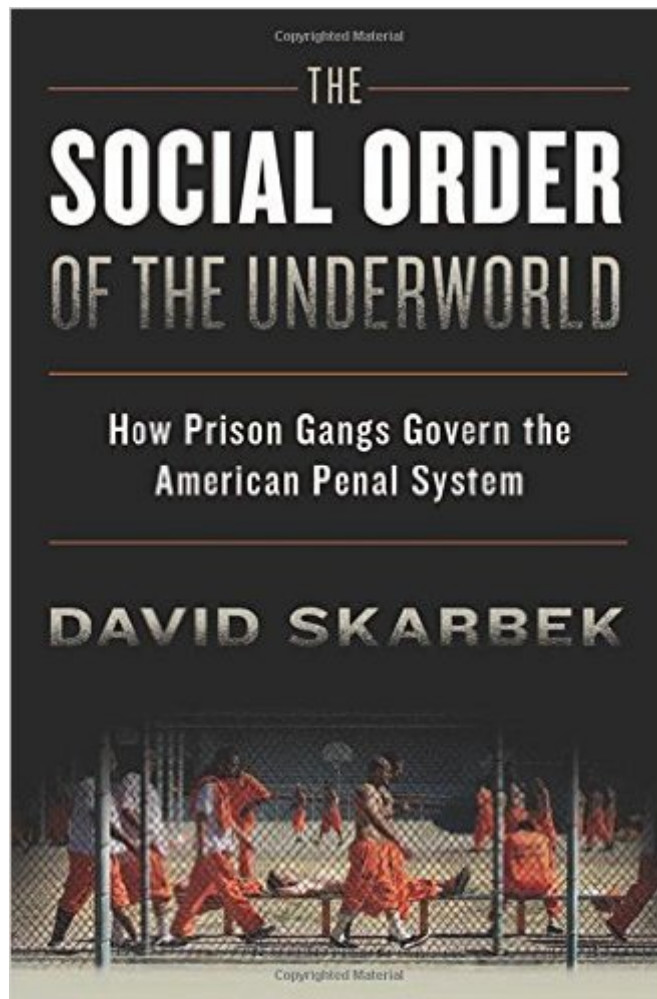


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The Social Order Of The Underworld: How Prison Gangs Govern The American Penal System



Synopsis

When most people think of prison gangs, they think of chaotic bands of violent, racist thugs. Few people think of gangs as sophisticated organizations (often with elaborate written constitutions) that regulate the prison black market, adjudicate conflicts, and strategically balance the competing demands of inmates, gang members, and correctional officers. Yet as David Skarbek argues, gangs form to create order among outlaws, producing alternative governance institutions to facilitate illegal activity. He uses economics to explore the secret world of the convict culture, inmate hierarchy, and prison gang politics, and to explain why prison gangs form, how formal institutions affect them, and why they have a powerful influence over crime even beyond prison walls. The ramifications of his findings extend far beyond the seemingly irrational and often tragic society of captives. They also illuminate how social and political order can emerge in conditions where the traditional institutions of governance do not exist.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The Social Order of the Underworld: How Prison Gangs Govern the American Penal System (2014) by David Skarbek is a fascinating look into when, how and why prison gangs have formed in the US and how they operate. The book concentrates on the Californian Prison System. Prior to the 1950s the Californian Prison system housed a fairly small number of inmates and Skarbek says there were no gangs, instead prison inmates had a code that they obeyed that was fairly simple but allowed inmates to remain fairly safe. As the population of inmates grew rapidly prison became more dangerous as new inmates didn't know the code and inmates had little in common with each

other. In order to provide protection gangs arose and then began to provide services for inmates including drugs and payment systems and a method of enforcing agreements. The gangs formed along ethnic lines and geographic lines. Skarbek argues not because of racial attitudes but simply because race is something that allows easy identification. These gangs create their own rules and even write their own constitutions. They recruit people who they believe will serve the organisation well. The gangs allow people to do deals by ensuring that people are more trustworthy because they will enforce contracts. For instance if a white inmate gets drugs from a latino inmate and then refuses to pay the white gangs will actually force the inmate to pay or physically harm him to keep order. Skarbek points out that prison gangs actually reduce riots and some kinds of violence as the gangs want things to be orderly so that they can make money from their illicit activities. Prison lockdowns due to riots hurt gang profits.

What an amazing book. I was a bit dubious, going in, that I would really be able to appreciate this book's topic, but was very happily surprised. The first 10 pages or so are an incredible description of what the book is all about and why it is important. Breathtaking in it's fresh, clear and realistic approach to explaining the rise of prison gangs, and what to do about them. The book destroys the pernicious myth that prison gangs are the cause of more crime and harms to prisoners. The case is patiently, poignantly and persuasively made that the reverse is more the case - gangs alleviate more crime and insecurity for prisoners than they cause. Facts, both anecdotal and as systematic as the data available allows are analyzed from a fresh economic perspective, as free of stifling jargon as possible and made crystal clear in it's implications. A theory of governance is used that acts like a clarifying lens to make comprehensible what is really going on in the prisons, street gangs and political system. After several iterations of the author's use of the theory to explain how prison gangs came to be, how they operate, what their upsides and downsides are, I believe any reasonable reader will agree that the author has not only made his case, but will think something like "Oh, geez, why did we not think of that before?" The author uses a wonderful device to hook the reader and keep him/her intrigued and emotionally connected throughout the book - stories of real prisoners which are as poignant, relevant and gripping as can be. Read the first page and a half to see what I mean.

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