On June 7, 1998, the body of James Byrd was chained to the back of a truck in Jasper, Texas. Byrd, who was black, had been beaten and stripped naked. His body was then dragged along a dirt road, which caused Byrd’s right arm and head to be severed. The three perpetrators had recently been released from prison where they had become indoctrinated into the tenants of white supremacy through a racist prison group called Aryan Circle (Anti-Defamation League, 2002). Byrd’s murder cast a spotlight on the violence of hate crimes but not on the influence of racist prison groups. Stories of crimes and extremist activities by those who become radicalized in the U.S. prison system are becoming increasingly common.

What is the true threat posed by adherents of racist and right-wing ideologies? The assessment of the real threat by right-wing extremists in the United States changed dramatically on April 19, 1995. The truck bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh took 168 lives and injured more than 800 people. It was quickly revealed that McVeigh had drifted through the radical militia movement and was a devotee of the racist novel, *The Turner diaries*, written by National Alliance leader William Pierce. The bombing put domestic antigovernment groups—especially those with links to neo-Nazi ideologies—on the top of the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s (FBI) antiterrorism efforts and led Congress to attempt the passage of the Comprehensive Antiterrorism Act of 1995. The act failed to pass but the crackdown on such groups by federal, state, and local law enforcement effectively crippled the militia movement (Anti-Defamation League, 2005).

The events of September 11, 2001, shifted public attention away from the threat of domestic terrorism and criminal actions by right-wing groups. However, large and small groups connected to various right-wing ideologies have continued to perpetrate various acts of terrorism and organized criminality. These groups have changed dramatically from the usual cast of characters that law enforcement and civil rights groups concerned themselves with in the late 20th century. Among the growing threats are racist groups that originate in the U.S. penal system.
Hate Crimes versus Hate Groups and Extremist Organizations

There is an understandable tendency to conflate the occurrence of hate crimes, the presence of hate groups like the National Alliance, and the criminal activities of extreme right-wing groups like the Aryan Republican Army. Hate crimes represent a considerable and consistent problem in the United States. The numbers themselves seem small. According to the most recent data from the FBI’s Uniform Crime Report, there were only 7,624 reported hate incidents in 2007 compared with 16,929 murders and 445,125 robberies (FBI, 2008). Yet, for several reasons, there is a significant underreporting of hate crimes to police. A 2005 study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics titled Hate crimes reported by victims and police found actual numbers of hate crimes occurring each year to be more than 15 times higher than the number reported, which puts the annual average closer to 191,000 hate crimes (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2005).

Both numbers are significant because hate crimes are a form of terrorism. Despite the claim that “all crimes are hate crimes,” bias-motivated criminality is qualitatively different. Unlike financial and interpersonal crimes, hate crimes are meant to send messages to larger communities. Usually, the victims are randomly selected and often misidentified. For example, many victims of the 481 anti-Islamic hate crimes reported in 2001 (most of which occurred after the 9/11 attacks) were not Muslim. Many were Sikhs, Latinos, and others that appeared to be Middle Eastern.

The goal of hate crimes is to terrorize larger communities to effectuate a specific political goal. The burning of a cross in a black family’s yard or the beating of a Hispanic man by racist skinheads is designed to create waves of fear in those specific communities. Research shows that hate crimes tend to be more violent than other violent crimes, often involving the mutilation of the victim (as in the James Byrd murder). The result is heightened anxiety among other potential targets (Iganski, 2001). This “greater harm” to the community has facilitated public support for hate-crime laws that enhance penalties for bias-motivated criminality.

The amount of participation by hate groups in the commission of hate crimes is largely unknown. High-profile cases focus attention on the criminality of group members. For example, the 1999 Los Angeles shooting spree by Buford Furrow, Jr.—which left three Jewish children injured and one Filipino postal worker dead—was linked to his membership in the Aryan Nations. However, the more typical form of hate crime is not likely to be committed by a formal hate group member. According to the FBI, the most common type of offense is the racially motivated destruction of property, including vandalism (FBI, 2008). Someone who spray paints a racial slur on a person’s car is committing a small act of terrorism (although not one orchestrated by a larger hate group).

One study found the terrorist activity of hate groups to be relatively minimal. Levin and McDevitt examined the records of the Boston Police in the early 1990s and found that 5% of hate crimes involved members of organized hate groups (Levin and McDevitt, 1995). However, Boston might not be the typical city with regard to hate activity, and hate crimes in Little Rock or Birmingham might be more likely to be committed by members of hate groups, which are more common in southern states. There is also the inability to assess the true nature of hate
groups’ influence on hate criminals who may not be formal members of any established group: Those who associate with hate groups do not typically carry membership cards.

The actual definitions of “hate groups” and “extremist organizations” are also imprecise sciences. There is a high consensus on the status of groups like the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and National Alliance, but less consensus that the Nation of Islam qualifies as a hate group. Criteria have been established based on a survey of law enforcement and monitoring groups. A group can be regarded as a hate group if it meets the following four conditions (Blazak, 2009):
1. The group is a collection of people who hold a common disdain for one or more large categorizations of people
2. The group is a named entity
3. The group desires the oppression of one or more large categorizations of people based on historical circumstances
4. The group must act on its collective disdain of other groups

These criteria allow for the inclusion of various bias-motivated groups (e.g., the New Black Panthers) and the exclusion of other groups that have been linked to oppressive ideologies, such as the Catholic Church. It bears repeating that involvement in a hate group is not equitable with the commission of hate crimes or any criminal behavior. Hate group membership itself is protected under the First Amendment, as are most hate-group members’ activities. Some acts might equate to symbolic terrorism, like wearing a swastika armband, but they are protected free-speech acts.

The 21st century has experienced a significant decline in the more traditional right-wing extremist groups. Although monitoring groups like the Southern Poverty Law Center have alleged an increase in hate groups, the claim is easily challenged. The 2009 Southern Poverty Law Center Year in hate report announced a 54% increase in hate groups since 2000 (and a total of 926 groups; Holthouse, 2009). However, some of this increase includes Klan groups who had split into smaller groups, groups that had fewer than three members (e.g., the American National Socialist Workers Party in Oregon), and black nationalist groups (e.g., Black Lawyers for Justice). And we cannot link the rise of the hate group count to an actual increase in the number of people engaging in right-wing extremism.

The 2000s ushered in the decline of the stalwarts of the white supremacist movement. The 2002 death of William Pierce led to internal dissension in his National Alliance. Richard Butler’s death in 2004 caused a splintering of the Aryan Nations. The arrest of several high-ranking members of the Hammerskin Nation disrupted the racist skinhead movement. Several civil cases—including the 2008 case against the Imperial Klans of America—have hampered the activities of the KKK. Militia groups declined after heightened attention in the 1990s and were replaced by traditional “patriot” groups like the John Birch Society. The only group to increase in activity has been a relatively small Nazi group, the National Socialist Movement.

Claims that the election of Barack Obama and the failing economy would fuel extremist activity have been made by civil rights groups and the Department of Homeland Security—without much corroborating evidence. On April 15, 2009, Homeland Security officers warned
law-enforcement personnel to expect an increase in right-wing extremism linked to hatred of
the new president and the rising unemployment rate (Sullivan, 2009).

Although the far right has been in increasing disarray, one area of growth has been racist
prison gangs. Those incarcerated under various state hate crime laws and federal civil rights
laws have become increasingly organized. Additionally, white offenders unaffiliated with racist
groups before incarceration become indoctrinated in far-right ideologies that stay with them
after release. The release of committed hate mongers back into the community might be the
greatest threat from the far-right extremist counterculture.

**Today's White Inmate Is Tomorrow's Racist Terrorist**

A bumper sticker reads, “Today’s prisoner is tomorrow’s neighbor.” Approximately 95% of the
2.2 million U.S. citizens currently in state and federal prisons will be released at some point
(Hughes and Wilson, 2005). That translates into more than 650,000 inmates released back into
communities each year (Harrison and Beck, 2005). Although minorities are disproportionately
represented in incarcerated populations, prison officials estimate that 10% of the prison popula-
tion is involved in racist white prison gangs (Anti-Defamation League, 2001). That translates
into roughly 220,000 members of groups—groups likePublic Enemy Number 1 (PEN1), Nazi
Low Riders, Aryan Brotherhood, Aryan Circle, Insane Peckerwood Society (IPS), and European
Kindred with 65,000 members—being released each year.

Some of those who have become involved in racist prison groups have done so out of a
need for protection in a population that is less than 40% white (The Sentencing Project, 2009).
Others have been incarcerated because they had been convicted of acts considered to be hate
crimes or civil rights violations. Many serve their sentences and, during parole, leave the world
of hate and crime. Others’ reentry is marked by either a return to racist criminal subcultures or
the first engagement with the racist subculture outside of prison. Those who recently transition
out of prison blend into the increasing number of U.S. citizens with incarceration histories.

One racist prison organization that has become a significant criminal presence outside of
correctional facilities is PEN1. The California group has become heavily involved in criminal
rackets, including identity theft and methamphetamine trafficking. In December 2006, more
than 300 federal and state law-enforcement officers throughout California raided PEN1 hang-
outs, arresting 67 members of the white supremacist group. Included in the crimes listed in
their warrants was a hit list of state prosecutors and police officers. Nearly all of those arrested
had become members of PEN1 in prison (Anti-Defamation League, 2007).

**The Rise of Racist Prison Groups**

The rise of racist prison groups has its roots in the 1960s civil rights reforms. Desegregation of
prisons resulted in the formation of racist inmate groups, most notably the Aryan Brotherhood
in California’s San Quentin Prison, which emerged from racist biker gangs (Anti-Defamation
League, 2002). Racist prison groups actively recruited white inmates who were then expected
to follow the groups’ radical racist agendas after release. Wesley Dillinger, leader of the East
Coast Aryan Brotherhood, said, “Prisons can be used as a training facility and should be” (Moser, 2002: 10).

With the growth of “war-on-crime” strategies like mandatory minimum sentences and “three strikes and you’re out” laws, the U.S. prison population exploded. Between 1974 and 2001, the number of U.S. citizens held in prisons more than quadrupled (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2003). This included the urban minority population that got swept up in an attempt to reduce “street crime” in addition to white offenders incarcerated through the new color-blind sentencing guidelines. Although minorities had preexisting street gangs inside prison to connect with—like 18th Street, the Bloods, and the Gangster Disciples—many white convicts had no such group for protection. The lone exception was the Aryan Brotherhood in California which, by the year 2000, was estimated to have 15,000 members (Lyman and Potter, 2006). White-power inmate groups, like European Kindred, grew rapidly in the 1990s along with the U.S. prison population.

Now, most men’s state and federal prisons, as well as many county jails, have racist white prison groups. Some, like the Nazi Low Riders (NLR), are recognized by the Bureau of Prisons as “security threat groups”; others, like Odinist Groves, pass as religious groups, and still others are informal cliques of white inmates who embrace racist iconography as a bonding symbology. A new white inmate, recognizing that he is now a racial minority in a world of well-established (and violent) black and Hispanic gangs, may rationally approach racist prison groups for protection. After a ritualistic initiation, which typically involves a mandated act of violence against another inmate, the new member is given a tattoo (often a swastika or Nazi SS bolts) and is indoctrinated into the racist ideology.

An addition to the new prison recruits are hate criminals who enter prison with a certain amount of experience. Those who are convicted of state hate crimes, federal civil rights violations, or any act that can be viewed as extending the white supremacist movement are viewed as heroes by many organized racists. For example, members of the Order, a racist gang that robbed banks and armored cars and murdered a Jewish radio host in the 1980s, have achieved celebrity status in prison. These stories have been celebrated on the “Free the Order” Web site, and their names are well known. Until his death in 2007, Order member David Lane operated a popular blog and a publishing house (14 Words Press). Other hate criminals are listed as “Aryan Prisoners of War” (APOWs) or “political prisoners” for waging battle against the supposed Jewish-controlled society. Their names are listed on Web sites, like Celtic Reign and Nationalist.org, and racists are encouraged to correspond with them. In 2002, the Oregon-based skinhead group Volksfront raised money to buy a television for Ken Mieskie. Mieskie was the ringleader of a group of skinheads who brutally beat an African student to death with baseball bats in 1988. He remains in an Oregon prison. Many of these Web sites publish letters from hate-affected inmates, including members of the Order, which gives them an audience outside of prison.
Except for those who receive death penalty sentences, life without parole, or who die in prison, all incarcerated offenders will eventually be released back into the community. This includes offenders who are convicted of hate crimes, are listed as APOWs, are members of racist prison gangs, and are influenced by racist ideology inside correctional facilities. Several programs are available to assist gang members with their transition back into the community after release from prison, such as the Going Home Program in Oregon, but no programs are available for inmates involved in racist prison groups.

Convicted hate criminals and those who become “hate affected” in prison experience a similar support network. Inside correctional facilities, racist gangs offer protection, brotherhood, and emotional support to white inmates who are likely to perceive a threat because of their new minority status. Additionally, hate offenders receive support and encouragement from the white supremacist community outside the prison. Many hate Web sites have run APOW mailing lists that encourage followers to write racist inmates and provide them with resources for their release, such as jobs, residences, and even wives. This strategy translates into an expectation that the inmate will maintain engagement with this support network after release.

The case of Kyle Brewster is instructive. Brewster, along with Ken Mieskie and a third skinhead, were convicted of the brutal 1988 beating death of Mulugeta Seraw in Portland, Oregon. In 2002, Brewster was paroled under the condition that he not associate with known gangs, including skinhead groups. In 2006, Brewster’s MySpace Web site featured pictures of him with members of Volksfront, a violent skinhead group. Volksfront supported Brewster while he was in prison, including conducting a letter-writing campaign on his behalf. Having violated his parole, Brewster was returned to prison. He again violated his parole in 2006 by assaulting a black prison guard. He remained in custody until he completed his sentence in 2008.

**Policy Implications**

The issue of prison-generated hate offenders generates two primary responses regarding research and policy. Criminologists and other academics must assess the nature of the problem itself. Little is known about the sociology of racist prison gangs. Research areas should focus on the following issues:

1. The nature of recruitment inside prisons
2. The presence of racist prison gangs inside juvenile correctional facilities
3. The activity of white groups that are not counted as security threat groups, including racist religious groups
4. The demographics of hate groups, including the percentage of members who are hate criminals or hate group affiliated before entering prison populations
5. The support racist group members and APOWs receive from the white supremacist community
6. The relationship between racist groups and other inmate groups, including religious groups and gangs
7. Factors that allow inmates to leave racist prison groups while incarcerated
8. The recidivism rates of racist prison group members and the types of criminality they engage in
9. The participation of racist offenders with organized right-wing extremists after release
10. The effectiveness of postrelease transition programs in reducing the recidivism of racist offenders

These issues also require policy responses from lawmakers and correctional officials. The following areas clearly require policy actions:

1. The creation of resources that allow inmates to resist recruitment into racist prison gangs, including protection from assault, extortion, and harassment from minority inmates
2. The development of an active threat assessment of racist prison groups that communicate with extremists in the general population
3. The setting of stringent conditions of probation and parole that restrict offenders’ associations with extremist groups
4. The development of postrelease programs that help offenders adjust to living and working in a diverse society

It is possible that more than a thousand members of racist prison groups are being released back into the community each week, with no established strategy to respond to their increasing presence in the criminal landscape. Police are often the first to confront the criminal threat of racist groups like PEN1, IPS, and NLR, who mix terroristic activity with traditional gang offenses. These groups feed into biker gangs, radical political groups, and older hate groups to pave the way for future events like those in Jasper, Texas, and Oklahoma City.

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