

Mother Goose's New SHUs: Race-based gangs, Drug Trade, and Violence in Arizona Lockdown Facilities.

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Abstract

As citizens of the United States enter what some, at least during the initial euphoria following the election of Barack Obama, dubbed “post-racial America,” other sites, such as prisons, and more particularly maximum-security lockdown facilities, present a different picture of possibilities for the implied “declining significance of race” in shaping the dynamics of interpersonal interactions and institutional regulations. Based on evidence collected during an 18-month project using multiple intensive interviews and participant-observation interactions with 44 persons released to Arizona communities after having spent at least a year in one or more of Arizona’s maximum-security housing units (SHUs), the talk with examine interviewees’ contentions about how institutional efforts to gain control over race-based gang violence prisons, which result in concentrated segregation of races as “security threat gangs,” provide opportunities for practices “race-based security-threat gang” leaders devise to introduce and regulate control of profit-making from the distribution of illicit drugs deemed more or less appropriate for the different races.

To explore how personal commitment to or rejection of racial ideologies of superiority and inferiority intersect with personal and gang drug-related economic motives, I focus on highlights in the life of a White male, released for an Arizona SHU at age 61, after having spent more than 40 years of his life moving in and out Arizona prisons, encountering, and in large measure becoming an embodiment of the changing patterns of institutional regulations he encountered during these movements and the factors that eventually resulted in his forced acceptance of affiliation with the Aryan Brotherhood, a white supremacy gang, competing with other race-based gangs for dominance of the street-to-prison-prison-to-street profiteering from the trade in marijuana and heroin. I consider what his experience, differentially represented in lives of the other 43 interviewees, suggests for anthropological investigations of the development of or resistance to race consciousness among the 1.4 million persons currently housed in US prisons and the more than 700,000 persons now annually released, an increasingly large percentage of them directly from race-segregated SHUs, to communities in “post-racial America.”