

How Prison Officials Manufactured Gangs And Gang Wars In Virginia's Prisons

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No Virginia Prison Gangs Before 2004

With the prevalence of youth lumpen organizations (so called street gangs) in Virginia today, it's hard to believe that there were actually no gangs (especially no Black ones) in Virginia's prisons prior to 2004. The culture never took root because of Virginia's own culture of prisoners bonding based upon the cities they were from prevented it. The few gang members who did surface were mocked as bringing alien cultures into Virginia's own local culture. Virginia had always had a highly territorial culture against those from other states.

I witnessed the birth and clash of gangs in Virginia prisons and how officials at Virginia's remote Red Onion State Prison (ROSP) and Wallens Ridge (WRSP) manufactured the entire situation almost overnight beginning in 2005.

This all happened for a reason.

Inventing Justifications For Two Unneeded Supermaxes

The gangs were created and played against each other by these officials because they needed to create justifications for ROSP and WRSP to remain open in light of both being repeatedly exposed as unneeded, and previous justifications proving to be lies. Particularly where the expensive construction and operation of these prisons contributed to a state recession.

When ROSP and WRSP opened in 1998 and 1999 respectively, the Virginia Department of Corrections (sic!) [VDOC] director Ron Angelone fed the public the lie that these two 1,200 bed supermaximum security prisons were needed to safely house Virginia's huge number of chronically violent and dangerous prisoners and those never going home.

In response to a flood of prisoner complaints about racism and abuse at ROSP, Human Rights Watch (HRW) investigated conditions at the prison and in 1999 issued a scathing report. (1) The report not only exposed extreme racism and abuse in the prison, but also that Angelone's claimed justifications for these prisons were outright lies. HRW found that the vast majority of prisoners assigned to these facilities were soon to be released back to society while very few met the VDOC's own criteria for supermax housing, and the VDOC never had enough chronically disruptive prisoners to fill even a fraction of one let alone the two 1,200 bed supermax facilities. Officials then repeatedly rewrote VDOC classification policies attempting to make more prisoners qualify for housing at ROSP and WRSP, yet failed miserably.

They ended up having to transfer most ROSP and WRSP prisoners to lower level facilities. Then began an unprecedented move of contracting to hold waves of prisoners from other states and territories.

Large groups of prisoners were suddenly brought to ROSP and WRSP from Washington D.C., Connecticut, New Mexico, The Virgin Islands, Wyoming, and many other states in efforts to fill beds that the Virginia prisoners couldn't. This scheme quickly backfired as these out-of-state prisoners experienced the same racist abuse as had Virginia prisoners at the hands of ROSP and WRSP staff, and reported these mistreatments to loved ones, the media, and organizations in their home states, where they had strong advocacy networks and groups unlike Virginia prisoners.

Prisoners from Connecticut were being murdered by WRSP officials like Laurence Frazier, a Black man who died from repeatedly being electrocuted by multiple guards while he was strapped down to a steel bedframe. There was the attempted murder (staged to look like a suicide) of another Connecticut prisoner Michael Austin, a white man who WRSP guards disliked because he grew up around and embraced Black urban culture and clashed with

WRSP rural white guards who ridiculed him and tried to influence him with racist values. Dozens of the New Mexico prisoners were systematically beaten upon intake at WRSP as were the Connecticut prisoners. The killing of Lawrence Frazier was also featured in the documentary "Up The Ridge" and an Amnesty International report on U.S. law enforcement officials' abuses of electric weapons. (2)

The pushback from advocates in their states was immediate! Large assemblies of families and groups from New Mexico and Connecticut protested in the WRSP parking lot and nearby town of Big Stone Gap, VA. Pressure was brought to bear on officials in these prisoners' home states, several came to Virginia and toured WRSP. Lawsuits were filed and the media was awash with critical reports, especially about the abuses of the New Mexico and Connecticut prisoners at WRSP.

One by one these states terminated their contracts to house their prisoners at ROSP and WRSP, and Virginia was once again left with huge numbers of empty beds at these supermaxes.

With no one to fill them and need to give public justification for these prisons' continued expensive operations while facing waves of bad publicity, VDOC had once again to change the security classification of these prisons.

In 2005 WRSP had downgraded from supermax (security level 6) to maximum security (security level 5) prison, and for the first time WRSP became a predominantly general population (GP) prison. Meantime ROSP's population was cut in half from 1,200 to a little over 600 prisoners. A large number of minimum security prisoners were then moved to ROSP ostensibly as custodial maintenance and other workers (called "cadre workers"), they were really just bed fillers.

But still other measures had to be taken to bring in more prisoners and fill more beds and justify these prisons. This is where the gang situation arises.

Creating Gangs To Justify These Prisons

At ROSP, the newly appointed warden, Tracey Ray, promoted a sergeant named Tony Adams who previously worked in the prison's dog kennel to the position of lead investigator and gang specialist (Adams was ROSP's first gang officer). Ray became warden in latter 2004 and appointed Adams as investigator/gang specialist in early 2005. A low ranking guard, James Bentley who still works as an investigator and gang specialist at ROSP today, was selected as Adams' assistant.

This new gang-busting duo hit the ground running alongside their WRSP counterpart Sgt. Steele. These men from rural white America with no prior exposure to Blacks or Browns became self-proclaimed experts in urban Black and Brown culture and street organizations overnight. Everywhere they went and looked they saw gang activity. And this wasn't accidental. They set out to deliberately create an organized gang problem and culture at these prisons where none existed before. This to validate their own jobs as "gang busters" and justify the continued operation of these prisons.

Before this period, the VDOC had no gang officials, no so-called STG (Security Threat Group) units nor task force, no policies on controlling gangs or gang activities, and so on, because there were no gangs in Virginia prisons.

At both ROSP and WRSP they created cellblocks in GP and solitary confinement exclusively for gang members unofficially called "gang pods." Those assigned to these pods were people they documented and labeled as gang members. In most cases, they targeted people who were, in fact, not in gangs. There had developed a small but insignificant gang presence at ROSP and WRSP under the influence of prisoners from other states like Connecticut and New York. But by placing prisoners who weren't gang members in blocks and cells with those who were, this led to waves of prisoners joining gangs for protection from those in these blocks who actually were gang members. It also created an isolated environment — like a hot house — where the gang culture took root and proliferated without resistance from Virginia's local culture. Most who weren't gang members when they entered these pods, were active gang members when they left. This created a steady cycle of non-members

entering these pods and leaving as active members, so that the gang presence in these prisons multiplied overnight.

There were also some members of Central American gangs in the prisons (a result of large Salvadoran migrant communities in Alexandria, VA) who had traditional rivalries with certain Black gangs. Initially these Browns stayed to themselves, but in the gang pods they clashed with those Blacks who had been profiled as members of the rival Black gangs. This also prompted Blacks who weren't initially in gangs to join them for protection or support-in-numbers against these Brown gangs.

In violation of VDOC policy which required screening for gang affiliations and forbade housing documented gang rivals in cells together, Adams, Bentley, and their WRSP counterparts also deliberately put rivals in the same cells, especially Blacks and Browns. Which predictably led to fights and stabbings, and cycles of revenge that they used as "proof" of organized gang violence. In fact, at WRSP administrators created a GP gang pod in a 44 cell cellblock, then moved documented rivals into the cells together. An hour later a large group of guards invaded the block and had all the prisoners stand outside their cells as they inspected their faces and hands for signs of fights. Those with marks on their faces or hands were written disciplinary infractions for being involved in "gang-related" fights — fights that officials themselves engineered. These and similar "documentations" were then used as "evidence" of a "problem with organized gang violence in Virginia prisons", for which WRSP and ROSP were now said to be needed to contain and control.

At ROSP and WRSP officials were manufacturing a gang presence and gang wars using a prison version of what Crips co-founder Stanley "Tookie" Williams observed "hood" cops and gang units did on the streets with the same outcome and purpose of justifying unneeded and abusive police and gang units. As Tookie described it in his book, *Blue Rage Black Redemption*:

"Yes America, as unbelievable as it may seem, had cops with impunity commit drivebys and other lawless acts. It was common practice for them to abduct a Crip or Bounty Hunter and drop him off in hostile territory, and then broadcast it over a loudspeaker. The predictable outcome was that the rival was either beaten or killed on the spot, which resulted in a cycle of payback. Cops would also inform opposing gangs where to find and attack a rival gang, and then say "Go handle your business." Like slaves, the gangs did exactly what their master commanded. Had they not been fueled by self-hatred, neither Crips, Bounty Hunters, nor any other Black gang would have been duped.

"The hood cops were pledged to protect and serve, but for us they were not there to help, but exploit us — and they were effective. With the cops' Machiavellian presence, the gang epidemic escalated. When gang warfare is fed and fueled by law enforcement, funds are generated for anti-gang units. Without gangs their units would no longer exist."

In an effort to isolate me since I'm not in any gangs and it was presumed that the gangs wouldn't interact with me, I was put in A-3, one of the solitary confinement gang pods at ROSP, where I witnessed the whole scheme play out. I watched the rivalries fester in that block, often under the direct instigation of guards who played sides with the gangs, then Adams, Bentley, and others would release rivals to the progressive housing gang pods where they were put in cells together and violence immediately erupted. Guards were openly amused by the stabbings and fights they were setting up.

When Gangs Become Conscious

I pointed out to those in the gang pod with me what was being done to them and how they were being used to justify the continued operations of ROSP and WRSP. Most agreed with what I pointed out and some refused to play into it. In 2010 I wrote an article, "Kill Yourself Or Liberate Yourself", documenting the history of the U.S. government instigating and manipulating rivalries and wars between street gangs in just this manner and calling on them to unite and return to many of their original missions of serving our communities instead of preying on them. I also discussed the uses of the gang pods at ROSP in that article. (3)

My efforts began paying off as many of those in the cellblock with me embraced the views I shared with them and joined in the historic 2011 and 2013 hunger strikes led by thousands of California prisoners protesting solitary confinement. I was then transferred out of state in early 2012, followed the next year by several who participated in the 2013 strike.

One of the gang leaders, Kofi Dankur aka L.I., who was a victim of the ROSP gang pods and out of state transfer where Virginia officials tried to set him and others up with racist white gangs in the other states (which they also did with me), wrote an article in 2022, "Blood In The Clenched Fist Alliance" (to which I wrote an introduction), where he bore witness to all of this. He opened the article stating:

"I've read Rashid's 2010 article 'Kill Yourself Or Liberate Yourself', and found it to contain perspectives which I also share. It also gives a true account of the scheme employed by Virginia officials at Red Onion State Prison to manufacture rival gang conflicts to create new justification for continuing to operate Virginia's two supermax prisons in remote southwestern Virginia — ROSP and WRSP, after both had been repeatedly discredited for racist abuse by their almost totally white staff against a predominantly Black prisoner population and exposed as unneeded. I was one of the numerous prisoners being housed at ROSP's so-called gang pods where these rivalries were manipulated by Virginia officials. I am an identified east coast Blood leader." (4)

While in the "gang pod" in 2010, I circulated a random survey to which 18 of the 22 prisoners in the cellblock immediately responded. The responses were telling, especially concerning the systemic false labeling of prisoners as gang members by "gang specialist" Sgt. Adams and others at ROSP and his role in putting rival gang members in cells together. I wrote an article discussing that survey and what it revealed about abuses at ROSP in the victims' own words. (5) Victims who mostly didn't communicate or get along with each other, but spoke with one voice about conditions and mistreatments at ROSP.

As the gang wars became more deeply entrenched at ROSP and WRSP, many were transferred between other VDOC prisons across the state where the gang presence and conflicts followed and grew. From this process, I and others, witnessed the literal creation of a huge gang presence and rivalries in Virginia's prisons where none previously existed, which also spread to the streets. All manufactured by officials at ROSP and WRSP, some of which still work at these prisons like James Bentley. The gang presence became so large and the resulting rival violence so extreme across Virginia's entire prison system that prisoners had to be separated and assigned to specific prison units based upon gang affiliations.

I was sent into domestic exile (transferred out of state) in early 2012 and returned to the Virginia prison system in late 2021. Upon my return, I found a different culture, whereas in most states, violent bangin' between rival gangs had largely stopped, while the local Virginia culture and gang culture have somewhat merged. Now there was still bonding based upon what city one is from but also a bonding across territories based upon gang affiliation. In many cases bonds based upon one's city of origin take priority over gang affiliation, while in other cases it's the reverse. The culture is still evolving.

If the public could have seen and known that prison officials caused the development and proliferation of gangs and gang wars in Virginia and the consequent violence and suffering endured by those in these prisons that spilled over into our outside communities, there would have definitely been massive push back against ROSP and WRSP. And there still should be push back now demanding that these places be closely scrutinized by the public and closed down. These remote prisons are a danger not benefit to their prisoners and the outside communities.
Dare To Struggle Dare To Win!
All Power To The People!

Endnotes:

*This article began as part of a larger article on abuses in Virginia's two remote supermax prisons, Red Onion and Wallens Ridge State Prisons. But a number of readers felt the subject of the development of gangs and spread of gang wars in Virginia's prisons at the prompting of Virginia prison officials warranted an article of its own.

1. Jamie Fellner, "Red Onion State Prison: Super-Maximum Security Confinement In Virginia" (NY: Human Rights Watch, 1999: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/redonion>)
2. Amnesty International, "Cruelty In Control? The Stun Belt And Other Electroshock Weapons In Law Enforcement" (2002) http://totse2.com/totse/end/law/justice_for_all/6resforu.htm
3. Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, "Kill Yourself Or Liberate Yourself: The Real U.S. Imperialist Policy On Gang Violence Versus The Revolutionary Alternative" (2010) <http://rashidmod.com/?p=6264>
4. Kofi Donkur, a.k.a., L.I., "Blood In The Clenched Fist Alliance" (2022) <http://rashidmod.com/?p=3195>
5. Kevin "Rashid" Johnson, "When Given A Voice The Voiceless Speak As One: A Random Survey Confirms Racism, Abuse, and Corruption at Virginia's Red Onion State Prison (2010) <http://rashidmod.com/?p=435>

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