

## Research Philosophy

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My research philosophy is driven by the idea that the world is a fascinating place and economics has the power to explain it. Rational individuals acting in different institutional environments and facing different constraints will act systematically differently to accomplish their desired ends. Economics can illuminate all areas of human action when carefully applied. Understanding how people accomplish their chosen ends in varied situations, from criminals seeking illicit profits behind bars to political actors in government bureaus, economics can explain well when social coordination of resources and desires occurs and when it does not. Identifying the institutions and mechanisms that people rely on to coordinate their desires is the central theme that drives my research.

My dissertation examines the economics of criminal behavior, specifically the organizational problems facing prison gangs. The Nuestra Familia prison gang, a hierarchical organization with hundreds of members, requires members to join for life, and because of their incarceration, their members have high costs of exiting the gang. These costs create the threat of predation to lower-ranking members by the higher-ranking members of the prison gang. This reduces the efficiency of the organization, as members find it more difficult to recruit high quality members and members expend resources to engage in or prevent predation by others. In order to overcome these problems, the Nuestra Familia has written a lengthy constitution which outlines the structure and protocol of how the organization operates and constitutional processes for electing leaders. The Nuestra Familia is one of the most dangerous California prison gangs because they overcome the predation problem by creating electoral processes, the right of impeachment, and checks and balances that provide members the ability to identify misconduct, the incentive to stop it, and mechanisms for doing so.

In future research, I would like to investigate how overcrowding and drug prohibition affect the growth of prison gangs. Past research suggests that organized crime often arises to provide quasi-governmental services, and these two factors generate unique needs in this regard. More generally, criminal enterprises provide a unique opportunity to isolate certain formal institutions from analysis and shed light on organizational problems and mechanisms of both legal and illegal groups. I would also like to investigate how economic development proceeds in countries governed by failed and weak states. Though not necessarily involved in illicit enterprises, like prison gangs, people in many countries have little to no access to well-functioning courts of law and must rely on self-enforcing mechanisms to engage in productive activity. In short, I plan to research the necessary formal and informal institutions required for successful social coordination and economic development in a variety of contexts.