



Carceral racialization, prison segregation, and the Integrated Housing Program in Arizona

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tcr**Stefano Bloch** 

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Abstract

Prisoners in the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry (ADCRR) coordinate to circumvent full racial housing integration, revealing how “race” and adherence to the “racial code” is used as an organizing concept in carceral settings that is distinct from conceptualizations of race and politics of identity within free society. In addition to providing a review of the literature on the complexity of prison racialization, we base our discussion of racialization and adherence to the racial code on our combined experience as formerly racialized and gang-affiliated inmates, as well as on insights from informal and semi-structured interviews with prisoners who have navigated attempts at racial integration as part of the ADCRR’s recently adopted Integrated Housing Program.

Keywords

Prison, race, racialization, carceral geography, Arizona

Introduction

Race has long been the central organizing feature for incarcerated people. This became particularly true starting in 1970 as incarceration rates began increasing exponentially,

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with a disproportionate number of those sent to prison in the United States being poor people of color. Between 1970 and 2020—an era known as “mass incarceration”, or more specifically for our analysis, “mass imprisonment” (Garland, 2001)—the prison population grew from under 200,000 to over 1.4 million, a more than 500% increase in incarcerated people in just over a generation. Before this era of mass imprisonment and the creation of what Miller and Stuart (2017) identify as the “carceral citizen”, race was rarely acknowledged in prison research for reasons ranging from a lack of demographic data, to self-imposed scholarly colorblindness, compounded by the fact that most prisons in the United States were overwhelmingly White spaces (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Carroll, 1974; Hemmens and Marquart, 1999; Henderson et al., 2000; Jacobs, 1977; Trulson and Marquart, 2002). But within the first decade of mass imprisonment, race-based prison gangs became a focus for scholars of penology as groups such as the Aryan Brotherhood, Black Guerilla Family, Mexican Mafia, and Nuestra Familia began making inroads into the western US states of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and to a later and lesser extent Texas from their birthplace in the California prison system (Camp and Camp, 1985).

The arrival of race-based gangs further exacerbated racial self- and institutionally supported segregation across the US Sunbelt’s burgeoning prison industrial complex (Lynch, 2009). Numerous studies have focused on prison gangs and corresponding racial violence (Gaes et al., 2002; Pyrooz, 2022; Pyrooz and Decker, 2019; Skarbek, 2014), but in recent years prison racial cordoning has increasingly been acknowledged as a far more complex process that is reflective of prisoner organization in which orthodox notions of race are not the principal dividing line or source of violence between prisoner groups (Rahimipour Anaraki, 2021; Weide, 2020). Notwithstanding trends in racialized gang violence in prison settings, and informed in part by our combined experience as formerly jailed and incarcerated scholars, we understand how selecting a socially constructed and spatially contingent racial identity within a carceral context is a fundamental decision from which almost all other experiences and opportunities are derived. With whom one can bunk, eat, exercise, trade goods, and worship is predicated upon the racial category one subscribes to while “locked up”. Despite the salience of racialization and racial in-grouping in a carceral context, as Infante et al. (2023: 2) point out, “little is known about the informal racial code of conduct (i.e., the racial code) that arguably bridges the gap between institutional racial classification and the enactment of racial categories to participate in the racial politics of prison.”

Unlike notions of immutable and heavily guarded racial categories that pervade free society, race-making in a carceral context is based on a confluence of “negotiated settlement” (Goodman, 2008), “racial sorting” (Lopez-Aguado, 2018), “racial priming” (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021), institutional racialization (Walker, 2022), participation in prison “politics” (Weide, 2022b), and adherence to the “racial code” (Infante et al., 2023). Building on extant literature looking at prison race-making practices and paradigms, we discuss prison race-making and racial sorting in the context of control exerted equally by Arizona’s racialized Security Threat Groups (STGs)¹ and the Arizona Department of Corrections, Rehabilitation, and Reentry’s (ADCRR) Integrated Housing Program (IHP), which seeks to end racial segregation within the ADCRR as mandated by a 2020 federal decree. We contribute to the literature on

prison race-making and institutional desegregation efforts by introducing the concept of spatially contingent carceral racialization. In doing so, we argue that the contours of “race” as an institutional identifier and the “racial code” as an organizing feature that dictates rules and mores for intergroup social interactions among captives are dependent on the geographical and more micro socio-spatial context in which racialization is operationalized by inmates and institutions alike within a carceral setting.

The spatially contingent forms of prison racialization discussed in this article highlight the adaptability of race as an organizing feature even in the face of desegregation efforts mandated by law and for purposes of maintaining control based on the existence of “prison politics” for organized prisoners and prison leadership alike. Ultimately, we assert the geographical axiom that “place matters” (Sack, 1993) in constructing and conceptualizing race at the prisoner/prison nexus. But, to be clear, prison-specific racialization cannot be seen as completely separate from the racist and racializing conditions within free society and throughout the broader conditions of carcerality that extend well beyond the physical prison walls.

Contingent carceral racialization

In the sociological literature there continue to be debates about life course racial fluidity, passing, self-identification, and (im)mutability (Roth, 2016; Saperstein and Penner, 2010, 2012; Sen and Wasow, 2016), though scholars universally adhere to the social scientific truism that race is socially constructed at both micro- and macro scales as per Omi and Winant’s (1994) racial formation framework. What is open for discussion is the degree to which status, station in life, and socio-economic situatedness inform perception of one’s race. Adding to this literature are recent retheorizations of “colorism” and the politics of skin tone on racial reorganization, particularly as it pertains to American Blackness as a contested identity category (Reece, 2021; see also Gilroy, 2000). Although domestic and institutional settings, including the home, school, and workplace are prominent within theory-laden discussions of where and how race is assigned and performed, analysis of direct personal experience with the fraught contours of racialization in prison environments is almost entirely absent from the social scientific literature (c.f. Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021; Bolden, 2022; Walker, 2022).

Geographers, for whom place matters above all else (Massey, 2005; Soja, 1989; Tuan, 1977), have likewise looked at the social construction of race and its relationship to the political production of space (for example Allen et al., 2019; Hankins et al., 2012; Hoelscher, 2003; Holloway, 2000; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; McKittrick and Woods, 2007). But even here, direct observation of racialization that occurs behind prison walls is hard to come by given the lack of access scholars have to daily life on the inside. Nevertheless, the resolute identification of prisons as “sites that house the slow death of inmates, racial violence, and the spatial management of race” (McKittrick, 2011: 955; see also Gilmore, 2007) are front of mind for critical geographers within the still-growing subfield of carceral geographies (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021; Bonds, 2019; Gill et al., 2018; Massaro and Boyce, 2021; Moran, 2016; Moran et al., 2018). And despite limited access, geographers and sociologists alike have in recent years forwarded our understanding of racialization processes that do in fact

occur in and around prison landscapes (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021; Bonds, 2013; Goodman, 2014; Lopez-Aguado, 2016; Moran, 2013; Simes, 2021; Walker, 2016; Weide, 2022b). Likewise, work conducted far afield from prison spaces has theorized race as iterative, viscous, and far from ontologically fixed (see Price, 2012; Saldanha, 2006), yet, as we argue, wholly consequential for navigating prison spaces. As scholars who have experienced direct racialization firsthand within what Goodman (2008: 737) identifies as the last “overt bastion of state-enacted racial segregation”, we build on theories of race and racialization by offering the concept of a “spatially contingent carceral identity”.

Like Wacquant (2005) who identifies prison as the “main machine for race making” in a post-bondage civil society, we see prison as a distinctly emplaced locus for racialization given carceral contingency. Unlike race-making and categorization that continues to be forwarded by and adhered to within liberal institutions and populations as part of the preservation of de facto segregation and promulgation of identity politics, prison racialization is rife with complex and counterintuitive components that are highly contingent on carceral conditions, including prison securitization, which are distinct from places and processes found in civilian life. For example, in our own experience, individuals who choose to “run White” on the inside, and therefore operate within a strict social hierarchy based on self-imposed racial cordoning and animus toward non-Whites, often do not hold such “racist” views or adhere to such racial division when on the outside where class position frames shared marginalization (see Phillips, 2018). Similarly, an individual racialized as Black in free society may in a prison setting “run” (affiliate with) *Sureño* (*Chicano*, or one who is American of Mexican descent from Southern California or with gang allegiance to the Mexican Mafia) by virtue of their personal experience as well as embodying and performing Chicano street identity. Identifying as *Sureño*, like “running” White or Black, comes with a host of responsibilities and strict adherence to prisoner-imposed rules of conduct (*reglas*), as well as participation in what prisoners call the “politics” that govern virtually every facet of prison social and emotional life (Crewe et al., 2014). It is the navigation and promotion of the *reglas* and broader prisoner politics that inform the contingent “racial code” more than possessing ontological or commonly identifiable racial identity that matters most on a prison yard (see Skarbek, 2014).

Given the byzantine structure of carceral space and identity formation, we understand prison settings as unique in terms of how racial identity and racial categorization operate. Prison spaces including the mess hall, yard, visiting room, classroom, and spaces of worship have been studied in terms of everyday micro-management of racialized bodies (Haller and Kolind, 2018; Moran, 2013; Tasca et al., 2016), but in a US context, it has been the California jail and prison systems that have received the lion’s share of attention (Lopez-Aguado, 2018; Walker, 2022; Weide, 2022b). But because, as we argue, racialization is contingent upon place and occurs at both micro and macro spatial scales, how one is racialized has as much to do with where one is racialized, particularly when removed from academic settings, policy realms, and other bastions of “free society identity politics” (Walker, 2016: 1054; see also Mills, 2017). Bearing in mind these contingent realities, in the next section we discuss how the Arizona prison system is distinct from other penal contexts in terms of racialization because of both demographic differences in the region as well as the particularities of gang formation

found within the state. As Brangan (2022: 2) argues, a more “nuanced comparative view of penalty” is needed to ensure “we treat it as a dynamic social institution rooted in place”. We heed this call for attention to place with a discussion of the recently implemented IHP modeled in part on the Texas and California State Prison systems’ own desegregation efforts.

Arizona’s Integrated Housing Program

The ADCRR has the fifth highest rate of incarceration in the United States ($N = 453$ per 100,000 residents) and is comprised of nine public prison facilities and seven private facilities across the state, and as of 2023 imprisons 34,046 people ($N = 30,906$ men and 3140 women), each of whom has been subject to the IHP since 2020. Though racial segregation in US prisons was declared unconstitutional as early as 1968 as per *Lee v Washington*, it was more recent constitutional tests in Texas and California that provided a model for Arizona’s own attempt at integration. Like the Texas Department of Criminal Justice that began the desegregation of prison housing in 1991 after entering into a federal consent decree following *Lamar v Coffield* in 1977 (Trulson and Marquart, 2002), the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation began implementing its own in-cell Racial Integration Housing Policy in 2005, after facing a 14th Amendment challenge in the 1995 case of *Johnson v State of California* (Lindsey, 2009). Arizona’s desegregation effort was likewise initiated by a court challenge outlined in *Rudasill v Ryan*, which calls for an end to equal protections violations and for racial desegregation in cell, bunk, dormitory, and work assignments across the ADCRR. But, as we argue below, abiding by legal challenges to racial segregation as conceptualized by the courts and imposed by prison administrators may have little effect on the daily manifestations of racialized self-segregation for several reasons, including the disconnect between contingent realities of racialization in prison settings versus liberal notions and reifications of racial categories conceptualized in free society.

Although this is the first academic study to analyze the newly implemented IHP in Arizona, scholars have looked at failed and flailing federal involvement in state prison racial politics before, including in Rhode Island (Carroll, 1974), Illinois (Jacobs, 1977), Alabama (Yackle, 1989), Georgia (Chilton, 1991), Texas (Trulson and Marquart, 2002), California (Lindsey, 2009), and in Mississippi where “racial integration was another high-blown social abstraction, a thing that got little more than lip service” (Taylor, 1999: 6). Research by Trulson et al. (2008) on the difficulty of top-down prison desegregation coincides with our own understanding of the IHP in Arizona. In addition to scholarly analysis of policy implementation at the behest of legal authority, we base our understanding of the intricacies of everyday contingent carceral racialization and self-imposed segregation in defiance of the IHP on our combined experience and ability to rely on our respective insider status to access and interview incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people about highly fraught integration efforts in Arizona (see also Phillips and Earle, 2010).

In addition to retrospectively relying on participant observation, autoethnography, and informal interviews while in detention—as well as on “memory ethnography” and

“place-based elicitation” as qualitative research methods employed *in situ* (Bloch, 2018, 2019)—the second author, Olivares-Pelayo, routinely made contact with recently released prisoners in his capacity as a community organizer and drug treatment peer supporter. His status as a formerly incarcerated person likewise provided him with insider status and trust among others who had served time. During informal and semi-structured reentry conversations in Tucson, Arizona between 2020 and 2023, Olivares-Pelayo asked specific questions about how incarcerated men were navigating the IHP within the ADCRR (Table 1).

The first author, Bloch, was able to make contact with formerly incarcerated individuals given his neighborhood advocacy work and role as an educator within the state prison and university systems. Bloch conducted informal interviews with female-identifying family members and supporters of incarcerated men, including three formerly incarcerated women, two of whom identify as Native and one of whom identifies as Black. Although further research on adherence to prison “politics” and the “racial code” among female prisoners remains to be conducted (cf. Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Kruttschnitt and Hussemann, 2008), there is currently no STG category or, based on our preliminary research, evidence of IHP circumnavigation within ADOCRR facilities for women.

The IHP “song and dance”

The IHP form is first filled out at the Alhambra Reception Center, part of the Arizona State Prison Complex. A staff person, upon determining and recording an inmate’s “race”, their gang affiliation, and photographing “relevant tattoos” (see Figure 1), determines the inmate’s willingness to house with members of a different race. The IHP has six “race” categories: Caucasian, African American, Native American, Mexican American, Mexican National, and Other (see Figure 1). Each staff member must provide an assessment regarding the inmate’s willingness to house across racial lines by indicating their preference and determining which of the following pertains to the inmate’s bunk, cell, or dorm assignment:

- RE (Racially Eligible)—“Can live with members of any race”;
- RH (Refuses to House)—“Inmate refuses to house (with members of other races), but no valid reason”;
- RO (Restricted to Own)—“Can only live with member of the same race (valid reason)”;
- RP (Restricted Partially)—“May be considered ineligible to live with inmates of a particular race (but can live with a member of at least one different race)”;
- RT (Restricted Temporarily by Custody)—“Pending further review based on lack of documentation and/or inmate is required by policy to be single celled”.

For prisoners who elect to remain in general population and sign the IHP, the process is understood to be an entirely pro-forma display on the part of the administration that has minimal impact on day-to-day life for prisoners once in general population during their incarceration. This belief was a common theme among the respondents

Table 1. Respondent demographics^a (n = 25).

Declared "race" of respondent ^b	African American / Black / Kin	4
	Hispanic / Chicano / <i>Sureño</i> / Mexican (American)	10
	Native / Indian / Indigenous / O'odum / Diné	3
	White / Peckerwood	8
Age (years)	22–29	5
	30–39	6
	40–49	10
	50–59	3
	60–70+	1
Housing security designation ^c	Level V	6
	Level IV	10
	Level III	5
	Level II	6
	Special Management Unit (SMU)	7
Gender ^d	Protective Custody (PC)	0
	Male	22
	Female	3
Years imprisoned ^e	1–4	8
	5–9	4
	10–14	5
	15–19	4
	20–24	2
	25+	2

^aClass and economic data were not collected. However, most of our respondents communicated housing precarity, a history of being unhoused, time spent as juveniles in state detention or state housing programs, in addition to three of our respondents specifying "middle class" upbringings or current "working class" status. We also did not include Security Threat Group (STG) validation or street gang affiliation because of the geographically contingent context and fluidity of such distinction.

^bResponses reflect the respondent's declared "race" specified during our interview. We did not interview anyone who identified as "Mexican National" or "Other".

^cRespondents selected the level of security with which they have most experience and/or the level of security assigned upon completing the Integrated House Program or immediately before release. Prisoners often move between levels based on "behavior" and prison administered "status", including Security Threat Group (STG) validation. For this reason, the total is greater than number of respondents.

^dTotals reflect experience in men's and women's prisons, not necessarily the gender identification of each respondent.

^eTotals reflect single "bids" as well as cumulative time imprisoned.

regardless of their self-determined and contingent carceral identity, the "car" (social group of affiliates) they were in, or the length of the prison sentence they had served. When asked if implementation of the IHP had changed the status quo of racialized prison spaces that Olivares-Pelayo personally navigated for several years and at every level of security prior to the IHP, respondents made it clear that prison in Arizona remained a clearly demarcated racialized zone, with all six of the recognized racial groupings continuing to observe segregated spaces for tables in the chow hall, bunk assignments, recreation stations, and regarding the use of barber supplies and exchange of contraband. Adding to Arizona's segregation realities are gangs and



Arizona Department of Corrections

Rehabilitation and Reentry

Integrated Housing Program Declaration

INMATE NAME (Last, First M.I.) (Please print)		ADCRR NUMBER	
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INMATE DEMOGRAPHICS

☐ Caucasian (1)

☐ African American (2)

☐ Native American (3)

☐ Mexican American (4)

☐ Mexican National (5)

☐ Other (6) (7)

*Includes all other races not listed

Security Threat Group (STG) Affiliation

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, list STG

Street Gang Affiliation

☐ Yes

☐ No

If yes, list street gang

Tattoos

☐ Verified (List relevant tattoos)

HOUSING (Indicate if inmate is willing to house with one or more of the following race)

☐ Caucasian (1)

☐ African American (2)

☐ Native American (3)

☐ Mexican American (4)

☐ Mexican National (5)

☐ All (A)

☐ Inmate refuses to house with other race (If checked must choose the Integrated Housing Code of RH or RO below.)

INTEGRATED HOUSING CODE

☐ RE (Racially Eligible) - Can live with members of any race.

☐ RH (Refusal to House) - Inmate refuses to house, but no valid reason.*

☐ RO (Restricted to Own) - Can live only with a member of the same race, ADCRR determined valid reason.

☐ RP (Restricted Partially) - May be considered ineligible to live with inmates of a particular race.

☐ RT (Restricted Temporarily by Custody) - Pending further review based on lack of documentation and/or inmate is required by policy to be single celled.

COMMENTS (Indicate reasons and provide documentation to support the above selected housing code)

☐ Inmate advised of Earned Incentive Program (EIP) Step I consequences if found to have invalid reason for declaring to house only with same race.

☐ ACIS IHP Declaration Page entry date (mm/dd/yyyy):

***If determined inmate does not have valid reason for this declaration, inmate will be in EIP phase 1 or Step 1 until such time the inmate revises his/her declaration.**

Distribution: Original – Institutional File

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Figure I. Integrated housing program declaration form. Obtained via a public records request.

groupings such as The New Mexican Mafia and Native American STGs such as Warrior Society and Diné Pride that add complexity to top-down desegregation imaginaries.

To be sure, there are those who abide by an “old school” or “hard core” prison ethos and safeguard their status by outright refusing to house (RH) with members of any other race, thereby reifying their contingent carceral identity. However, respondents indicated that the RH option is rarely selected by anyone in general population, no matter what their belief system, because there is express approval for signing the IHP from the highest levels of racialized STG leadership. Further, abiding by the IHP has immediate benefits for those who hope to avoid prison politics on lower security yards and other less racialized spaces (Walker, 2016). In fact, as several of our respondents put it, true IHP adherence—or “Racially Eligible” (RE) classification—is not only making lower security yards even “softer” and even less amenable to would-be shot caller control from afar, but is also allowing for increased legitimate privileges, “easier time” and access to what Crewe and Levins (2020) identify as opportunities for “personal reinvention”.

What respondents called the “IHP song and dance”—or securing a “Restricted Partially” (RP) designation—likewise has benefits for STGs. Such benefits are longer term and derive from maintaining racialization as an organizing feature on higher security yards, as well as keeping the co-dependent relationship with prison administration intact. Therefore, validated STGs benefit from controlling contraband across higher security yards, but at the same time have a way out of isolation units and onto racially integrated lower security yards given how the IHP counts and incentivizes those willing to cooperate, even if only on paper and for the purposes of inner-prison mobility. As Pyrooz (2022: 23) explains such apparent contradictions, STGs “both contribute to and complicate prisons as racialized spaces, allowing interracial collaboration to occur for instrumental reasons”.

Given American prison administrators’ reliance on orthodox demographic data and contingent racial categories, it should come as no surprise that legally mandated integration efforts that treat racial categories as distinct and enduring are foredoomed. Whereas institutions conceptualize race as consisting of distinct groups of people, prisoners base their understanding of race on a host of contextual and experiential factors as well. But the primary framing for identity is structured around one’s willingness to participate in prison “politics” and the racial code. “Politics” in a prison context refers to the highly organized and fervently enforced rules and “convict code” (Wieder, 1974) of conduct that govern every aspect of prison life (Trammell, 2012). Politics is the name given to the gang-affiliated and racially coordinated divisions that determine who can bunk with, eat with, exercise with, engage in business with, and even fraternize with whom and in what places, from cells and basketball courts to mess hall tables and barbers’ chairs. From gang to gang, the politics and overlapping racial code may even specify rituals of cleanliness and worship to be followed, in addition to guidelines for appropriate social interaction and activity.² So powerful are the politics in circumscribing prison life, that prison staff almost universally adhere to and even expect complete abidance by the politics even when they deviate from official prison protocol (Lindsey, 2009).

Overlooking the primacy of prison politics when enforcing top-down legal mandates regarding desegregation is one way prison administrators are able to fulfill their legal obligation to the courts without disrupting what Clemmer (1940) identified over 80 years ago as informal social systems of self-government among prisoners, which he terms “prisonization”. Building on the concept of prisonization and presciently speaking

to the very processes of racialization we discuss in this article, Sykes (1958) argues that “prisoner subcultures”, which rely on contingent values, norms, and attitudes learned on the inside, exist not so much in direct opposition to official prison rules and expectations, but as corresponding social systems that help maintain prison order and even safety. More recently, scholars such as Weide (2022a) have shown how the imposition of prison politics actually can help mitigate serious violence, while Lopez-Aguado (2018) points to the organizational benefits of contemporary race-based and gang-affiliated prisonization practices (see also Jacobs, 1977; Marquart and Crouch, 1984; Skarbek, 2014).

Organized (dis)integration and prison politics

Just as the politics pervade every facet of prison life, so too do mandates by “shot callers” in collaboration with prison staff make their way across prison space and into intake centers where racial priming and a crash course in the *reglas* for the previously uninitiated take place. In the past few years as Arizona state prisons have sought to integrate, there has been a coordinated effort to circumvent the IHP in a way that registers as adherence on paper but plays out as defiance in reality. Namely, as our respondents who have filled out the IHP form attest, when asked if they are “willing to house with one or more of the following race” after declaring their own race, STG, and street gang affiliation in the inmate demographics section of the form (see Figure 1), prisoners adhering to the politics engage in coordinated mutual exclusion that results in maintenance of the status quo in terms of segregated housing as follows:

- Caucasians (“whites”, “peckerwoods”, or “woods” in prison parlance) agree to house with Native Americans (“chiefs” in Arizona prison parlance);
- Native Americans (chiefs) agree to house with Mexican Americans (raza in Arizona prison parlance);
- Mexican Americans (raza) agree to house only with Caucasians (woods);
- Mexican Nationals agree to house only with Mexican Americans (raza);
- Africans Americans (“brothers” or “kinfolk” in prison parlance) agree to house with anyone.

With this mutually exclusive system of partial racial integration in place, every race has agreed to house with another race, but because no two races agree to house with one another, there is no possibility of full racial integration. According to our respondents, this cordoning and exclusion was orchestrated with full knowledge and support by prison administration seeking to maintain the relatively peaceful status quo of Arizona prisons. As Steven, a *Sureño*-identifying former prisoner put it, if the IHP was actually enforced and total integration were to be mandated, “they knew we would just riot”.

In addition to the downstream advantages for prisoners living under STG sanctions, the benefits derived from performing the IHP “song and dance” manifest in virtually every aspect of prison life for those general population inmates for whom playing such politics is seemingly anathema to “just doing my time”. Agreeing to check “RP” as opposed to “RE” keeps general population inmates in good standing with “shot callers” who adhere to the “convict code” and therefore “hold the keys to the run”

(i.e., hold authority over a specific housing segment or unit). Marking “RP” and agreeing to partially house across racial lines, therefore, satisfies both the expectations of the shot callers and places inmates in good standing within the prison-sanctioned “phase system” of graduated incentives and privileges, including access to phone calls, recreation time, hobby-craft, property storage space, visitation, increased commissary budget, higher work assignment pay rates, and relocation to lower security units after periods without disciplinary infractions (ADCRR, 2022a). Also, by marking “RP” as part of this compromise that lies between “RO” (Restricted to Own) and “RE” integration, inmates may still enter level 2 of the three-tier phase system while simultaneously remaining within the good graces of shot callers.

Conversely, marking “RE” upon entry to any level of housing above a low-security (level 2) yard is akin to requesting protective custody (PC), thereby positioning oneself as weak and not worthy of “respect”. While checking “RH” and indicating a “Refusal to House” across racial lines has institutional consequences and results in a loss of official privileges, agreeing to full racial integration by marking “RE” can result in more serious consequences ranging from social ostracization and limited access to contraband (including narcotics), to being assaulted in the form of receiving a “hot one” (i.e., a physical beating administered intra-racially) on a level 3 or 4 yard, or being stabbed on a level 5 yard.

What is now occurring in Arizona can likewise be seen in the Texas prison desegregation program. Although officially coordinated racial segregation has been illegal in the state prison system since 1979 (Marquart and Crouch, 1985), prisoner-orchestrated racial grouping continued into the 1990s. Since the 1990s, racial segregation has continued in an ad hoc capacity, though gang affiliation as the grouping mechanism by which racial segregation is mandated by “disruptive groups” has never been as pronounced in Texas prisons. Adding to this ad hoc grouping, as Tapia et al. (2014) point out, is the fact that in Texas it is geography that forms the lines along which prisoners are divided given how Hispanic prisoners subgroup by city and regional affinities (see also Bloch, 2022; Lopez-Aguado, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017). Like in Arizona and California, it is largely gang alliances, formed both on the outside and inside of prison territory, that present as racial in-grouping at various scales. For example, in California the majority of *Sureño* gang members who hail from the Southern California region form an alliance when “locked up” regardless of street-level antagonisms.

Further complicating a one-size-fits-all mandate for integration is how desegregation plays out away from bunk and cell assignments. The everyday spaces and intricacies of racial segregation that endure are not accounted for in facility progress reports or housing statistics. And it is not just prisoners who know this. One of the reasons desegregation is delayed and even outright rebuked by prison staff is due to a purported popular fear of “extreme racial violence” (Trulson et al., 2008). And as Trulson et al. (2008) show, there have been periods of racial violence following forced integration during the 1970s. However, in recent decades, data show a trend toward reduced violence among racially integrated prisoners (Weide, 2022a), as well as among race-based gangs in the aggregate. As Weide (2022a, 122) argues as part of the theory of “structural disorganization”, in the midst of racial integration, “shot callers” continue to wield social control through dissemination of the *reglas* (rules), allowing “inmate faction leaders to

proactively prevent or resolve conflicts between subordinates” resulting in diminished aggregate violence. The reduction in incidents of violence amidst integration is less an institutional or legally mandated feat and more the result of “all parties accepting or at least acquiescing to the authority of the dominant group, [therefore] there is no need for further violence in order to establish dominance” (Weide, 2022a; see also Crouch and Marquart, 1989). Crucially, the dissemination of the *reglas* and the resulting hierarchy is not only supported by prison staff, but made compulsory through condoning and even coordinating enforcement of informal and often extralegal social norms, including the racial code. One such example of this bottom-up control of prison life is the intra-inmate demanding of “paperwork”. As enforced by shot callers, inmates must be in possession of all court documents—from charges and pleas agreements to sentencing—and institutional disciplinary records, as well as their signed IHP and housing status.

As this illustrates and we have previously asserted (Bloch and Olivares-Pelayo, 2021), racialized and racializing norms of prisoner behavior in Arizona exist on a spectrum that is simultaneously a function of administrative bureaucratic policy as well as prison culture and social codes. This is to say, prison staff and wardens in Arizona do not have sole control over the prisoners in their custody; rather, they uneasily share authority over daily life in prison with the various STGs who exert dominance over their respective racial cliques. The tension between administrative control in the form of penal policy and STG control in the form of *reglas* and codes of conduct manifests along a spectrum of licit and illicit forms of cooperation, compromise, and combat. Although validated STG shot callers often find themselves prosecuted and punished for their roles in ongoing gang activities during their incarceration, whether by adding new charges and sentences to their records or through administrative segregation to a Special Management Unit (SMU, or “Security Housing Unit” [SHU] in a California context), they are also recognized and deferred to by administration as the undisputed leaders of their racial cliques, thereby able to wield a vast amount of authority over the members of their race not only on individual prison units or even complexes, but also throughout the entire state.

This type of institutional interfacing between validated STGs and prison administration is common through the US carceral landscape. In fact, Step Down Programs have been relied on across the United States for decades to transition validated STG prisoners from more restrictive housing in Administrative Segregation and SHUs (known colloquially as solitary confinement) to less-restrictive general population units that allow for greater privileges and opportunities for social interaction (Labrecque et al., 2021; see also ADCRR, 2021). Recently in California, as Weide (2022b, 231) shows, “hundreds of bona fide members of the four principal inmate organizations have been released onto general population yards at prison facilities throughout the state over the past half-dozen or so years, almost entirely without incident”, revealing not only the corporation that exists between STGs and prison authority, but also what Weide (2022a: 128) recognizes as the “mitigating effect that organizational structure in criminalized communities can have on criminal violence”.

In Arizona—a prison system with entrenched STG involvement—the reality is that no top-down administrative orders for racial integration could be made to take effect without cooperation at the highest levels of highly racialized STG authority. In the

case of the Arizona's IHP, this cooperation was elicited through the opportunity that the IHP represents for prisoners with validated STG designation to one day rejoin the general prison population outside the SMUs. Prisoners who refuse to sign the IHP with at least a partial promise of integration relegate themselves to yards reserved for such self-segregating prisoners, and among the privileges automatically rescinded is the opportunity to move down in classification level to a lower level of security. Therefore, the only way out of an SMU isolation cell is by way of signing a form with a "staff witness" on hand (see Figure 1). And yet, in order for this partial acquiescence to the mandate of the IHP to take effect statewide without the kind of violence described in Trulson et al. (2008), administration has to collaborate with shot callers of the four major "racial" STG factions in Arizona—including Native Americans—to ensure a system of non-correlating partial integration that would appease a court order as well as maintain the relatively peaceful status quo without a major disruption to prison politics.

Racial integration, then, is contingent upon highly racialized STGs benefiting from reentering general population at lower security levels where they can continue to rely on racialized prison politics that remain intact outside bunk assignments and IHP bureaucracy. Accordingly, the performative partial integration agreement facilitated by STG cooperation with administration functions on the understanding that it will not actually alter the contingent racialization of prison yards in Arizona.

A shifting politics in Arizona

Politics—including incarcerated people's perception of the broader "convict code"—are shifting in Arizona due in part to the imposition and understanding of the IHP. As our respondents have pointed out, the long-dominant California and Texas models for understanding prisonization as it relates to race are becoming increasingly outdated. This shift in perspective, which includes operational prisonization, is a significant change matched only by the drastic uptick in gang-affiliated racialization that occurred in the California prison system starting around 1970 at the dawn of the era of mass incarceration. While interviewing recently released and currently incarcerated individuals for their perspective of this shift in prison politics, we noted the varying perspectives on navigating prison social life under the IHP. As one American-born non-Spanish speaking self-identified Hispanic inmate in his late 30s with sporadic "bids" (prison sentences) as an inmate across two decades put it:

Things are chill now. Fifteen years ago Paisas (Mexican Nationals) had their own yards in Arizona. It was green lights (permission from shot callers to attack at will), open beefs on sight, what have you. Today it's more about smooth business and a calm way of life, so Big Homies (validated STGs) can get out and continue to control their outside business interests. For this to happen, for them to get out and do their shit, there has to be less dope, less race drama, less violence inside the races.

As a recently paroled *Sureño* in his 30s who spent time on level 4 and 5 yards in Arizona put it:

The IHP is not the only game in town, but ya, it's a game changer. Things have been chilling out for a while now, since 2008, ever since the Paisas came back on the yard and the Big Homies started trying to get out of SMU and back onto the yard, things have been getting more chill. It's just bad for business when knuckle heads can shut down whole yards when Big Homies are trying to get out of the hole. So at some point we all just realized it was easier to just play ball.

Here too the downstream benefits of adhering to the IHP for validated STGs are what is at stake according to prisoners attempting to rationalize adherence to partial racial integration. For general population inmates less likely to “play politics”, adherence to the IHP “just makes sense” given the benefits accrued and regardless of the downstream benefits for would-be validated STGs. As a White inmate in his late 20s who has only served time on low-security 2 yards put it:

Ya, I signed it. It don't matter. My bunkie was a Black dude and I went to church and none of the Woods in my pod had anything to say. I was pretty much on a DUI (driving under the influence) yard. No one cared about that shit.

Likewise, reflecting on the IHP's rollout in 2020, one White-passing male in his 30s who has run *Sureño* on every level yard pointed out:

There were some holdouts at the beginning. Fools who were just super hardcore. But they got put on their own yards with no privileges, no visit, no calls, and it's just not worth it. You sign the fuckin' form and that way everyone's happy and you can get on with your shit as usual.

Similarly, a Latino, Raza-identifying inmate in his 30s who had served most of his time on level 2 and 3 yards reflected on finding out about the IHP and the new politics upon reentry into the system after a several year gap “staying clean” on the outside, saying:

I found out who we were housing with (woods), but I'd be just as likely to agree to house with Paisas and live that shit out like nothing. I'd then do my time. But it's not worth the hassle to not sign how your car wants. You get locked outta deals on one side and LOP (official and punitive “loss of privileges”) on the other, and you find yourself standing up for non-existent principles and trying to be badder than the fools who signed it in this way or that way. Not worth it.

For Black prisoners in Arizona, prison politics plays out differently relative to their unique adherence to the “racial code”. Although Blacks are overrepresented in the Arizona prison population relative to the state as a whole (15.3% and 4.3%, respectively), they remain a minority inmate population, with only Native Americans (5.5%) and Mexican Nationals (6.4%) having smaller numbers in the ADCRR (ADCRR, 2022c). Consequently, unlike in California starting in the 1960s, a Black “car” has never held sway over the majority of Black inmates in Arizona. Although Black STGs do exist—with the ADCRR identifying Black Guerilla Family and the African Mau Mau as two such groups (Fischer, 2002)—their small numbers and ethos concerning prison politics have resulted in the formation of an alternative “racial code” for Black prisoners.³

Although inmates who run Black likewise exhibit strong adherence to the general and almost universally adopted “convict code”, which governs rules regarding respect and behavior, they are far less likely as a group to express interest in or exhibit adherence to a strict “racial code”, which dictates “adherence to beliefs surrounding racial segregation and obedience and loyalty to one’s race, as well as a willingness to mobilize misconduct and/or violence in defense of one’s racial group” (Infante et al., 2023: 6). As Infante et al. (2023: 15) found in their testing of adherence to the “racial code” in Arizona, “Black respondents and those identifying as Other were significantly less likely than their White counterparts to report an affinity for the mobilization of misconduct and/or violence in service of their race”. The primary reason for this, Infante et al. (2023: 16) argue, is due to there being “less benefit of racial politics participation for Black individuals in the broader scheme of group competition over power” given their small numbers. For our Black-identifying respondents, the reluctance to “play racial politics” was likewise an expression of individuality and a desired differentiation from more well-formed racial “cars” and their corresponding STGs. As Walker (2016: 1070) similarly points out, Black inmates will navigate around or outright disregard those racial politics with which they do not agree when they threaten a sense of agency or interfere with the provision or offering of a “creature comfort”. As one of our respondents—a Black prisoner in his 20s who has served a sentence on a level 3 yard—put it in regards to the IHP:

The *eses* (*Sureños*) have always been on a power trip, just like the woods. The White boys and Mexicans run their race with rules and orders and shit. Us kinfolk treat each man as his own man. We don’t tell no other man how to do his time, but we do run together because that is just the way it is. We just write whatever we want [on the IHP form]. I wrote full integration (“Racially Eligible”) because I have people on the outside.

Both the prison administration and STGs pressure prisoners to sign the IHP as we have shown, but the degree to which it is adhered to is, ultimately, contingent upon the securitized and racialized space in which it is signed. Aspiration of lower security housing assignments and greater benefits is one such pull factor, whereas benefiting from adhering to the convict code in higher security environments determines how and why inmates “play the IHP song and dance”, thereby reinforcing the compromise of prisoner and institutional cooperation and collaboration writ large.

Conclusion

Prison racialization is inexorably tied to conditions of race-making within free society. But the contingent forms of racialization discussed in this article highlight the adaptability of race as an organizing concept in the context of both top-down and bottom-up prisonization and adherence to the “convict code”. As we have shown, top-down efforts to reorganize race within carceral spaces as per an institutional mandate to comply with 14th Amendment protections are doomed to fail without buy-in from prisoners for whom race underpins such “prisonization” and the power and profit that are derived from maintaining prison “politics”.

In addition to providing a more nuanced view of race-making in carceral spaces, we highlight the broader implication of Goodman’s (2008: 740) assertion that prisons are

“woefully understudied locales, and the lack of attention to the construction of ‘race’ inside carceral facilities is a prime example”. As understudied spaces, prisons have much to offer scholarly and policy-oriented discussions about race-making and racialization that are otherwise derived from data representing free society where matters of race are comparatively more “black and white”. While prison race-making cannot be seen as completely separate from the racializing conditions within free society and throughout broader carceral environments, “race” as an organizing concept is highly dependent on the socio-spatial context in which racialization takes place for the preservation of “prison politics” and, as we have shown, as exemplified by the navigation of the IHP. Such a recognition that “place matters” in the prisoner-controlled race-making process challenges state and federal conceptualizations of how racial (de)segregation works and what can legally, politically, or ethically be done about it.

Finally, in offering the example of Arizona’s IHP, we hope to center the Arizona prison complex within discussions of carcerality moving forward, arguing that the contingencies of race-making and punishment in the “Grand Canyon State” provide a contemporary, complex, and contested view of prisonization given the political climate, demographic realities, and history of intensive carceral policies within the territory and state. We posit that any future analysis of prison policies aimed at reform without equal consideration of the perspectives of incarcerated people and buy-in from those categorized as validated STGs will remain wanting.

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Notes

1. A Security Threat Group, or STG, is the designation given by prison investigators to an identified “gang”.
2. For example, the 29-item by-laws written by Warrior Society shot callers—an STG recognized by the ADCRR—include “All members must be loyal to the people, unto death”, “Jeopardizing organization or the people is punishable by death” and “All members will help and stand by each other whether in right or wrong” (ADCRR, 2022b).
3. To illustrate the different levels of racial code adherence at the STG identification nexus, the most recent ADCRR STG Program Elevation (Fischer, 2002) reports 9.1% of *Sureños* had “applied for renouncement” (disaffiliation from their STG) compared to 47.8% of validated African Mau Mau members.

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