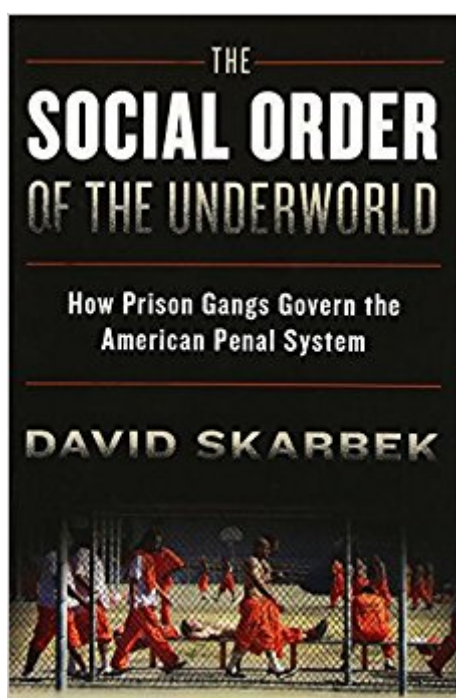


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The Social Order Of The Underworld: How Prison Gangs Govern The American Penal System



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

Paperback: 240 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (July 1, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199328501

ISBN-13: 978-0199328505

Product Dimensions: 9.1 x 0.8 x 6.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.7 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 28 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #192,324 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #38 in [Books > Business & Money > Economics > Comparative](#) #679 in [Books > Textbooks > Social Sciences > Criminology](#) #714 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > Public Affairs & Policy > Social Services & Welfare](#)

Customer Reviews

Winner of the William H. Riker Book Award, American Political Science Association Winner of the 2014 Outstanding Publication Award, International Association for the Study of Organized Crime. Shortlisted, 2014 Thinking Allowed Ethnography Award, British Sociological Association "This is a fascinating study of what the title suggests. It is also a remarkable study of a "natural experiment" in the evolution of government. Put a couple of thousand men, not of the nicest kind, into close confinement with limited communication facilities and little government, and see what

happens. What happens is government, based largely on ethnic gangs, with hierarchy, rules, and sometimes written constitutions. The basic problem to be solved is the management of the market for drugs, and solving that leads to genuine institutions. A great read."-- Thomas Schelling, Nobel Laureate in Economics (2005)"David Skarbek has written a wonderful book. It is a gripping account of prison gangs, pointing to a wholesale re-thinking of the management of American prisons. But it is far more than this: if you care at all about ethnic politics, violence, and the emergence of social order, organizational theory and the problems of collective action-in short, if you have any interest at all in how societies govern themselves-you have to read this book."-- Philip Keefer, Lead Economist, Development Research Group, The World Bank"David Skarbek's *The Social Order of the Underworld* can be read with great profit on each of three levels: it is an engrossing ethnography of American prison life; it is a penetrating economic analysis of the organization of the drug trade; and it offers an innovative theory of how an effective governing institution can originate in the wild and exert legitimate domination over its subjects. This book is a stunning achievement that makes me proud to be a social scientist."-- David D. Laitin, Watkins Professor of Political Science, Stanford University"Meticulously researched and convincingly argued. Skarbek's book is an outstanding addition to our understanding of self-governance, its ubiquity, and effectiveness."-- Peter T. Leeson, George Mason University, and author of *The Invisible Hook: The Hidden Economics of Pirates*"Drawing on economic theory, David Skarbek shows how social order can emerge in the most unlikely circumstances. In the nasty and brutish world of American prisons, gangs have emerged to govern the penal system, settle dispute and regulate the market for drugs. This is a story about the ingenuity of gang members and of institutional failure. *The Social Order of the Underworld* straddles all the social sciences to give us a masterly account of the human condition in the most harrowing circumstances. Add a vivid narrative style and the total absence of jargon, and you have in your hand a terrific book."-- Federico Varese, Professor of Criminology, Oxford University"Excellent...A very interesting book, which should be read by anyone with an interest in this topic".-- Tyler Cowen, George Mason University"Skarbek...shows how gangs have spread through the prison system in the United States. He argues, convincingly, that gangs offer protection and governance in places where established institutions fail."-- *The Economist*"A fascinating new book."-- Matt Ridley, *The Times*, author of *The Rational Optimist*"*The Social Order of the Underworld* is thought-provoking and challenging...in jurisdictions like England and Wales, where gangs are a significant issue but less firmly entrenched, policy-makers in this field potentially have much to learn from Skarbek's book."-- Tim Newburn, London School of EconomicsEvery once in a while a daring book or article comes along that helps us establish new connections

between apparently distant analytical and geographic locations” – The Social Order of the Underworld, by David Skarbek does just that” – It is prime evidence of why rigorous, but methodologically flexible, academic research and heterodox thought is often much more deeply relevant for the real world. [for] those working on organized crime and gangs, violence, ethnicity and race, governance, urban sociology and politics, economics and, even, international development and anthropology.--- Graham Denyer Willis, University of Cambridge

David Skarbek’s The Social Order of the Underworld: How Prison Gangs Govern the American Penal System is a revelatory account of the etiology, flourishing, and demise of prison gangs. Skarbek works in a rational choice tradition, but also brings to bear a rich tapestry of first-hand accounts. He shows that prison gangs are an inevitable (and, yes, rational, even efficient) response to mass incarceration and the new demographics of prisons. The result is a compelling portrait of the inadvertent consequences of mass incarceration.--- Aziz Huq, University of Chicago Law School

"The most perceptive book about the US prison regime....Skarbek’s The Social Order of the Underworld should serve as a terrible warning of where [the UK] may otherwise be heading."--- Vicky Pryce, former joint head of the UK Government Economic Service

“meticulously researched, soundly reasoned, well written, and accessible to specialist scholars and casual readers alike. It should be considered required if not immediate reading for anyone with serious research interests in either economics or the applied fields of crime and punishment” – a much needed methodological and theoretical update to the currently dominant and arguably incomplete models of crime and punishment.--- Daniel J. D’Amico, Brown University

"[Skarbek] makes his case with compelling logic and evidence [he] brings a refreshing perspective to prison research” – A short review cannot do justice to this valuable work or fully develop the nuances. It is perhaps the best book on prison culture and administration since James Jacobs’ Stateville: The Penitentiary in Mass Society."-- Jim Thomas, Northern Illinois University

"This is a really incredible book. I was utterly fascinated by it. I learned an immense amount, way too much, actually, about prisons...it’s a fabulous application of economics to a wide range of social phenomena. It’s really an amazing book."-- Russell Roberts, Hoover Institution, Stanford University

A fascinating account...a model example of how to use economic analysis to highlight the illegal world, without falling into the trap of economic imperialism...a must-read.--Diane Coyle, University of Manchester

This work is an intriguing, well-written and insightful contribution to the gang and prison literature...I found the intervention of Skarbek’s work to be thought-provoking and analytically enriching in an area that is extraordinarily bereft of rigorous critical inquiry.-- David Brotherton, John Jay College

"Brilliant book, meticulously researched, well

argued, and clearly written. Order now for you and your students' edification and pure pleasure in reading well written and well done social science."--- Peter Boettke, George Mason University

"The Social Order of the Underworld is an excellent read with an illuminating analysis. Those unfamiliar with the world of penal gangs and those looking for a refreshing take on the organization of inmate social systems would do well to start with this book."--- Michael L. Walker, University of Nebraska

"Skarbek has produced a must read piece of research for anyone remotely interested in the American criminal justice system. His well-argued economic analysis makes it difficult to subscribe to any other theory of what we're seeing in the prison system and why."--- Adam Bates, Cato Institute

"Skarbek's book has much to offer -- especially as a classroom tool. It is highly readable, well organized, and...provides a concise introduction to basic economic theories of governance and punishment in a field that tends to be more sociologically focused. And it certainly provides a fresh perspective on gangs."--- Keramet Reiter, UC Irvine

David Skarbek is a Lecturer in the Department of Political Economy at King's College London.

I'm a retired street cop out of Detroit and have had to deal with gangbangers for 25 years. While this book is more about prison gangs, what I discovered was that I found many similarities and commonalities to street gangs. As a prepper these will be my biggest problem: pre-existing gangs and gangs that form out of necessity. Anyone who does not have first hand knowledge about these "people" will have a dangerous learning curve ahead of them after it hits the fan. Sun Tzu advises us that if we know our enemy and know ourselves he cannot destroy us. How well do you know this enemy?

Came across this book through a random post online, decided to give it a try - glad I did. It reads a little dryly at points, but it is a fascinating look at the current prison system and how it is on the inside. From an economist's perspective, there is a lot of information to sift through. I like how the author included an anecdote with each facet of the system he examined as well. Some of the things you will learn:

- * How governance systems are created - this was an unexpected look at political and social science, very interesting to see what groups of people will do when they are not provided governance, as many prisoners are not
- * How gangs were created in the system
- * Why gangs on the outside pay tribute to those inside
- * 13,000+ cell phones confiscated in California Prison system in one year . . . estimated 10% of what there is
- * How gangs can serve to lower violence in prison
- * How broken the system is right now - too many prisoners, not enough protection. There is almost no

choice but to join a gang for your own protection* How gangs are created to provide the goods others want This is well worth the read, one of the most interesting and thought-provoking books I have read this year. The author did an excellent job of giving an inside look at prisons, governance systems, and possible solutions moving forward.

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 its 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 its 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. I bet you will then read the rest of the book to find out what prison gangs are really all about and what realistic things can be done to make the system vastly better, for taxpayers, prisoners and society. That should be all you need to get into this wonderful book, but if you still want more, let me know and I can give you more details specific things that really intrigued and/or impressed me.

Fantastic book! Skarbek reveals the economic logic behind the frightening world of prisons and prison gangs. But to read this book and only think about prisons is to miss the larger value of what his research demonstrates. We can learn a great deal about what people really want and how they behave by reading about this unique environment. The book is well written, with enough horrifying stories to keep you turning the pages, but also enough theory to keep you thinking about human nature and human organizations after.

A look at the shadow economy of the prison system was very enlightening. The length that we, the people, will go through to create order out of chaos is amazing. I believe our educational and political systems have a deep affect on how we live in the USA. The fact that prison 'gangs' have written constitutions and codes of conduct attest to the influence of USA culture on American life even under the undesirable situations that are found in prison. I wonder what the internal governance systems of prisons are like in other parts of the world.

Many political philosophers imagine man in a state of nature, and then think on how social order came to be. Prisons, although very physically structured, are effectively lawless places with lots of leisure. Prisons are a way to study men in a state of nature without the restraining factors of women and family and work. This is truly one of the most interesting and enlightening books I've ever read.

Gives great insight into the gang activity in prisons. And from a unique and compelling perspective. Sort of like Freakanomics, but is really an in-depth look at how humans are motivated in the pressure cooker that is our modern prison system.

Really thoughtful and interesting. Well written given its academic underpinnings

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