman, 1968). In 2012, with full support of a non-governmental childcare organization, I was granted permission to collect data from a women’s ward (band-e nesvan) located in one of the largest cities in Iran. However, 5 years later, in 2017, most of my requests for access to the prisons were either not responded to or were met with negative and discouraging responses. Instead, then, I ended up travelling from Isfahan to different cities (i.e. 446 km to Tehran, 1156 km to Mazandaran and 676 km to Kerman) to recruit participants in two different kinds of setting: governmental organizations, such as compulsory drug treatment camps, Association for the Protection of Prisoners, courts, prisons, and non-governmental organizations, such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Women’s Rehabilitation centre and non-governmental drug treatment camps. Constant comparison of ‘theoretical constructs with the data in different sites and situations’ was applied to help the researcher recognize biases and distortions (Gasson, 2004: 96). In other words, understanding of the experience of incarceration and the prevalence of gang activity has been enhanced by constant comparison among different contexts (e.g. prison, camp, NA, night drop-in centre, treatment centre, harm reduction centre and mother and child care centre), locations (i.e. different cities in Iran) and organizations (i.e. governmental and non-governmental organizations).

This study’s data collection process included theoretical sampling and in-depth, semi-structured interviewing. Theoretical sampling is, according to Glaser and Strauss (1967: 36), ‘the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his (sic) data and decides which data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges’. Therefore, data collection is guided by ‘theoretical sampling’ in GT studies. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 100 min and were recorded digitally. The basic interview guide included questions regarding the following topics: background information, social interrelationships, social life in general, the informal behavioural guidelines or unwritten rules of behaviour, the normative basis of everyday life and priorities in relationships with other people. All interviews were transcribed and translated from Farsi to English.

Findings: Gang membership as a double-edged sword

The research participants included 38 males and 52 females aged 10–65 years, with 22 of the female participants recruited in 2017 and 30 recruited in 2012. The status of participants were as follows: on leave at the time of the interview (5 participants), being released (1 participant), incarcerated and on their court day (4 participants), in prison (30 participants), in compulsory camps (3 participants), in mother and child centres (7 participants), in night drop-in centres (4 participants), in rehabilitation centres (5 participants), in voluntarily camps (10 participants), a wanted criminal (1 participant) and in NA (20 participants). All identified as Muslim except for one Christian. Their crimes were mostly related to illegal drugs (e.g., possessing illegal drugs, drug trafficking, abusing drugs, and committing murder while high on drugs).

Gang affiliation

Prisoners’ home regions before incarceration play a crucial role in the recruitment of gang members. Gangs in prison usually include 30–50 individuals. Almost all the gangs in prison are named after a borough in the city; for example, there is a district north of Isfahan called
*Sabzemeydon*, and there is a gang in Isfahan prison with this specific name. Inmates are encouraged to associate with their own regional gangs in order to gain all the privileges and protection of the group. If the inmates join another regions’ gang, because they have control over others, they will not profit from the gang’s protection in a fight. In other words, joining another region’s gang is considered as a betrayal of one’s own region. In fact, those inmates are under the sever surveillance of not only their own region’s gangs but also the gangs they associated with no specific affiliation; in the case of fighting, these prisoners who ‘change sides’ are often the first to be abandoned and are often the target of violence.

It is an important fact that you have to join gangs of your own region (district). For example, if you are from southeast of Isfahan, the rational decision is that you will join their gang and be a part of their group, instead of joining other groups. If any fighting and conflicts happen against you in the prison and you are in a gang that does not inherently belong to you, you will be injured and hurt bad. In fact, in this particular situation, there is nobody to support you, and all of the prisoners who come from the same region will keep each other’s back, and you will be left alone with no supporters. (Male participant, 7 years of incarceration)

Neighbourhood-based gangs can be categorized into two groups: the upper-class districts and the lower-class districts. It is not necessarily the rule that the upper-class boroughs amplify their dominance over the lower-class district gangs. This totally determines by the number of violent criminals in each gang.

For years, the lower-class district gangs had control of the prison and set their own rules to manage the prison; however, recently, the upper-class district gangs had taken control. The upper-class district gangs in Isfahan introduced a new version of illegal drugs and new criminal skills, and through their knowledge, they controlled the whole prison. (Male participant, 10 years of incarceration)

**Shaking solidarity**

According to Sykes (1958), the principle objective of a prison code is keeping prison solidarity and cohesion. Therefore, the more the prisoners adjust to the prison code, the more solidarity is assured; otherwise, a ‘war of all against all’ seems inevitable. However, gang members also play a crucial role in disrupting the stability of life inside the prisons. The inter- and intra-conflicts of gangs lead to the necessity of constructing and reconstructing rules and orders. Although prison society is primarily managed, governed and monitored through informal codes, which are mostly issued by high-status criminals, this stability is not guaranteed. To not put their safety in jeopardy, members of gangs do not always support their cohort in violent situations; this threatens the cohesion of the gang. In other cases, the reason for disobeying and rejecting the orders to fight of high-status gang members does not revolve around keeping a safe zone; rather, it is rooted in the intervention programmes offered in prisons. Although many prisoners show little interest in participating in prison self-help programmes, such as NA, and even make jokes about such programmes, the few inmates who are involved in, and practice NA principles, shake the solid structure of the gangs by protesting against the violent and criminal acts and ultimately by leaving the gangs. However, this is not the end of the story, as they define their own rules and codes, which are also in conflict with the order imposed by the prison administration. It is notable that gangs are not willing to fight against outsiders as they are not considered their opponents or enemies:
I was a member of one of the most powerful gangs in the prison. Everybody respected us, as otherwise they were in big trouble. It was a couple of months until I became an active member of the Narcotics Anonymous programme in the prison. I felt different, and I truly wanted to follow the NA principles. One day, four or five members of the gang and me were discussing issues we had had recently with one of the members. He had much more power than he deserved, so the group decided to drag him down. But I protested against their decision. I told them that it is not right; as he was one of us, we could not betray him. After that incident, when I disagreed with one of the most important decisions of the gang, several conflicts and struggles happened in the group, and at the end I decided to leave the group. I left and created my own group with my own rules, which was according to the NA principles. (Male participant, 7 years of incarceration)

True enemies are those who do not have the intention to follow the rules, not because of identity transformation, but rather because they are driven to challenge the powerful status of the dominant gangs. Prisoners do not always show respect for the rules and norms established by the dominant gangs; as a result, power struggles pit gangs against one another to assert control over the prison:

We have to admit that the dominant group in the prison was not stable. Like in society, everything is updated every day. The criminal skills and drugs are being changed over time. When I was incarcerated, we did not know about methamphetamine, but in recent years, young people from the wealthy regions of the city who are familiar with new drugs and new forms of crimes are the dominant group in the prison. Forms of managing the prison, even fighting, languages, everything, are being changed gradually. Sometimes, a group of prisoners will set up a fight with the dominant group in the prison, and if they win, they take their position, then all the prisoners will be under their wing. What I mean is that managing is not in the hands of one group always; it has been changing as time passes. (Male participant, 9 years of incarceration)

**Drug networks, violence and safety**

Struggling with gang violence and drug trafficking are inevitable parts of gang affiliation in Iranian prisons. One of the most important links from inside the prison to the outside world is via the gangs: they take care of narcotics trafficking into prison and manage, control and govern drug trafficking from inside the prison. In other words, sometimes incarcerated drug traffickers not only manage their business from inside the prison but also make prison another potential destination for drugs. Furthermore, high-status drug traffickers often recruit their business team members from ‘gang buddies’ inside the prison. Some gang members, particularly those who carry out criminal activities such as drug trafficking, maintain their gang identity even after being released. Therefore, the incarceration of high-ranking drug traffickers is considered as a potential profitable business, especially when they become a leader of a gang in prison:

They could not stop me by incarcerating me; they even provided me the opportunity to meet qualified people for my drug business. When I was arrested, I became a king of the gang in prison. I recruited almost all of the members to smuggle drugs into the prison. It is not all about the prison, as almost all of them became my business partners outside the prison. While I was in prison, I managed several drug trafficking operations from south to north, east to west, and even from Afghanistan to Iran. All was being helped by my gang buddies. All drug distributions inside the prison was under my eyes. All
prisoners have no option but to buy drugs from me. If I wanted, I increased the price of drugs. It was all my business; there was no competition. (Male participant, 30 years of incarceration)

Gangs in prisons have a monopoly on illicit drugs. As outlined by Schelling (1967), this is due to having poor and vulnerable victims who have no protection and are trapped in a predictable extortion routine. High-status drug traffickers have exclusive possession over drugs, which not only may trap people who use substances but also can corrupt correctional officers. This can, however, have dramatic consequences:

I remembered the day that one of the most powerful gangs were executed all together by the authorities. Why? Because they gained too much power to be handled by authorities. The gang had ultimate control over drug smuggling into the prison; the drug market was in their hands. In other words, they control and manage the prison instead of correctional officers. They even control and govern correctional officers as well. Some of the corrupted guards cooperated with that gang in the process of smuggling drugs into the prison. The gang members know all the personal information of those guards – from their home address to their family members’ names and affiliations. Guards were like prisoners: they had nowhere to escape or hide. The gang became more powerful day-by-day until one day they had been set up and all were killed in one night. (Male participant, 10 years of incarceration)

The importance of the gang can be explained by violence behind bars. Gang affiliation undoubtedly brings emotional and economic support and safety, while also increasing one’s exposure to aggression and coercion. On a daily basis, boundaries between safety and violence are blurred, which is hard to distinguish them. None of these concepts are fully distinguishable in the penal world, as their gaps dissolve.

Whether you want to or not, before you know it, you will be involved in the most violent criminal acts in prison, especially if you are a gang member. Fighting for the sake of having safety and support from your gang cohort is vital in prison. Yes, some guys won’t fight; they’re scared of fighting. But you cannot live long with this strategy in the gang. You should sacrifice your safety sometimes to buy more safety in the future. If they cannot count on you to fight, sooner or later they will fight against you. Also, if I want drugs, if I want to be provided with drugs whenever I needed, I should be available for fighting whenever they want. By just transferring drugs from one section to another I earn a lot – money, sometimes foods, clothes. I told you before, I can have safety as well. (Male participant, 3 years of incarceration)

Multi-layered system of support

Since most prisoners are deprived of any social support, joining a gang can be a substitute for family as well as a means of financial support. Drug trafficking in prison is one of the most profitable businesses, which can cover all expenses of the incarcerated prisoner’s life, especially as most no longer have ties with their real families on the outside:

The point is that I earned money by drug trafficking in prison. Whenever I smuggled drugs into the prison, I distributed one gram by one gram, and it was like gold in prison. I could buy stuff in prison. I could afford my life there. Otherwise, I would wash others’ clothes or dishes, be a servant to survive. Being in the gang and being protected by them is all that I have there. If I was not in the gang, I was not allowed to distribute drugs that easily in the prison. My group support me and protect me. Nobody
dares to steal my drugs. I have nobody to send money to me in the prison. Everybody rejected me. But here, being a member of the gang is like having money and family all together. (Male participant, 5 years of incarceration)

Through being a gang member, prisoners receive a ‘defined identity’ and rely on gang leaders, who are mostly powerful, high-status inmates. The emergence of gangs in Iranian prisons does not occur solely from applying coercion and aggression over others, gaining economic support and being protected from violence, however; gangs also fulfill emotional and physiological needs. Gang affiliation brings safety, family, identity, emotional support and a sense of belonging. Once again, then, gangs in prison function as a double-edged sword. Some of the prisoners did not have any contact with their family members and friends in society, as most of them were forgotten or rejected by their family. Thus, being a gang member created a sense of familial belonging for them and provided them with social and emotional support:

I did not have anyone. Nobody called me while I was in the prison. They all hated me. I was an addict and hurt them so much. I deserved this misery. But the only chance I had was the gang, and I found myself there. My true identity; I found myself there. They approved of me. All of them were the same as me. I did not feel excluded anymore. (Male participant, 4 years of incarceration)

Each member of a gang is supported emotionally depending on his status in the hierarchy of the gang. Most often, the high-status gang members expect to receive more psychological and emotional support from the lower status members:

Like ordinary life outside the prison that requires emotion, money, and affection, the boss of the section demands all of them in the prison from the prisoners. Prisoners who are under his control have to provide all of these qualities for them. (Male participant, 5 years of incarceration)

**Pseudo-families**

Although the social groups in prisons for women are labelled pseudo-families, family-like relationships among gangs in prisons for men function in many similar ways. As Messerschmidt (1995) states, as a result of cultural feminist research, with its marked celebration of femaleness, the organizations have been labelled based on gender differences. Even male-affiliated gang members have referred to their gangs as the family they have never had in their life or have been missed for a long time. There is an erroneous assumption that gangs do not exist in prison for women, while family groups function very similarly to gangs. However, in Iranian prison for women, in contrast to the gangs in prisons for men, most of the women, especially long-term prisoners, prefer to join familial groups. The concealed reason behind this fact is that not all pseudo-families are violent or participate in drug-related activities. In each prison, there were some familial groups, with the mother at the highest level of hierarchy who managed drug smuggling and distribution within the prison. At the same time, however, there were many familial groups, which were organized based on a drug-free and peaceful lifestyle.

Incarcerated women form emotional bonds as a social support system, to control prison society and to represent their previous family identities as grandmothers, mothers and sisters. The size of familial groups varies; however, they usually have no fewer than 15 members. Basically, familial
groups in the women’s ward represents as an emotional and financial shelter for women. The grandma (nane) is usually an older inmate with a high-status position in prison. Mother and daughter relationships is the most pervasive relationships in the familial groups, which do not necessarily follow demographic rules. Mothers not only protect the safety of other group members but also command and guide them:

We protect each other from being bullied or assaulted by other groups in the prison. Also, we are emotionally attached to each other. We cook on the weekend with each other. Sometimes we borrow some things from our family members in the familial group. I was a mother of some young girls in the prison, and I always encouraged them to read the Quran and be positive. I tried to protect them. We had emotional ties. (Female participant, 7 years of incarceration)

Prisoners with their children in the women’s ward organize family-like relationships, which are considered as the most peaceful familial groups in the prison. Although they were governed by high-status inmates, the violence had less of an impact on them than other groups in the prison. Child companionship prevented mothers from committing violate acts; in fact, taking care of children in mother-and-child sections became a turning point in their lives and kept the women away from dangerous circumstances which could jeopardize the children’s safety. Women continuously practice femininity in total institution by expressing maternal feelings, creating emotional bonds and organizing familial groups. Some of the prisoners had children behind the bars, and by performing motherhood in the prison they could fill a void.

I play a role as a mother for 10- and 11-year-old-girls in the prison, and I help them in everything. They are scared, and I am the only one who protects them. They remind me of my own daughters whom I lost years ago due to my actions. I feel really good to have them here. (Female participant, 5 years of incarceration)

However, illustrating the complexities and ambiguities of gang membership, some of the participants declared that being a member of familial groups in prison not only saves themselves from aggression but also is the best gateway to exploit and bully others. Familial groups are one of the most important channels for violent criminals to achieve their goals in the women’s ward:

I was a member of a family in the prison, and our mom ordered us to force someone to buy something for us. We were hungry, so we forced a prisoner who was alone and not a member of any groups to buy food for us. . . . We did not dare to bully a prisoner who was a member of a familial group in the prison, because they were not alone. They will come back with others . . . I was in a family group to have some protection and safety in the prison. (Female participant, 3 years of incarceration)

**Conclusion**

This article represents the first investigation of gangs in Iranian prisons (though see also Anaraki, 2021, for a broader discussion on prisons in Iran), and it sheds light on the activities and functions of Iranian prison gangs. Its findings are based on research conducted in four cities, and it does not aim to imply that all Iranian prison gangs have the same characteristics, which constitutes a limitation of the study. However, what I have intended to portray in this article is the dual function of gangs: inmates both benefit from and struggle with the double-
edged sword of being a gang member in prisons. Gang-affiliated inmates are at a higher risk of being violated or involved in fighting and drug trafficking in prison, which puts members constantly at risk, as they have to always be aware and conscious of the potential dangers around them, especially from opposing gangs. This finding is consistent with the majority of studies that have reported gangs and gang involvement as a potential cause of violence and criminal acts in prisons. But there is also safety in gang affiliation as members offer each other protection.

In criminological literature, the emergence of gangs in prison has been explained through two classic models of the penal system – deprivation and importation. The former emphasizes how the pains and deprivations of imprisonment can be healed by gang affiliation (Pyrooz et al., 2017), while the latter focuses on the connection between street gangs and prison gangs and the norms and values brought into the prison from outside (Irwin, 1980). However, as Pyrooz and Decker (2019: 36) state, ‘this is not to say that only deprivation or only importation represent the descriptive and explanatory realities of gang activities, culture, and organization in prison’. Results of this study, like Pyrooz et al.’s (2017), support the blended view, the connections of prison gangs, especially drug-related ones with drug trafficker gangs in the outside world. However, mass incarceration, in-group imprisonment and lack of rehabilitation programmes contribute to the emergence of gangs within Iranian prisons too. Undeniably, the lack of facilities, such as well-educated correctional officers and comprehensive rehabilitation programmes, leaves authorities and prisoners with few alternative options, of which one is creating familial groups or gangs. Iranian prisons are governed and managed by informal leaders of gangs who have been selected by the correctional officers from the highest status criminals with long-term prison experiences and a serious criminal history. One of the most efficient ways to govern prison is through informal leaders (who are usually among the most effective gangs in prison), as most of them have an exclusive power over drug distributions in the prison – this results in absolute power over the rest.

Although different studies have explored the impact of gang membership on the frequency of violence (Cunningham and Sorensen, 2007; Fong et al., 1992; Gabor, 2007; Gaes et al., 2002; Griffin and Hepburn, 2006; Huff and Meyer, 1997; Ralph and Marquart, 1991; Shelden, 1991) and offending behaviours (Wood, 2006; Wood and Adler, 2001; Wood et al., 2009), the current study acknowledges that gangs create a shelter for many inmates in prison. It is commonly believed that gang membership increases insecurity, but the results of this study suggest that gang membership also offers protection and support. Joining regional gangs provides inmates with emotional, financial and social support, all of which they have been deprived of for many years as a result of being labelled by society as a criminal or dismissed as people who use and abuse substances. A degree of safety and security from gang membership decreases the rate of being violated or victimized (i.e. sexual and non-sexual victimization), by other inmates.

Most research studies have focused on the social support provided by gangs in prison, but joining a gang in Iranian prisons is also useful as a means of financial support. Being separated from family, friends and loved ones pushes inmates to make arrangements with other prisoners to meet basic needs such as drugs and safety. Gaining access to illicit drugs or being involved in drug trafficking and distribution networks in prisons depends entirely on the extent to which the inmates are close to gang-affiliated inmates or the kings of the gangs. Being a member of a drug network in prison is not only about having untethered access to high-quality drugs, but it is also about being able to afford a decent life inside the prison walls and sometimes to support one’s family outside,
while behind bars. Therefore, prison life involves fragile relationships and blurred lines between violence and safety. In Iranian prisons, sheltering in the safest and most secure zone is simply not feasible unless you are willing to accept the possibility of some degree of violence and aggression. To be protected from constant violence and permanent threats, attempts to find a midpoint result in a combination of violence and safety.

While gangs are a pervasive phenomenon in prisons for men, almost all incarcerated women create prison families (Chesney-Lind, 2002; Giallombardo, 1966a, 1966b; MacKenzie et al., 1989; Owen, 1998; Pollock and Polock, 1998; Propper, 1982). Similarly, incarcerated women create family-like groups to form emotional bonds as a social support system, control prison society, cope with the pain of incarceration and represent their previous identities as daughters, mothers and grandmothers. Although incarcerated women do not form gangs in the conventional sense, and do not engage in pervasive violent behaviour and fluctuations in power as incarcerated men do, they do struggle with multiple identities as a mother, wife, daughter and grandmother and their familial groups sometimes engage in behaviours such as drug trafficking that are typically associated with gangs.

We now know more about gangs in Iranian prisons, but further information related to the number of gang-involved inmates, the structural differences in prison gangs, the process of emerging gangs in prison and similarities and differences between gangs before and after the Islamic Revolution of Iran is necessary to paint a more comprehensive picture. Furthermore, it is worth exploring the intersection of gangs and ethnicity in Iranian prisons in future studies. There are 27 ethnic groups in Iran – including Arabs, Kurds, Baluchi and Azari – with different languages and religious traditions, some of whom have been excluded and isolated in this society (e.g. Kurds) (Amanolahi, 2005). The life experiences of ethnic groups in prisons and their perceptions of gangs were outside the scope of this study; however, exploring the impact of ethnicity on gang experiences in Iranian prison is worth considering. Additionally, despite the fact that 99% of the population in Iran are Muslim, the current study did not capture non-Muslim minorities’ gang experiences (e.g. Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and Yarsanis) in Iranian prisons, and additional attention is needed to shed light on this matter.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. The actual number of prisoners in Iran is uncertain and different sources use different estimates.
2. Examples of those who will be sent to mid-closed prisons are criminals who committed nonintentional crimes, criminals who have spent one-fourth or at least 3 years of their sentence and criminals who have spent 4 years of their life impressment (Abdi, 2011).
3. Examples of those who will be sent to open prisons are criminals who committed nonintentional crimes and criminals who spent 7 years of their life impressment (Abdi, 2011).
4. It is assumed that camps are designed solely for drug-related criminals; however, based on the Regulation, non-addict criminals who have committed less serious crimes may be kept there as well (Saffary, 2007: 88).

5. The field work was approved by Memorial’s Research Ethics Board and was performed in accordance with TCSP (Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans).

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