The Mexican Mafia in Supermax: Comparing Prison Gang Structures at Pelican Bay

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THE MEXICAN MAFIA IN SUPERMAX: COMPARING PRISON GANG
STRUCTURES AT PELICAN BAY

by

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ABSTRACT

The Mexican Mafia in Supermax: Comparing Prison Gang Structures at Pelican Bay

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Prison gangs create serious issues within correctional institutions. From behind prison walls, prison gang members endanger other inmates, smuggle drugs, and form protection rackets. To combat these criminal organizations, prison officials and law enforcement officers utilize a variety of strategies. One of the leading tools used by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation to suppress prison gang activity is the Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit (SHU). This thesis focuses on one particular gang with members in the Pelican Bay SHU: the Mexican Mafia. The Mexican Mafia is powerful in the California prison system and poses a unique challenge to suppression efforts due to its organizational structure. This thesis argues that the horizontal structure of this gang better equips it than a hierarchical gang to survive when members are isolated in the SHU. By evaluating this gang’s organizational design, this thesis presents original insight on how SHU suppression strategies challenge the Mexican Mafia differently than other gangs.

KEYWORDS: Mexican Mafia, prison gang, gang structure, Pelican Bay, Security Housing Unit, supermaximum prison
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction ........................................................................................................... 1

  Methodology and Literature Review .......................................................................................... 2

Chapter Two: Prison Gangs and Prisons ....................................................................................... 7

  Mexican Mafia Organization ...................................................................................................... 7
  Prison Gang Structures ............................................................................................................... 13
  Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit .......................................................................................... 18

Chapter Three: Individual Gangsters in the SHU ........................................................................ 23

  Mexican Mafia Politicking .......................................................................................................... 27

Chapter Four: Operating a Horizontal Organization despite SHU Incarceration ......................... 33

Chapter Five: Conclusion ............................................................................................................ 40

Works Cited ................................................................................................................................ 43
CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

Prison gangs pose a unique challenge for law enforcement and correctional officials. Prison gang members operate gang activities from within correctional facilities. While in prison, they are able to coordinate drug enterprises via street gangs, and they carry out violent assaults against other inmates for intimidation purposes. Prison gang members also find ways to operate within even the most secure facilities. Since prison gang members are already in prison, correctional officers have few avenues to further punish or deter criminal behavior. Given these problems, law enforcement struggles to curtail these criminal organizations.

One facility utilized by the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) to restrict prison gang activities is the Pelican Bay State Prison Security Housing Unit (SHU). The Pelican Bay SHU is a supermaximum prison designed to house difficult management cases, dangerous inmates, and prison gang members who are threats to the general prison population (“Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP”)”). By segregating prison gang members from other inmates in higher security modules, prison officials attempt to limit prison violence and minimize opportunities for prison gang members to effectuate gang activities (Tachiki 1127).

This thesis focuses on the ability of a unique prison gang to operate within the Pelican Bay SHU: the Mexican Mafia. The Mexican Mafia, or la Eme, is a California-based prison gang that law enforcement reports is “the most powerful gang within the California prison system” (Skarbek, “Governance” 703). The Eme is powerful due to its large number of street connections, and it is unique because of its organizational
structure. While most prison gangs have hierarchical structures, the Mexican Mafia operates along a horizontal consensus model. Every member in the gang has the same rank: a carnal, or brother. This gives each member an equal voice and an equal vote in gang decisions (“Code of Conduct”). This structure impacts the gang’s ability to spread its power quickly and operate autonomously within different prison facilities. While current research describes the organization of this gang, no detailed analysis of how this structure operates within supermaximum prisons exists.

This thesis presents an original analysis of how the Mexican Mafia’s unique structure impacts the power of its members who are incarcerated in the Pelican Bay SHU. While the “CDCR’s stated goals in operating SHU facilities are reducing the overall levels of prison violence [and] reducing prison gang activity” (Shaiq 347), prison gangs are challenged by the SHU differently depending on their organization. This thesis argues that the Mexican Mafia’s structure is designed in such a way as to improve the organization’s survivability despite SHU incarceration; however, the expendability of members in this structure gives individual carnales accentuated difficulty when trying to maintain their influence. This insight can be used by law enforcement and prison officials to understand how efforts to restrict gang activity impact this unique gang. Consequently, better efforts to restrict Mexican Mafia activity may be developed.

Methodology and Literature Review

This thesis is broken into a three parts. First, this analysis explores the Mexican Mafia’s unique structure and history. This structure is compared to the other major prison gangs in California to show how this gang is different from its counterparts. Also, a description of the Pelican Bay SHU’s goals and security features provides context for
how prison gangs with different structures operate from supermaximum facilities. Second, this thesis analyzes challenges that individual Mexican Mafia members experience in the SHU. The security challenges prison gang members experience are addressed. Third, this thesis analyzes how the Mexican Mafia’s consensus model as a whole operates while individual members are incarcerated in the Pelican Bay SHU. Since there is no hierarchy for prison officials to target, this gang’s unique structure is designed to survive despite the segregation of individual members.

Researchers who study supermaximum prisons note that “although supermax housing is now widespread, there exist few empirical studies of even the most basic dimensions of such housing” (Mears and Bales 545). While some studies have attempted to quantify the impact that supermaximum prisons have on prison violence, such efforts experience many limitations. One study that evaluated a substantial amount of data from states with supermaximum prisons found that “the opening of a supermax had no effect on eight of the measures of institutional violence examined across three states” (Briggs, Sundt, and Castellano 1367). However, the researchers noted that violence levels in the different states varied by classification, and that the numerous factors that influence prison violence make it difficult to empirically evaluate the impact supermaximum prisons have on prison violence (Briggs, Sundt, and Castellano 1370). This issue is compounded by the fact that prison gang members indirectly influence violence that street gangs produce. There are numerous variables involved in these relationships, making empirical analysis difficult.

Rather than arguing the empirical effectiveness of the Pelican Bay SHU, this thesis argues that inmate segregation in the Pelican Bay supermaximum prison may
potentially impact the Mexican Mafia differently than other gangs due to structural differences. The degree that the Pelican Bay SHU limits a prison gang member’s ability to effectuate criminal activity is not quantitatively measured due to data limitations. Rather, this thesis notes that, as a management strategy, the Pelican Bay SHU poses different challenges to vastly different organized prison gangs. Some existing research has studied the impact of different gang demographics on prison violence (Ruddell and Gottschall), the internal governing procedures of prison gangs (Skarbek, “Constitutions”), and the power monopolies of prison gang governance (Skarbek, “Governance”), but no studies evaluating prison gang structures as a targeting strategy exist.

The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is primarily concerned with prison gang member identification and gang leader identification. In its Security Threat Group Prevention, Identification and Management Strategy, the CDCR claims it is mainly concerned with its ability “to identify and prioritize criminal gangs into groups based on the level of threat the group presents” (7). The Mexican Mafia and other major prison gangs are categorized as high security threats based on their “history and propensity for violence and/or influence over other gangs” (Security Threat Group Prevention, Identification and Management Strategy 12). Since the prisons are concerned with reducing violence, it is logical to focus on the most violent gangs. Currently, identifying gang members and gang leaders are the primary methods by which the CDCR targets prison gang violence.

While the CDCR gives gang structures some attention, it primarily does so only for the purpose of evaluating the sophistication of a gang. Some structural criteria to evaluate a gang’s threat are: “Evidence that the group’s bylaws or other mechanisms
regulate group activity and/or that the group has a structure” and “[a]ny evidence of current or developing leadership structures” (*Security Threat Group Prevention, Identification and Management Strategy* 14). Highly developed leadership structures are seen as a sign of organization and power. This impression is found in existing gang research; some signs of a gang’s formal organization are “written constitutions, corporate structures . . . regular meetings and subchapters” (Ayling 7). When a gang is particularly violent or powerful, this success “is at least partly attributable to its leaders” (Ayling 14). This is why some of the leading strategies to combat prison gangs are “the use of segregation units for prison gang members [and] the isolation of prison gang leaders” (Fleisher and Decker 7). Leadership and a structured organization are signs of a developed prison gang that correctional officers use to evaluate a gang’s strength.

While current gang literature and correctional strategies do not focus heavily on prison gang organizational structures, research in other fields often discuss the implications of centralized and decentralized management. In business and economics, organizational designs and their benefits are often applied to different settings. Decentralized businesses can promote innovative new ideas (Wu), improve communication efficiency (Chu, Lin, and Ng), and improve reactions to rapidly changing markets (Zábojník). Furthermore, more than one organizational structure present in a market “may reduce competition and increase profits, without necessarily benefiting one firm more than the other” (Vroom 1700) and generally “the economic literature strongly favors decentralized decision structures in economic systems, based on the observation that free-market economies perform better than planned, centralized economies” (Wu 126). Government research also points out key differences in organizational structures:
“[D]ecisionmakers who are too centralized may be indifferent to the consequences of commands that have wholly localized effects” (Gillette 1351). The focus of these fields on horizontal, decentralized structures is critical to understanding the success and benefits of different organizations. Similar analysis is needed to understand prison gang organizational designs and their implications.

The Mexican Mafia may appear less developed than a hierarchical prison gang, but its unique structure must be addressed by correctional efforts. The Mexican Mafia is ranked high as a security threat in the CDCR, and it is responsible for extensive prison violence. While this gang does not have a traditional hierarchy, it is still a serious management issue. By analyzing the Mexican Mafia’s structure through the lens of supermaximum incarceration, this thesis provides an original perspective on how this gang should be viewed differently as a management concern.
CHAPTER TWO
Prison Gangs and Prisons

Mexican Mafia Organization

Since its inception, the Mexican Mafia’s organizational structure set it apart from other prison gangs. The Mexican Mafia originated in 1957 at the Deuel Vocational Institution (DVI) in Tracy, California. The Deuel Vocational Institution at that time “was often referred to as ‘Gladiator School,’ a place where already tormented teenagers honed their criminal skills and acted out against rivals from enemy barrios [streets]” (Blatchford 4). One young offender at DVI was seventeen-year-old Louis ‘Huero Buff’ Flores. He sought to unite incarcerated Hispanic street gang members from Southern California into a powerful prison gang called the Mexican Mafia (Rafael 273). Despite the gang’s name, “all the original members were U.S. citizens, not Mexican nationals” (Valdez 54). By joining forces, these former street gang members could protect themselves from other prison gangs while generating their own reputation. However, according to ex-Mexican Mafia member Ramon “Mundo” Mendoza, the original members were “leaders of their respective street gangs. They had monumental egos . . . nobody was going to tell them what to do” (qtd. in “Code of Conduct”). To overcome this issue, “Huero Buff” Flores devised a unique plan to give individual members more autonomy.

A horizontal leadership organization was created. Among made Mexican Mafia members, there is only one official rank (Skarbek, “Governance” 704). Every made member holds the rank of carnal, a Spanish term for brother. Within this system, the members have “no hierarchy, no bosses, no one man in charge. ‘Huero Buff’ brought
them in together, but once the Mexican Mafia was formed, he stepped back and took his place amongst the members” (“Code of Conduct”). When a decision is made in the gang, every member has an equal vote and no *carnal* can give orders to another *carnal*. In this manner, “[e]verything is done by consensus, at least theoretically” (Rafael 135). This was the solution to uniting former street gang leaders who did not wish to take orders: every member was given an equal voice.

There are some potential problems with a consensus organization, however. First, making decisions by consensus “can drag on indefinitely if one or more group members continue to oppose the most popular proposal” (Sager and Gastil 3). Also, organizational size can render consensus organizations ineffective. Consensus decision making is often found in small groups, like town hall meetings and juries; however, maintaining order is difficult with several members. Large gangs with hierarchies often elect a president (Landre, Miller, and Porter 11), and if the gang is large enough to have different chapters, then elected representatives from each chapter form a committee (Landre, Miller, and Porter 12). In this manner, important decisions are delegated to leaders and more experienced gang members.

By carefully choosing its members and remaining small, the Mexican Mafia minimizes these issues. From the beginning, the Mexican Mafia only sought out the most hardened, violent inmates to join their ranks. The original gang membership was only about fifteen to twenty members, and “[t]he emphasis in those formative years was expressed in quality over quantity” (Enriquez and Mendoza 4). By keeping the gang small and only recruiting the most violent inmates, the Mexican Mafia was able to maintain a powerful reputation. Sgt. Richard Valdemar, a retired Mexican Mafia expert
from the L.A. Co. Sheriff’s Gang Unit, says, “They wanted to instill fear in the enemy so that they didn’t even actually have to fight many times. All they had to do was say they were going to fight and the enemy would withdraw” (qtd. in “Code of Conduct). In addition to building the gang’s reputation, selective recruitment also keeps the gang small enough to make its consensus organization operate effectively. This relationship between the gang’s structure and its power is given very little attention in scholarly research.

Since there are a very small number of made Mexican Mafia *carnales*, the consensus model is manageable. The actual number of made Mexican Mafia members is unclear. Enriquez and Mendoza, two former *Eme* members, claim that there are “approximately 50 made members in [the California] system” (Enriquez and Mendoza 337). Other estimates claim there are between 155 and 300 official members nationwide (Skarbek, “Governance” 703), but calculating exact membership is difficult. However, this number is low compared to other prison gangs. For example, the Mexican Mafia’s rival prison gang, *Nuestra Familia*, may have between 400 and 1000 made members in California (Skarbek, “Constitutions” 187; “Maximum Security?”). Maintaining a gang with hundreds of made members requires a hierarchical organization in order to efficiently make decisions. For example, the Aryan Brotherhood, a large prison gang, had to create a commission because consensus decision-making was too cumbersome (“Aryan Brotherhood”). However, the Mexican Mafia in the California prison system chooses to remain small enough so that it can still operate as a horizontal organization.

There have been periodic instances in the Mexican Mafia’s history where the *Eme* has “closed the books,” or stop recruiting members: “This happens periodically when the Eme needs to evaluate its current membership, clean house if necessary, and determine if
new recruits possess the necessary qualities” (Rafael 326). U.S. Department of Justice Special Agent Joe Moody describes one such period of “cleaning the books,” saying, “The purging of ranks took form in the assassination of [la Eme’s] weaker members” (qtd. in Enriquez and Mendoza 86). Recruiting quality members is imperative for the gang’s reputation. Therefore, the Mexican Mafia works periodically to halt recruiting or to kill weak members. Such proactive measures also ensure that the gang remains small, thus making a consensus model possible.

While the Mexican Mafia has relatively few actual carnales, it is able to spread its power through its associates and street soldiers. These individuals are not Mexican Mafia members. However, they are a crucial component to Mexican Mafia business. Hispanic street gang members who pledge allegiance to the Mexican Mafia are called Sureños. A Sureño is defined as “a gang member who identifies with the Southern California Hispanic gang subculture and who has adopted the ideology of the EME [Mexican Mafia]” (Enriquez and Mendoza 62). These street gang members are the prison gang’s loyal soldiers on the outside.

Sureños are loyal to the Mexican Mafia for two main reasons. First, Sureños understand that, as gang members, they eventually will go to prison. Like other prison gangs, the Mexican Mafia was formed for self-protection (Landre, Miller, and Porter 49). Prison gangs form along racial lines, and if incarcerated Hispanic street gang members desire protection from other violent prison gangs, they do the Mexican Mafia’s bidding. This requires Sureños to deal drugs and pay a portion of their profits to the Mexican Mafia as an extorted drug tax. In his book, The Mexican Mafia, researcher Tony Rafael explains:
The Eme has little difficulty enforcing taxation. Every gangster knows that the Eme controls the prisons. And every gangster knows that he’ll eventually end up there. The Eme may not get you on the street for resisting the taxation, but it will when you’re brought into custody. Reluctantly or willingly, street gangsters have to obey the Eme if they’re in any way inclined to stay alive. (Rafael 39)

For their own profitability and safety, Sureños obey the Mexican Mafia. Second, Sureños who are loyal to the Mexican Mafia receive prestige and may eventually become carnales themselves. When a gang is loyal to the Mexican Mafia, it tags the number “13” to its name. “M” is the thirteenth letter of the alphabet, and “M” or “la Eme” (the Spanish pronunciation of the letter M) stands for the Mexican Mafia (Skarbek, “Governance” 710). For example, the powerful gang Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, is a Sureño gang loyal to the Mexican Mafia. MS-13 is present in at least 42 states with approximately 10,000 members (FBI). As Sureños grow in power, so does the Mexican Mafia. The power between these gangs reciprocates.

In order to give Sureños orders from behind prison walls, the Mexican Mafia also relies on associates and street representatives. There are roughly 400 Sureño street gangs in Los Angeles alone with ties to la Eme (Skarbek, “Governance” 712), so extensive communication between prisons and the streets is required. Associates establish this link. Eme associates are aligned with an individual carnal, and each carnal may have several associates to operate his street crews. While locked in the Pelican Bay SHU, one Eme member’s associate “visited him three hundred times . . . between December 1993 and April 2002” (Blatchford 149). These associates enable Mexican Mafia members to keep control over Sureños. If a Sureño defies the carnal he is supposed to pay, an associate will report the infraction.
Other important figures in Mexican Mafia business are representatives. On behalf of the Mexican Mafia, a *carnal* “often designates members who are from local gangs to be the tax collectors and representatives for that gang” (Skarbek, “Governance” 707). The representative collects the drug taxes from his fellow *Sureños* and pays that tribute back to the *carnal*. This position as tax-collector is actually coveted, because “[s]treet gang members consider membership in the Mexican Mafia as an elevated position in the criminal underworld” (Skarbek, “Governance” 704). Being a representative may eventually help a *Sureño* attain *carnal* status.

Understanding how each of these players fit into the Mexican Mafia’s structure shows how the gang’s horizontal organization is able to proliferate. *Sureños* are the street soldiers who pay drug taxes to their gang’s representative. Representatives ensure that *canales* receive their money, and associates act as the communication link between *Sureños* and incarcerated *Eme* members. However, what is critical to realize is that *Sureños*, representatives, and associates are not Mexican Mafia members. Each Mexican Mafia member has his own street crews and associates who report to him. A *carnal* is responsible for establishing his own business ties and drug territories, and his business “either flourish[es] or flounder[s] depending on his socio-political skills and business acumen” (Enriquez and Mendoza 210). While each *carnal* has relative freedom in this system since he has the same rank and voice as other members, he also has the freedom to succeed or fail business-wise. While important decisions that impact the gang as a whole are determined by a vote, individual business decisions are made independently.

Comparing this structure of the Mexican Mafia to the other three major California prison gangs provides insight as to how the Pelican Bay SHU poses different challenges
for different gangs. While there is some existing research about each gang’s structure, research explicitly comparing these structures is lacking. Therefore, comparing these gangs’ structures will give correctional and law enforcement officers a better grasp of the differences between the criminal groups they encounter.

**Prison Gang Structures**

There are four main prison gangs in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR): the Mexican Mafia, the Aryan Brotherhood, the Black Guerilla Family, and *la Nuestra Familia*. These are by no means the only gangs in the CDCR; some studies show that there are 2,050 prison gangs in California alone (Fleisher and Decker 3). However, these four gangs are the major California prison gangs (Enriquez and Mendoza 71). Unlike the Mexican Mafia, the other three prison gangs have hierarchical structures. Each gang is analyzed in turn.

The Aryan Brotherhood is a white prison gang that has a very structured organization. The Aryan Brotherhood “admits only white members who align themselves ideologically with white supremacists” (Landre, Miller and Porter 51). This gang has a hierarchy, with “a four man commission . . . [heading] the California state leadership” (“Aryan Brotherhood”). Within the Aryan Brotherhood’s federal faction, it uses “a three-member council of high-ranking members” (Fleisher and Decker 4). These top members make decisions about the gang. Subordinate members, who are still made Aryan Brotherhood members, take orders from the top of the pyramid.

The Black Guerilla Family (BGF) is a black prison gang with a militaristic structure. There is very little existing literature about the BGF. It originally “was formed
in 1966 by former Black Panther George Jackson” (Landre, Miller and Porter 52). The Black Panthers, Black Vanguard, Black Family, Black Mafia, Symbionese Liberation Army, Black Liberation Army, and Weatherman Underground all have ties to the BFG (Landre, Miller and Porter 52). Since the gang has multiple connections between radical political groups and criminal organizations, its paramilitary structure is needed to make decisions. In the BGF, there is “a high central committee [that] presides over the entire gang organization. Each unit or subset is led by a supreme leader. Other positions within the gang are represented by traditional military ranks such as field generals, captains, lieutenants and common soldiers” (Gangs.org). These different ranks are all assigned to BGF members who are not equal within the gang’s hierarchy.

The Nuestra Familia is also relatively militaristic in its organization. Nuestra Familia is composed of Hispanics from Northern California, whereas the Mexican Mafia draws its strength from Hispanics of Southern California. The Nuestra Familia has four different ranks: “a General, Captains, Lieutenants, and Soldiers . . . one General govern[s] the incarcerated members. He command[s] up to 10 captains, who usually reside[] in different prison facilities. Each Captain command[s] Lieutenants and Soldiers” (Skarbek, “Constitutions” 187). Nuestra Familia elects its top leader and follows “a traditional pyramid organizational structure” (Rafael 282). The chain of command and ranks are very rigid in this type of organization.

Unlike the Mexican Mafia, these other three prison gangs follow traditional organizations for criminal groups, especially prison gangs. In Fleisher and Decker’s study of prison gangs, they claim, “Prison gangs share organizational similarities. Prison gangs have a structure usually with one person designated as the leader who oversees a
council of members who make the group’s final decisions. The rank and file form a hierarchy, making these groups look more similar to organized crime than their counterparts on the outside” (Fleisher and Decker 3). According to these researchers, hierarchical structures are even more common in prison gangs than street gangs.

The book *Gangs: A Handbook for Community Awareness* manages to describe common gang structures even further, allowing additional comparison between the Mexican Mafia and other gangs. The book’s authors classify gangs into three organizational types: traditional, committee, and social. First, the traditional organization type is controlled by an elected president, and “[v]otes to change leadership usually occur when there is a disagreement within the gang over a major decision” (Landre, Miller and Porter 11). Second, gangs also commonly form a committee of representatives, which gives members “experience in limited leadership roles” as they represent their individual chapters or cliques (Landre, Miller and Porter 12). The third type of organization is the social organization: “In the social organizational structure, identifying members in leadership positions tends to be the most difficult” (Landre, Miller and Porter 13). While the Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerilla Family, and *Nuestra Familia* are either traditional or committee organizations, the Mexican Mafia does not fit explicitly into one of these categories.

The Mexican Mafia’s consensus organization is a something of mix between a committee and social organization. It appears social in the fact that there is no elected leader and “[m]embers in this gang structure feel equally powerful in their influence on the gang’s decisions and activities” (Landre, Miller and Porter 13). However, given the gang’s small size and extensive street connections, it operates almost as a committee.
When a rival decides to attack a Mexican Mafia member or his street connections, the rival “is actually going to war with a larger, more powerful organization” (Landre, Miller and Porter 12). However, the Mexican Mafia is not a true committee because *carnales* are not representatives appointed by different gang cliques. In a committee structure, the members elect committee members to make decisions on their behalf; the committee members are essentially elected representatives. When the *Nuestra Familia* formed, it created a governing council of captains that “remained loyal to the mob . . . because the people put them there and can vote them out” (Skarbek, “Constitutions” 187). This type of governing structure is similar to a representative democracy. In the Mexican Mafia, however, members are not elected by subsets to represent a clique; instead, Mexican Mafia *carnales* vote among themselves whether to bring a person up to *carnal* status (Skarbek 705). While *Eme* members operate individual street crews and cliques, street crew members have no vote in how the Mexican Mafia operates or who controls them. The *Eme* makes its own decisions by meeting and consensus, and it dictates orders down to street crews.

The primary reason the Mexican Mafia does not have a hierarchy is because its street connections and *Sureños* are non-members. Other prison gangs do have street connections and similar goals to the Mexican Mafia. The Aryan Brotherhood “has strong chapters on the streets, which allows criminal conduct inside and outside prisons to support each other” (Fleisher and Decker 4). The Black Guerilla Family, while most members are incarcerated, “has a growing street presence” (*Gangs.org*). Furthermore, the *Nuestra Familia* has connections to *Norteños*, or Northern California Hispanic gang members, but it also relies on paroled *Nuestra Familia* members to act as soldiers and
take orders from generals (“Maximum Security?”). In these types of organizations, there are alliances with street gangs that sometimes work for the prison gangs. However, some of the “soldiers” in these prison gangs are made prison gang members themselves. This requires high ranking members to give orders to low ranking members who are working on the street.

In the Mexican Mafia, however, the “soldiers” are Sureños, who are not Mexican Mafia members. Sureños have no voice in the Mexican Mafia, and they do not elect leaders in la Eme because these are separate gangs. While leaders can be voted out of hierarchies, once a member becomes a Mexican Mafia member, he retains that status unless he dies or drops out (Rafael 286; Enriquez and Mendoza). When a gang member joins the Eme, he may wear the symbolic ‘Black Hand’ tattoo: “[O]nly a fully inducted member of the [Mexican Mafia] can wear the Black Hand tattoo . . . the punishment for a non-member wearing this insignia is death” (Enriquez and Mendoza 54). Sureños who are loyal to the Eme do not identify as members of the gang: tattoos of “13” mean loyalty to, but not membership in, the Mexican Mafia. Also, once a made carnal is paroled, his loyalty remains with la Eme and not his former street gangs. Paroled Eme members “perform a wide variety of functions, from executing errant members or enemies, organizing drug sales in their neighborhood, and collecting overdue taxes, to expanding the Eme street empire into virgin territory” (Rafael 27). However, these paroled members are not subordinate to the members in prison and do not take orders from them like Sureños do.

While varying prison gang organizational styles lack serious scholarly attention, this thesis argues that the Mexican Mafia’s consensus model is better equipped than a
hierarchy to operate in supermaximum facilities. This original analysis is useful since the Pelican Bay SHU supermaximum facility in California is one of the state’s leading prison gang suppression strategies. Before analyzing how prison gangs operate, this thesis explores the goals and structure of the Pelican Bay SHU. This provides context for why gang organizational differences matter.

*Pelican Bay Security Housing Unit*

The Pelican Bay State Prison is a prison within the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). The facility is located in the forests of Northern California, and it houses several prison gang members, including Mexican Mafia members. It is one of the most secure facilities in California, thus making it the main place to house violent prison gangsters. According to the CDCR, “Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP) is designed to house California’s most serious criminal offenders in a secure, safe, and disciplined institutional setting,” and this facility “opened in 1989 to accommodate a need for a growing population of maximum security inmates” (“Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP)”). This need emerged after decades of violence. Prison gangs have grown as a major management concern since the 1960s, so the “CDCR responded by building the SHU at Pelican Bay” (King, Steiner, and Breach 146). This Security Housing Unit, or SHU, is the supermaximum structure at Pelican Bay. Pelican Bay also has a maximum security, level IV unit, but the SHU is the supermaximum unit.

The Pelican Bay SHU is designed to house prison gang members and other special categories of prisoners. The CDCR states, “The SHU is a modern design for inmates who are difficult management cases, prison gang members, and violent
maximum security inmates” (“Pelican Bay State Prison (PBSP)”). Especially violent inmates such as prison gang members who endanger the general population are housed in the SHU, and “[t]he largest group of SHU inmates, comprising two out of every three SHU prisoners at Pelican Bay, is alleged gang members” (Shaiq 337). Assignment to the SHU is determined by in-prison violence or for inmates “who are deemed to endanger the safety of others or the security of the prison system” (Tachiki 1118). When prison officials identify and validate an inmate as a known gang member, that inmate is a prime candidate to be transported to the SHU.

There are key security differences between a supermaximum SHU unit and other prison facilities. According to Mears and Bales, “The essential characteristics of supermax housing . . . include twenty to twenty-four hour-per-day single-cell confinement . . . in a setting that relies on substantially more intensive security measures than used in other facilities” (Mears and Bales 546). In the Pelican Bay SHU, inmates are “locked up in their cells twenty-two and a half hours a day” (“Maximum Security?”). Other than the hour and a half that inmates are allowed to individually go into an exercise yard with twenty-foot-high cement walls, inmates remain in their cells. Each control unit is positioned so that guards can monitor cells from elevated positions with assault rifles. Guards are relatively protected from inmates, for “[t]he cell doors are perforated with 4,094 holes, which are large enough for the guards to see in, but small enough to prevent prisoners from reaching out” (Tachiki 1123-4). When in their cells, inmates are under continuous supervision.

The purpose for segregating gang members from the general population is to reduce overall prison violence. This is why the “CDCR’s stated goals in operating SHU
facilities are reducing the overall levels of prison violence, reducing prison gang activity, increasing staff safety, and protecting the general public” (Shaiq 347). Segregating gang members is supposed to help protect general population inmates and protect gang members from each other. Researcher Scott Tachiki describes this methodology to reduce violence:

Prison officials achieve these goals in two ways. First, they isolate the most violent, predatory offenders within the prison system, allowing inmates at other facilities within the system to serve their time with less chance and fear of being a victim of violence. Second, supermax prisons limit an inmate’s freedom, making the potential for violence inflicted upon fellow inmates or prison staff practically nonexistent. In short, gang affiliated prisoners are not placed in the SHU merely as a form of punishment for specific behavior, but rather for the safety and security of other inmates and staff. (Tachiki 1127)

Violence is a trademark of prison gangs. The Mexican Mafia is able to collect drug taxes because it threatens other inmates and street gang members with violence. Therefore, if prison officials can reduce an Emé member’s ability to generate violence, his ability to deal drugs will likewise suffer.

The Pelican Bay SHU operates as a mode of suppression. Among prison gang control strategies, studies note that “perhaps the most effective method for controlling prison gangs and their influence has been suppression efforts—especially if the focus is to reduce gang violence, disorder and recruitment” (Trulson, Marquart and Kawucha 28). Isolating prison gang members from other inmates restricts their ability to attack other inmates and gain influence. When a prison gang leader is locked in the SHU, “vertical communication within the gang ideally would weaken and the prison gang group’s solidarity eventually would deteriorate” (Fleisher and Decker 7). Not only does the SHU attempt to weaken ties within prison gangs, but it also attempts to segregate gang
members away from their street connections and associates. In 2006, the CDCR created the “Short Corridor Program”, where “approximately 200 top prison gang members [were] moved to the ‘short corridor’ in Pelican Bay’s Security Housing Unit D-Facility. The move [was] an innovative effort to effectively isolate prison gang leaders from their associates and disrupt gang communications” (Enriquez and Mendoza 261). By placing fellow gang members in the same SHU unit, the CDCR attempts to inhibit prison gangs’ street ties.

The SHU has different potential implications for prison gangs with varying structures. Currently, many California prison gang members are housed in the SHU and members from the same gang are placed in a “short corridor” together in order to more carefully scrutinize their communication (Pelican Bay State Prison). However, no existing research indicates how different gang structures operate when members are in the SHU. Consequently, most prison gangs are treated similarly within the SHU despite their structure. Members of the same prison gang are locked down together, which can lead to legal issues since gangs are divided along racial lines. For example, the California Court of Appeals for Division One found in Escalera v. Terhune that the “prison’s policy of keeping Hispanic inmates on lockdown following a prison race riot in 2000 was unconstitutional” (Escalero v. Terhune 1). If prisons choose to lock down specific racial groups to deter prison gang violence, this can violate inmates’ constitutional rights to being treated equally regardless of race. These are the types of challenges correctional officials experience when attempting to handle prison gang violence. However, more insight may help lead to improved, well-informed gang suppression efforts.
In the following sections, the challenges the SHU poses to the Mexican Mafia are addressed. First, the problems that individual gang members experience in the SHU are evaluated. These general problems are issues for all gang members, but some problems inherent to the Mexican Mafia’s structure, like gang politics, may be exacerbated by SHU conditions. Second, how different prison gang structures operate when members are isolated in the SHU is evaluated. While individual Mexican Mafia members experience challenges while in the SHU, this analysis shows that the gang’s horizontal organization manages to operate without having all of its members present in gang decisions.
Unlike gang members in a traditional hierarchy, Mexican Mafia members do not hold rank over other members in the organization. When a Hispanic gang member attains *carnal* status in *la Eme*, he has reached the highest official rank possible in this organization. He does not have to take orders from a supreme leader, but he also cannot give orders to other members. This creates potential problems when a member is moved to the SHU. In the SHU, a Mexican Mafia member can give orders to his individual associates and *Sureños*, but he cannot give orders to other *Eme* members. Therefore, any sway that member retains in the organization comes from his reputation.

A Mexican Mafia member gains his reputation and respect from violence. According to former *Eme* member Rene “Boxer” Enriquez, “Unfortunately, for the Mexican Mafia the status and mobility system is violence” (“Surenos and La EME”). This is how the Mexican Mafia is able to operate its business; by being a violent organization with a violent reputation, it can successfully threaten and extort Hispanic street gang members. If the gang did not have a violent reputation, inmates would not feel the Mexican Mafia could provide them protection and would not feel the need to pay taxes. However, the *Eme*’s threat of violence is strong: “The Mexican Mafia can extort from drug dealers because they pose a credible threat to harm people” (Skarbek, “Governance” 714). Furthermore, this reputation is why some *Sureños* are willing to commit violence on behalf of the Mexican Mafia outside of prison; young gangsters “[do] the Mafia’s bidding . . . secretly hoping to join their ranks someday” (Blatchford
By committing violent acts within prison, the Mexican Mafia manages to promote business and gain the loyalty of Sureños on the street.

However, the SHU attempts to limit the opportunities inmates have to attack one another. According to the CDCR, “The SHU is specifically designed to house offenders whose conduct endangers the safety of others or the security of the prison” (Security Housing Units). To limit violence, inmates in the SHU have very little interaction with other people. To release an inmate from a cell, guards “give instructions through loud speakers and open and close cell doors electronically, minimizing contact between the guards and the prisoners” (Tachiki 1124). Cell doors are opened when an inmate is allowed to individually use the shower at the end of the tier or when an inmate is allowed into the small exercise yard. When an inmate is taken out of the cell block, such as for library or medical reasons, two guards escort the handcuffed inmate. Furthermore, the guard in each control unit “monitors and controls movement in the pods and their connected exercise yards via closed-circuit television cameras and a speaker system” (King, Steiner, and Breach 148). This surveillance attempts to monitor any opportunity an inmate may have to attack either guards or other inmates. The only times that inmates are able to see other inmates is when they are walking past cells on their way to the shower or the yard, so these instances are watched carefully.

This security creates very limited opportunities for Mexican Mafia members to attack anyone in the SHU. SHU inmates may be able to assault people when being transported or when they are taken out of the SHU. One way inmates leave the SHU is when they are subpoenaed by other inmates. When inmates choose to represent themselves, they go in propria persona (pro per), which gives them the right to subpoena
their own witnesses. By doing this, *carnales* can arrange to “have a mob meeting, or call someone down to do a hit, or to get hit” (Blatchford 99). However, these opportunities are limited and prison officials watch inmates carefully when they leave the SHU. Therefore, opportunities to attack gang members out of the SHU are scarce. Former Aryan Brotherhood member and SHU inmate J. Bryan Elrod notes, “For many inmates, their whole thought process on the mainline is consumed with physical safety because of the regular threat of violence on the mainline. When they arrive in the SHU, it is a relief because they know that they are physically safer than they would be in the general population” (Elrod 6-7). Research verifies this notion. Investigative journalist Chris Blatchford says that “the only plausible way to kill someone in the SHU is to have an inmate’s cellie do it” (Blatchford 233). Since cellmates in the SHU are rare and only result from overcrowding, inmates often have no plausible way to directly attack people.

The most feasible way to attack people from within the SHU is to commit violence indirectly. A Mexican Mafia member can either ask other *carnales* to commit violence on his behalf or order *Sureños* to carry out a hit. Since he is a member of a consensus organization, he cannot order a fellow *carnal* to kill for him. However, he may request that an enemy of his be placed on *la lista*, or “the list” in Spanish, to be targeted and killed (“La Lista”). While Mexican Mafia member cannot give orders to other *carnales*, often members work together to carry out hits. As Rene “Boxer” Enriquez explains, “You are placed on the list because you are not readily available to kill, that is why it is called ‘la lista’ . . . usually Mexican Mafia members are housed in maximum security housing units . . . it limits their access to one another” (“La Lista”). Whoever has access to a target in prison often is given the hit assignment. Furthermore,
Sureños are required to follow orders from their carnal. Since the Sureños are subordinate to Mexican Mafia members, “[f]rom prison cells in Pelican Bay, members of the Mexican Mafia can order executions on practically any Los Angeles street” (Rafael vii). This is called “‘reaching out and touching [killing] someone’ on the outside from inside the prison system” (Enriquez and Mendoza 291). This is a viable means for a Mexican Mafia member to further his violent reputation.

The problem Mexican Mafia members face when committing violence indirectly is that they are dependent on the actions of other people. To further his own business, a carnal needs street crews to follow orders. Street crews follow orders either because they want protection and prestige or because they feel they would be endangered if they did not. However, a Mexican Mafia member in the SHU cannot directly provide any protection to Sureños; likewise, he cannot extort street crews on his own because he cannot attack anyone for failing to pay drug taxes. Therefore, he is dependent on other Mexican Mafia members and Sureños to carry out hits and offer protection on his behalf.

While this dependence is problematic for a member of any prison gang in the SHU, this dependence is especially problematic to Eme members because of the gang’s fluid power structure. Since there is no set hierarchy and are no different ranks in the Mexican Mafia, individual reputations and influence are primary means of gaining power. With no chain of command, there is no structure preventing carnales from forming personal alliances to gain influence in the organization. This leads to extensive prison politics which are inherent to consensus decision-making groups. For the carnal in the SHU who is dependent on other individuals to carry out business and commit violence on his behalf, prison politics pose a significant challenge to remaining
influential in the organization. For the member in the SHU who has limited avenues to
effectuate violence, these politics can be devastating to his role in the gang.

*Mexican Mafia Politicking*

There are some references to *Eme* SHU politics in existing research. However,
other than noting that this issue exists for the individual member, it receives little
attention. This section argues that politics in the SHU pose especially problematic
conditions for an individual Mexican Mafia member due to his position in the
organization.

While there is only one rank among Mexican Mafia members, some members
gain more power than others in this horizontal organization. When members make
decisions, members with stronger personalities attempt to sway decisions, and “[i]n
reality, some members have more influence on the organization than others” (Skarbek,
“Governance” 704). This is a result of the gang’s structure. There are no assigned
leaders, so natural leaders develop. Personality impacts what voices are heard in the
organization. Research on group communication has found that in a consensus decision-
making group, communication among members is influenced by “agreeableness,
extraversion, and openness” (Sager and Gastil 19). Similarly, in the Mexican Mafia,
members who can rally support from other *carnales* and convince them to vote in a
particular way are able to gain more of a foothold in gang politics. These politics result
from a decentralized organization struggling with “multiple individuals having different
opinions” (Vitez). This is a consequence of the gang’s horizontal structure.
Although there are strict rules in the Mexican Mafia about not politicking against a member, such rules are not reality. There are a few main rules, or reglas, in the Mexican Mafia, which are all punishable by death; they are:

1. A member may not be a homosexual.
2. A member may not be an informant, or rat.
3. A member may not be a coward.
4. A member must not raise a hand against another member without sanction.
5. A member must not show disrespect for any member’s family, including sex with another member’s wife or girlfriend.
6. A member must not steal from another member.
7. A member must not interfere with another member’s business activities.
8. A member must not politic against another member or cause dissension within the organization.
9. Membership is for life.
10. It’s mandatory to assault/kill all defectors (dropouts).
11. The Eme comes first—even before your own family. (Blatchford 44)

These reglas leave some room for interpretation, but other principles appear very clear. There are specific rules against interfering with another member’s property (6.), business ties (7.), and reputation in the gang (8.). However, the extent to which these rules are put into practice varies. There are no superior officers in the Mexican Mafia to oversee orders; consequently, “[t]erritories are up for grabs and while fighting and politicking between brothers is technically forbidden, it happens with such frequency that the rule may as well not exist” (Rafael 32). This type of politicking is inherent to the gang’s horizontal structure since there is no hierarchy to maintain order. Individual members are relatively autonomous to act as they wish, so they sometimes disregard official rules.

Firsthand accounts from former Mexican Mafia members reflect this inherent politicking. Rene “Boxer” Enriquez, who dropped out of the gang after ten years in the
Pelican Bay SHU, talks considerably about the politics he faced in the *Eme*. He says, “Before I got in, I thought it was this really organized group of people who had their act together . . . But once I was voted in I learned that none of that existed . . . Backstabbing and betrayal were part of the life . . . [Members] always wanted to kill a fellow member for some perceived slight or infraction” (qtd. in Enriquez and Mendoza 398). Another former member, Miguel Perez, who also dropped out of the gang after spending time in the SHU, says, “Loyalty, honor, it’s not there. There ain’t no such thing. I mean, it’s something that’s fed to you, but it’s not true” (qtd. in “Maximum Security?”). According to these former members, backstabbing and disloyalty were major components of why they left the gang. While these are merely a few examples of individual who now disdain their former role in the Mexican Mafia, their viewpoints are consistent with the politics inherent to this organization’s fluid structure.

The politics of this gang are unpredictable and violent enough that they even contributed to the birth of *Nuestra Familia*. *Nuestra Familia* is the arch rival of the Mexican Mafia (Landre, Miller, and Porter 55). While this gang is “one of the most ruthless, it is also one of the most regimented prison gangs in California” (Skarbek, “Constitutions” 183). *La Nuestra Familia* formed to protect Northern California Hispanic gang members from the Mexican Mafia. Mexican Mafia members would kill indiscriminately and even kill its own members to further its reputation and power: “Membership in the Mexican Mafia . . . often did not guarantee an inmate’s safety and internal predation occurred regularly . . . [*Nuestra Familia*] formed to counter the Mexican Mafia’s abuse” (Skarbek, “Constitutions” 186). While the *Eme* was founded on principles of protecting the Hispanic race (*la raza*), the focus has shifted to violence.
Enriquez claims, “Because Sureños were technically expendable, everyone would go along with the request [to kill a Sureño] just to see some action. This still occurs and is jokingly called ‘feeding the machine’” (qtd. in Enriquez and Mendoza 402). This type of killing can also happen among Eme members. The same violence that contributed to the birth of Nuestra Familia also helps maintain the Mexican Mafia’s reputation for violence. This violence can also pose serious dangers to members who are already viewed as expendable in a consensus organization.

In the Pelican Bay SHU, politicking between members can be brutal. Since members are locked away from other inmates, they cannot directly partake in gang activities, cannot directly commit violence, and essentially have nothing but time to sit and think. With time to think, gang members sometimes think of ways to sabotage each other. Chris Blatchford describes this dilemma: “Inside the SHU at Pelican Bay, an environment built to isolate and contain prison gang predators, there was no mainline prey. So Mafiosi more and more turned on each other” (Blatchford 244). Members think about their gang roles while in the SHU, and they consider any threats to their position. They have limited communication in the SHU to remain current on gang activities, which causes “paranoia, rumor mongering and openly hostile campaigns, or politicking” (Enriquez and Mendoza 251). Paranoid members in the SHU begin to worry about their status among other carnales.

Rene “Boxer” Enriquez claims to have had rival carnales in the SHU and general prison population who attempted to undermine his reputation. In the gang’s horizontal organization, factions sometimes form, and he claims he was enemies of certain groups within the gang as a whole (Blatchford 241-3). Enriquez says, “If you identify an
individual who is politicking against you or attempting to put you on *la lista*, you politick back just as hard. It’s a series of mudslinging. Individuals tarnish each other’s reputations” (“La Lista”). He claims that while in the SHU, he worked diligently to keep his street connections alive in order to maintain his reputation in the gang. Eventually, Boxer Enriquez’s closest associate was arrested and sentenced to life in prison plus 130 years: “It further deteriorated my political base. All my support on the streets was gone now. I found myself in turf battle after turf battle arguing with one carnal after another, and it was wearing me down. I was left in Pelican Bay, drifting. The wolves were circling” (qtd. in Blatchford 224). He could not stay afloat in the organization and eventually left it.

This account illustrates problems Mexican Mafia members face in the SHU due to their status in the gang. While gangster interviews “are only as accurate as what an interview subject is willing or able to reveal” (Rafael ix), these insights from Rene Enriquez provide an example to frame this section’s argument. The reality of consensus organizations is that participants with strong personalities who are persuasive and likeable gain more influence and more allies. For the member in the SHU, the opportunities to make new allies and connections are few. Backstabbing frequently results from gang politics, and an ally one day may become an enemy the next. For example, Rene Enriquez claims he had to reestablish an alliance with a *carnal* he had previously stabbed after the members who assigned him to the hit turned against him (Blatchford 235-6). In order to stay ahead in this type of organization, a member needs to be able to adapt and establish new connections. This is difficult at Pelican Bay.
The politics in the Mexican Mafia make it a ruthless organization. Backstabbing occurs often and loyalties shift. In the SHU, a member is isolated away from his connections, and he cannot directly help protect his allies who are in danger from gang politics. Therefore, if he loses his power base, he loses status in the organization. Furthermore, as the next section will discuss, individual members are not needed in all gang decisions. While this is problematic for individual *carnales*, it actually equips the gang to survive better than a hierarchy.
CHAPTER FOUR
Operating a Horizontal Organization despite SHU Incarceration

The Pelican Bay SHU’s suppression efforts pose significant challenges to the operation of hierarchical prison gangs. One of the CDCR’s goals in operating the SHU is to target prison gang leaders and isolate them away from their power base. For prison gangs with standard hierarchies, there are clear leaders to target. Prison gangs with presidents or generals of different factions have designated commanding officers and a designated chain of command. Orders flow from the top down, and soldiers and other low-ranking members look up the pyramid for guidance. However, this communication flow is interrupted if leaders are segregated away from their subordinates.

The Pelican Bay SHU attempts to monitor communication through enhanced security. Inmates still are able to communicate with outside contacts, but those opportunities are more restricted than if prison gang leaders were in the general population. SHU inmates primarily communicate with their outside contacts via visitation and the mail. At Pelican Bay, “SHU inmates can visit with their friends and family every weekend” (Pelican Bay State Prison Fact Sheet). Furthermore, inmates are allowed to “receive and keep an unlimited number of personal letters” (Shaiq 343). To monitor these communication channels, prison security monitors and records visitations, and prison investigators try to “scrutinize every letter that goes in and out of the SHU, an average of 2,000 a day” (“Maximum Security?”). These efforts attempt to limit contact between gang members.
Communication does still occur between gang members, but overall this is unavoidable. Research sometimes focuses on the fact that communication exists at all, which argues that “segregation policy is not effective because gang activity still occurs” (Fleisher and Decker 7). The documentary “Maximum Security?” with 60 Minutes calls attention to this view, stating, “California had a growing problem with prison gangs, and decided the best way to deal with it was by locking up the leaders . . . This is the story of how a bunch of gangsters went to one of the most maximum-security prisons in the country and turned it into their criminal headquarters.” However, the majority of this documentary focuses on the mere fact that prison gang members do operate out of even the highest security facilities. This fact is really no surprise. To overcome visitation monitoring, inmates use sign language and code words (Blatchford 149) in addition to hiding notes in body cavities that are then “held up against the Plexiglas window for the visitor to read” (Blatchford 150). To circumvent mail scrutiny, prison gang members use urine as invisible ink (“Maximum Security?”), third party mail drops, and abuse of legal mail privileges (Blatchford 150-1). Even under the most secure conditions, inmates are able to discuss illicit business in the SHU. Many prison gang members are intelligent and have a considerable amount of time to contemplate security weaknesses. Therefore, the ability of prison gang members to communicate with outside contacts is not a shock.

Instead of focusing on the fact that inmates do communicate with the outside, this analysis emphasizes how orders travel through different organizational structures. The degree that Pelican Bay SHU security truly inhibits prison gang activity is very difficult to empirically quantify. However, its security features do present challenges that prison gang members must find ways to overcome. It takes time to encode messages, it takes
time for visitors to travel to Pelican Bay (located near the Oregon border), and it takes time for prison security to process and inspect inmate mail. Gang activity undisputedly cannot happen as quickly between the SHU and prison gang members in other prisons as prison gang members who share the yard at the LA County Jail. Therefore, decisions and gang business cannot flourish at the rate it could with face-to-face contact.

This is where the Mexican Mafia’s structure makes its potential to thrive different from other gangs. Since la Eme has a horizontal structure, this creates an interesting dilemma for correctional officers: each Eme member is his own leader, but there is no leader of the gang. Prison authorities who wish to reduce the Mexican Mafia’s power have “no single leader . . . to target, [so] neutralizing the gang [is] almost impossible” (“Code of Conduct”). Prison efforts to target prison gang leaders do not work well with this gang. While some Mexican Mafia members are more influential, more violent, and more intelligent than others, these more visible targets still do not have authority over other carnales. Therefore, targeting Eme leaders is difficult because all members are leaders. Not all carnales wear “Black Hand” tattoos since they do not wish to be identified by correctional officials (Enriquez and Mendoza 52), and since there are only estimate numbers of carnales, correctional officers do not know if they should be targeting fifty or two hundred gangsters. This makes targeting the gang’s structure difficult.

Furthermore, inhibiting communication channels does not impact the Mexican Mafia’s consensus model the same way as a pyramid structure. If the Pelican Bay SHU incarcerates the president of a gang, then that entire gang must wait for final orders from the top or decide to elect a new president. Either decision is potentially damaging: slow
orders may lead to stagnation, and toppling the leadership may lead to dissention in the ranks. Business literature also indicates that inhibiting communication can significantly impact the efficiency of a centralized organization; decentralizing depots and communication in one study “improve[d] overall daily productivity based on . . . logistical considerations[s]” (Chu, Lin, and Ng 531). However, incarcerating a Mexican Mafia member in the SHU mainly impacts his immediate subordinates who are non-members. An *Eme* member in the SHU experiences obstacles to communicating with his associates and *Sureño* crews, so his own personal business may potentially experience problems. Orders to crews and word of any problems or disobedience may travel slowly. However, the member in the SHU does not give orders to other *carnales*. Maintaining communication with the gang is definitely important, but there are no orders to give between equal ranking members. Therefore, even when a Mexican Mafia member is in the SHU, the gang as a whole is able to conduct business relatively uninhibited because business connections are primarily individualistic. The individual member may have business problems that have minor ripples in the gang’s overall influence, but his brothers’ businesses are not seriously affected.

*La Eme*’s decision-making process also manages to operate despite having members in the SHU. One important gang decision for the Mexican Mafia is the selection of new *carnales*. Former Mexican Mafia members explain how only three members are actually required to induct a new member: “The three-member rule for Mexican Mafia induction requires that a minimum of three made *Carnales* participate in the vote with one of the three serving as the *padrino*, or sponsor” (Enriquez and Mendoza 278). If more *carnales* are in attendance, which is encouraged, then they must also vote,
and “[t]he gang typically requires unanimous support from members in the sponsoring location” (Skarbek, “Governance” 704). However, sometimes members are separated because of prison segregation, such as incarceration at the Pelican Bay SHU. Therefore, the minimum of three members is required to ensure that each new carnal meets Eme expectations. Votes from members at Pelican Bay are helpful but not entirely necessary. As a prison management concern, not only does SHU segregation not seriously threaten the way decisions are made in the Mexican Mafia, but prison officials also have a more difficult time monitoring recruiting.

The Mexican Mafia’s structure ultimately allows it to survive and spread because its members are somewhat autonomous in their gang decisions. Since there is no hierarchy and each member has an equal rank, each member has the authority to quickly make decisions on behalf of the gang. This is what helped the gang to initially spread. Once prison officials began to notice the escalating violence caused by the Mexican Mafia at DVI, they then “transferred a number of the charter Eme members to San Quentin, hoping to discourage their violent behavior by intermingling them with hardened adult convicts” (Blatchford 6). Instead, the young gang members decided to attack several inmates on the San Quentin yard. They furthered their violent reputation, and began to actually recruit the adult inmates (“Code of Conduct”). Without a hierarchical structure, there was no need to receive approval from a president or board to carry out these assaults or recruit new members. As a business, this helps innovation, because decentralized organizations “invest . . . in more new and innovative ideas [than centralized hierarchies]” (Wu 127). The Mexican Mafia’s structure allows it to act almost like individual cells that can be planted to grow in new prison facilities.
Due to its horizontal nature, the likelihood of curbing widespread Mexican Mafia activity with the Pelican Bay SHU is minimal. Other prison gangs have been subject to extensive prosecutions that threaten their power, but such efforts to curtail the Mexican Mafia would be difficult. For example, in 1998, the Nuestra Familia prison gang was subject to a major investigation called Operation Black Widow. This operation was “a three-year, $5 million cooperation between the FBI and local authorities in California . . . It was and remains the most expensive investigation into a U.S. prison gang” (Trulson, Marquart and Kawucha 26). This major prosecution focused on the gang’s top members who were commanding their subordinates from within the Pelican Bay SHU. The prosecution “uncovered a complex paramilitary hierarchy . . . including insight into its recruitment and membership activities, discipline structure, communication structure and members tracking” (Trulson, Marquart and Kawucha 26). Since the gang’s leaders were sending most orders from the Pelican Bay SHU and investigators were able to follow the chain of command to the streets, the investigation ultimately led to 150 arrests (“Maximum Security?”). This operation targeted the Nuestra Familia’s chain of command and managed to identify key leaders in the gang.

However, the likelihood of this type of prosecution against the Mexican Mafia is low. There are many indictments against Mexican Mafia members and their conspiracies with street gangs, but they generally include only a few carnales (Rafael). When investigators follow the Mexican Mafia command chain, they may identify a carnal, other carnales close to him, and an expansive network of associates and Sureños. However, the structure of the Mexican Mafia makes massive conspiracy cases difficult because there is no hierarchical chain of command. Even if members make decisions
together, they do not give each other orders. Furthermore, Operation Black Widow had the advantage of focusing on *Nuestra Familia* leadership in the Pelican Bay SHU. While the Mexican Mafia has members in the Pelican Bay SHU, these members are not the top leaders since every member is equal. The scope of a prosecution against the Mexican Mafia would likely be different than that of a hierarchical gang.

Overall, the Mexican Mafia’s structure is designed to survive well despite SHU incarceration. Since each member has the same rank in the gang, there are limited setbacks to the gang’s overall influence and power when a few carnales are separated from the rest of the group. In *Gangs*, the authors claim that a committee structure “permits the gang to survive even if members of the leadership group are absent due to incarceration or death” (Landre, Miller, and Porter 12). This explanation is mainly referring to street gangs with multiple cliques that need a board of representatives. However, analyzing this structure in comparison to the Mexican Mafia succinctly describes how the *Eme* survives with members in the SHU. Most members of the Mexican Mafia are already incarcerated. However, if “members” (not leaders) are incarcerated in the SHU instead of the general population, then the other members are still able to operate the gang since decision is made by consensus. While “[t]he truth is that everyone in the Mexican Mafia is expendable” (Blatchford 81), the gang as a whole is organized to survive. Despite individual SHU suppression efforts, overall the gang is still designed to last due to its consensus organizational model.
CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

Unlike hierarchical gangs, the Mexican Mafia is designed to operate well despite having members isolated in supermaximum incarceration. Conversely, the individual Mexican Mafia member incarcerated in the SHU is placed at a unique disadvantage because his voice is expendable to the organization and he has few avenues to protect himself against prison politics inherent to the gang’s horizontal structure. Hierarchical gangs, unlike the Mexican Mafia, have potential issues if gang leaders are isolated in the SHU, for necessary communication is restricted to a few highly monitored avenues. However, individual SHU members in hierarchical gangs have the benefit of their rank and superiority to maintain their influence in the gang, and hierarchical gang structures attempt to limit fluid alliances and politics.

These conclusions are useful additions to current law enforcement and correctional gang suppression efforts. Currently, the SHU at Pelican Bay is one of California’s dominant tools to combat prison gang violence. Prison administrations primarily attempt to identify prison gang members and leaders in order to isolate them from the general prison population. However, very limited empirical data exists about the SHU’s ability to effectively limit prison violence. Furthermore, minimal attention is given to how distinct prison gangs operate within this facility.

This thesis focuses on prison gang organizational models and suggests that these structures be utilized as a future targeting strategy to impede illicit gang activity. The major four prison gangs in California are not the same in their organizational design. The
Mexican Mafia’s structure makes it a unique management concern because it is a largely decentralized, horizontal gang. This structural analysis of the Mexican Mafia shows that its structure is designed to survive regardless of SHU incarceration. However, its structure makes members in the SHU highly expendable to the gang. Therefore, disruption tactics that reduce this gang’s business market, promote prison gang member dissention, or improve the identification of Eme members and their associates may seriously impact this gang’s business. Likewise, continually targeting top officials in hierarchical gangs is a promising tactic to disrupt gang communication and orders. While prison gang members will likely always have a market for their protection and drugs, prison officials may impede gang business by focusing on organizational structures to weaken major prison gangs. Since major prison gangs instill enough fear through their markets to intimidate other inmates and even street criminals, disrupting their power will also disrupt their influence throughout the criminal underworld.

This thesis also presents variables for further empirical study. Currently, empirical studies of SHU effectiveness are very limited. There are many variables involved since prison gangs have connections to street gangs and gangs in multiple institutions. Therefore, evaluating SHU effectiveness by viewing violence alone is difficult. However, this thesis shows the Mexican Mafia’s structure is an additional variable to take into consideration. Further research aimed at evaluating the SHU’s effectiveness may be well served to focus on individual gangs and similar gang structures in order to quantify prison violence. Prison gang hierarchies theoretically are similarly impacted by the SHU, so studying prison gang violence among gangs with isolated
leaders may be more insightful than attempting to evaluate prison gang violence stemming from vastly different criminal organizations.

The Mexican Mafia is a unique gang in the CDCR. Its ability to operate drug business is much more individualistic than the other major prison gangs, and its structure is powerful despite its limited chain of command. If prison officials seek to effectively suppress gang activity and if researchers seek to study how the SHU impacts aggregate violence levels, this gang’s distinct operational model must be taken into account. The Emes’s structure creates additional variables to study that act much differently than variables in other prison gangs. Furthermore, prison officials are well served to consider the impact of this gang’s structure. If prison officials are able to successfully identify and segregate the majority of Mexican Mafia members, then prisons may have a better chance of limiting the influence of la Emes in the prison system. Since this gang’s structure is unique to the prison setting, the implications of its structure must be taken into account to understand how to combat it.
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