

# NEXO

The Official Newsletter of  
**The Julian Samora Research Institute**  
The Midwest's Premier Latino Research Center

**MICHIGAN STATE**  
UNIVERSITY

University Outreach  
and Engagement  
Julian Samora Research Institute

An excerpt from Vol. XXII · No. 1 | Spring 2019

## **Murder and Prison Gangs: A Mexican American Experience Inside a Texas Prison**

by Alfredo Aguilar\*

Prison gangs have existed in the Texas prison system since at least the 1970s. They developed, rose, and gained their power through the demise of the building tender system. Prison officials argued prison gangs grew because the collapse of the building tender system created a power vacuum. The downfall of the building tenders was brought on by the success of the legal court case *Ruiz v. Estelle*. This case began in the early 1970s through the efforts of an inmate writ-writer named David Resendez Ruiz and ultimately exposed the unconstitutionality of the Texas prison system. Ruiz claimed the Texas Department of Corrections' (TDC) prison system violated the U.S. Constitution's 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment which prohibited cruel and unusual punishment. The unconstitutional findings exposed by the court ruling uncovered issues within the Texas prison system such as overcrowding, inadequate security (collapsed the building tenders), inadequate healthcare, unsafe working conditions, and severe punishment policies.

Building tenders were inmates who were tasked with monitoring and ultimately controlling the rest of the inmate population. Building tenders were also selected from the inmate population pool who were deemed more aggressive and violent to ensure strict control through violence and fear. Crucially, this process of selection was also highly racialized. The wardens, staff, guards, and building tenders were predominately White. Mexican Americans did not hold many of these positions, if any at all. In fact, the building tender system had purposely ignored Mexican Americans as potential candidates based on racial ideas. Furthermore, since the rapid growth of prison gangs in the late 1970s and early 1980s, prison gangs in Texas were responsible for several dozen homicides, hundreds of assaults on other inmates and staff, and have had a stranglehold on power in Texas prisons



Photo credit: Alexey Sergeev, asergeev.com

since then. David Weeks, a special prison prosecutor stated, "more than 90 percent of inmate homicides are gang-ordered and more than one-half of the assaults are the result of gang warfare" (Klimko, 1987). Regardless of what skeptics may argue, they engage in various illicit criminal activities such as the drug trade, prostitution, robbery, and extortion within the walls of Texas prison units (Fair, 1988).

Even while considering the institution's perception of the strength of prison gangs, they still largely lacked broad exploration in historical scholarship. Fields such as criminal justice, sociology, and criminology have provided vast research into prison gangs, and more specifically Mexican American prison gangs. This study is also meant to highlight not only Mexican American prison gangs but the overall Mexican American experience for inmates and guards within the confines of the world of prisons. This topic also continues to lack historical focus within mass incarceration and prison studies. Mexican American prison gangs are the focus of this study as they have been the most disruptive and most influential in impacting Texas prison institutions and administrations.



State officials inspect prisoner conditions at a state prison.  
Photo credit: William Wayne Justice Papers, tarlton.law.utexas.edu

Historians have lagged behind attempts to historicize prison gangs into the larger historical context. In this case, exploring the Mexican American experience within the development of the Texas prison system has broad implications. This study provides exploration of the varying Mexican American experiences within prisons as victimized inmates, as stifled prison guards, and also as prison gangs or security threat groups who employed efforts to demonstrate their own autonomy, regardless of the problematic legal and ethical quandaries through prison gangs.

Prison gangs commit homicides and assaults to establish dominance. These acts also garner the most attention as violence is habitually presented by the media, and more commonly consumed by the public. Thus, the public generally perceives prison gangs and their activity to be violent. However, there was another way in which prison gangs pursued and successfully maintained their power. They undermined, and ultimately controlled many prison guards making them do their biddings, even outside the confines of the prisons as extensions of their economic enterprises. The process of this type of coercive manipulation was a unique type of influence pursued by prison gangs in the prison system and highlights the nuance and complexity behind prison gang activity. The case of Luis H. Sandoval, a prison guard in Texas during the 1980s who became allegedly involved in criminal activity for the Texas Syndicate emphasizes this complicated multi-faceted Mexican American experience within the prison setting.

The Texas Syndicate or *Syndicato Tejano* was the first prison gang to heavily impact the prison system in Texas. Formed in the California prison system in the 1970s by incarcerated *Tejanos*, the Texas Syndicate sought protection against *Californios*. *Tejanos* were being preyed upon by California prison gangs in some of the most notorious California prisons including San Quentin and Folsom. Here is also where the earliest prison gangs were formed. The Mexican Mafia for example, was formed in 1957 in the Deuel Vocational Institution in Tracy, California and is one of the earliest formed prison gangs to still exist, and continues to exhibit power inside and outside prisons.

The tension between *Tejanos* and *Californios* also illustrated the restrictive and complicated parameters of membership for prison gangs. While both were considered Mexican Americans, state identity was also an important restriction along with ethnic identity. Membership was tied to their regional home state and in this case trumped ethnicity as the only restriction towards membership. For incarcerated Mexican Americans from Texas, *Tejano* identity was seen as an important component by the Texas Syndicate for admission. State identity also occurred as a form of 'othering' by the California prison gangs which did not extend membership to non-*Californios*. Mexican Americans were informed by their ethnic identity, but also by state identity as prison gangs formed. Similar parameters also included the Mexican Mafia or *La Eme*, which formed in California and did not recognize the Texas Mexican Mafia, also known as *Mexikanemi* from Texas. The Aryan Brotherhood which also formed in California is not related to the Aryan Brotherhood of Texas. While these prison gangs relied primarily on ethnicity and racial identity for membership, state identity informed their inclusion as well and should be noted.

Ethnicity and state identity likewise impacted Luis H. Sandoval's relationships with inmates. Associations principally began because of his shared ethnic background with many of the inmates, where their ethnic kinship was highlighted and then thusly exploited by the inmates. Like Sandoval, many inmates were both Mexican Americans and Texas residents, thus a sense of comfortability existed between inmate and guard. Familiarity was both good and bad. This new type of exploitation of the guards was also facilitated because many new guards had been hired as mandated by law as prison rights gains were made through several prominent legal court cases, primarily *Lamar v. Coffield*. Prison guards were rapidly hired. Another important factor was the hiring of many people of color and women to work for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). The larger pool of applicants paved the way for many new minority employees such as Mexican Americans to join the staff of the Texas prison system. Sandoval was hired as part of the new guard force that was coming in and was separate from the old guard who had largely stayed to themselves, was predominately white, and had strong rapport with the building tenders. Since the removal of the building tender system many of the old guard force resigned and left many "green" guards to come in and figure out the new and changing Texas prison system. Additionally, it is also crucial to highlight why Sandoval became a prison guard in the first place. New employment opportunities were too good to pass up for Sandoval and broadly speaking, for Mexican Americans. His brief story represented the limited social and economic opportunities that impacted many *Tejanos*; the continuance of a larger, repeated, and unceasing story in Texas.

## Sandoval's Early Beginnings

Like many Mexican Americans in the U.S. Southwest, Sandoval was unacquainted with racial groups other than his own. He was also unfamiliar with the environment of a prison. He was part of the new guard that was rapidly hired which attempted to respond to overcrowding and the resignation of the old guard. Sandoval grew up in Alice, TX, a city with a population of approximately 20,000. Contemporarily, its population numbers have been consistent and Alice has historically also largely been populated primarily by people of Mexican descent. Blacks had a virtual non-existent population in Alice, and the greater South Texas region for that matter. It was claimed that "Sandoval felt more at home with fellow Hispanics than with the Black inmates, who terrified him" (Statistical Atlas, 1991). This problematic worldview clouded his outlook as a prison guard.

In South Texas, Sandoval primarily interacted with Mexican American friends from the barrios and the housing projects of Kingsville, TX. He also met his future wife Veronica in the tenements across the street from Texas A&I University which became Texas A&M University-Kingsville, where Sandoval attended college for three years" (Draper, 1991). He did not complete his college education although he went farther than many Mexican Americans from this region. He married Veronica on Saturday June 22, 1985. He was twenty-one and she was fifteen. This marriage took place only after Sandoval was able to attain job security with the Texas Department of Corrections as a correctional officer in Huntsville. Securing employment, it seemed, was more important at that moment than securing a college degree. Employment opportunities were not plentiful in South Texas, and so "the next day, a Sunday [June 23], the newlyweds threw their possessions into a suitcase and a grocery bag, and drove Sandoval's Datsun to Conroe" (Draper, 1991). After his short stop off at Conroe, they made their way to Huntsville, the capital of the Texas Department of Corrections, and since 1989 known as the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. "On Monday [June 24], at eight in the morning, Sandoval reported for duty at the Ellis I training academy in Huntsville" (Draper, 1991) where he eventually secured employment with the TDC as a prison guard after completing several weeks of mandatory training.

Unbeknownst to Sandoval, he was entering as a prison guard during a transitional period from 1979-1986 for the TDC dubbed a 'Broken System,' as many court cases had upended the autonomous power of the prison administration during this period. It was also the most violent period for Texas prisons, which proved to be a difficult adjustment not just for the state but for Sandoval as well. There were approximately sixty prison gang related homicides between 1984-1985. These homicides were in part, primarily caused by the war between the Texas Syndicate and the newly formed Texas Mexican Mafia who sought to gain the reins of power as the building tender system

was being demolished. The Texas Mexican Mafia was initially formed in 1984 as a response to the predatory nature of the Texas Syndicate against non-member inmates. The cycle of predatory violence against non-gang members had continued to historically breed new prison gangs. Both prison gangs were identified as Mexican American prison gangs, yet developed at odds with each other, even while representing and emphasizing their Texas state identity. Sandoval experienced the escalated violence in the summer of 1985 first hand as he initiated his career as a correctional officer.

Soon after he began his work as a correctional officer, Sandoval witnessed his first homicide at the Ellis I Unit. The details of exactly who he saw murdered were not clear but according to homicide records, the victim was probably Cesario Gonzales who was killed on August 31, 1985. Gonzales was a Texas Mexican Mafia member and was allegedly killed by members of the Texas Syndicate (Buentello, 1986). Robert Draper, a journalist for the Texas Monthly provided an apt description of this homicide scene: "Help me, Boss! Turning around, Sandoval saw a Hispanic inmate [Cesario Gonzales] standing behind a hallway crash-gate, clinging to the bars with both hands. His neck had been slashed; his head was all but severed. A long, metal object—a homemade knife, or shank—protruded from his jugular. The assailant was nowhere in sight" (Draper, 1991). After this incident Sandoval soon realized it was the inmates who ran the prison, not the guards, and surely not the state of Texas. The Gonzales homicide was merely one representative example of the larger problem of violence stemming from the war between the Texas Syndicate and the Texas Mexican Mafia that raged inside the walls of the prison units.

These prison gang related homicides from the war between the Texas Syndicate and the Texas Mexican Mafia were not only happening in the Ellis I unit, it stretched beyond and consumed the entirety of Texas prison units. Just a few weeks before the Cesario Gonzales homicide that Luis Sandoval witnessed, Arturo 'Astro' Aguilar, a Texas Mexican Mafia member was murdered on August 22, 1985 in the Eastham Unit by the Texas Syndicate. On September 2, 1985 Raymond Delgado, a Texas Mexican Mafia member was murdered in the Ramsey II Unit, by the Texas Syndicate. A week later, a well-known event called Bloody Sunday occurred on September 8, 1985. At about 7:30 pm in the evening at the Darrington Unit day room in Rosharon, TX three Texas Mexican Mafia members Lloyd Vasquez, Jose Arturo Garcia, and Albert Carrillo were all fatally stabbed by Texas Syndicate members Lee R. Castro and Rogelio Cantu who were detained afterwards. Charles Brown, a TDCJ spokesman said, "an 8-inch long flat piece of metal and a boning knife were recovered at the scene," likely the murder weapons (Graczyk, 1985).

With the Texas prison administration on alert with the rise of

homicides, unit officials had to respond quickly to disturbances. Prison gangs used this to their advantage as they pursued a more diversionary approach to committing acts of homicide. Just a day later, at the Ramsey II Unit on September 9, 1985 a disturbance occurred which consisted of two inmates in the process of a fight. However, after the disturbance was quelled, in an adjacent room, Leonel Perez's body was found. Perez was found stabbed approximately fifteen times in his upper torso and back (Graczyk, 1985). The fight was merely a distraction. He was fatally stabbed by confirmed Texas Syndicate member Antonio Hernandez who was serving a seventeen-year burglary conviction (Buentello, 1986). While violence is demonstrably visible here, the larger picture was that an economic free market was being fought over for control of the drug trade as well as other illicit economic endeavors. Along with this, something else was happening.

Many of these Mexican American inmates who became prison gang members had to submit to a serious requirement for membership and could only leave the gang through their death. This was the "blood in and blood out" membership oath which stipulated that membership was predicated on members either assaulting or murdering someone which was tasked by the prison gang to get in. The expiration of membership or getting out only occurred upon the member's death. Relinquishing membership was not allowed. Jose Lopez, founding member of the Texas Mexican Mafia stated, "once you know you get out well you're marked by the gang for extermination" (Riggs, 2011). Many prison gang members were sentenced to prison on non-homicide charges and were incarcerated for charges such as burglary. Correspondingly, Vasquez, Garcia, and Carrillo who were the earlier victims were all incarcerated for robbery or burglary convictions. The pressure to commit murder for prison gangs was necessary for them to gain and continue membership. When the task was not accepted or completed by a member, then they were 'green lit' which meant they became a target within their own prison gang because they refused to follow orders (Riggs, 2011).

One former prison gang member, Jesus Valverde reflected on the toxic pressure to commit violence for a prison gang and exposed the problems it forced on these Mexican American prison gang members. Valverde who renounced his former prison gang stated, "I had to do a hit on another inmate. So, I started realizing that if I did that I was going to stay here a lot longer, so I started thinking about my family and the world [and realized] they need me more than the family I was here with in this game" (Riggs, 2011). These inmates came in for robberies and burglaries but had to either graduate to murder or be murdered. A former Texas Mexican Mafia member, Joe Morales, explained this process of escalation. Morales explains, "he gets a life sentence and he ends up doing thirty-five, forty years, or whatever before he even comes up for parole. Either he comes

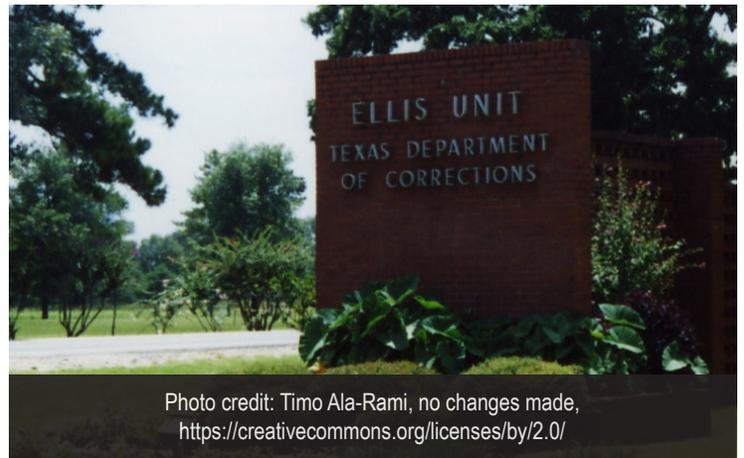


Photo credit: Timo Ala-Rami, no changes made,  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>

out an old man or he doesn't come out at all. And all he came down with was a five-year sentence" (Riggs, 2011). They are led to believe they must join a prison gang for protection and in the process of believing this, they eventually secure longer terms of incarceration. Their longer sentences mean they must continue to do the bidding of the prison gangs because they will have a longer stay and cannot escape the gang. Their exit does not exist and the prison gang has now also gained a member that will remain in their proximity for the duration of their sentence, equivalent to their life.

This process was an exploitative tactic that many prisoners faced and continue to face in prisons. The method was also wed with ideas of race because prison gangs are primarily built within racial structures. A false sense of belief existed for an inmate who joined with his racial or ethnic group and that protection occurred through their ethnic solidarity. The pursuit of ethnic solidarity was also encapsulated within Luis Sandoval's experiences, but as a prison guard and as a witness to these violent acts. His experiences, however, exposed other problems for Mexican Americans.

Sandoval's exposure to this initial shocking experience was predicated on his need for quick employment. Historically, the Mexican American population in Texas had been wrought with unfair legal and social practices that had negatively impacted this marginalized population for over a century. With the lack of social mobility due to economic constraints, Mexican Americans were forced into what limited opportunities were afforded to them. In the 1980s, one employment pursuit was prisoner guard positions in Texas, positions which were not glowingly sought after. These positions were, however, opening in Texas due to the loss of the veteran prison guards. Additionally, many prison units were being constructed as the state and the rest of the country saw a rise in inmate populations. Scholars have employed the phrase "mass incarceration" to explain and define this increased surge of incarceration in the U.S. that affected people of color, in particular African Americans. Mexican Americans were also affected by mass incarceration, particularly in the U.S. Southwest. This group has lacked examination within

the frameworks of mass incarceration scholarship, even as these studies continue to exponentially grow. The complicated history of Whiteness in U.S. history has been explored in the scholarship on Mexican American history but is virtually non-existent in mass incarceration scholarship. This complicates mass incarceration scholarship which primarily rests along the Black and White binary of American history. Mexican Americans exist in a difficult space as a protected group under the “White” category but not Black, such as reflected in the ruling of *Hernandez v. Texas*. Sandoval’s whole experience within Texas prisons was encased within these various historical processes. While violence was a problem for both guards and inmates, there were also non-violent measures explored by prison gangs.

From the time that Sandoval began as a “new boot” in the summer of 1985 until late 1986, he began to be enveloped into a slippery process of criminal activity that began with something as commonplace as the lighting of an inmate’s cigarette. His kinship and his familiarity with Mexican American inmates brought him to become close to them. Away from his home and in a foreign environment, it was easy for him to fall in and develop relations with them. Sandoval may have seen these interactions as encouraging, but inmates instead saw vulnerabilities and took advantage. Inmates used this perceived racial brotherhood to manipulate Sandoval for the gains of the prison gang’s illegal activity by initiating the common process in prisons called “downing the duck” (Bedard, 2013).

The process of “downing the duck” is described as an inmate or a group of inmates manipulating a guard or staff member into undertaking very small tasks perceived to be innocuous. For Sandoval, this was the lighting of an inmate’s cigarette, a task perceived in the outside world as nonthreatening, but inside the walls of a prison, a very dangerous act. It was also against the guidelines of the Texas prison system. Once the guard had completed the innocuous task that was against the policies of the prisons, the inmate(s) continue to slowly press the guard or staff member into other obligations that eventually lead to illegal acts. If the guard or staff member refused or rejected the task, the inmate(s) then informed them that they would notify prison administrators of previous favors (Bedard, 2013). The guard or staff member is now confronted with facing possible repercussions from prison administrators. Their options were either possibly losing their job, or continue assisting the inmates and they would remain silent.

Ellis I Unit prison guard Patrick Ware described a similar tactic used by inmates related to “downing the duck.” “Ware and numerous other current and former guards testified that gang members commonly try to influence prison officers to smuggle drugs to them. If an officer fails to cooperate, a gang has non-violent ways of retaliating [...]. ‘They start rumors to your supervisor that you’re bringing in drugs, or they’ll bring bogus grievances against you,’ Ware said. ‘There are a lot of ways they

can get you in trouble’” (McKay, 1991). The non-violent ways prison gangs wielded their multi-faceted agency beyond merely employing violent means is often overlooked. Furthermore, the ability of inmates to force the prison administrators to hear their grievances was developed from the successes of prison reform.

Sandoval had lit the cigarette for newly befriended Armando Garcia (name changed) and another inmate named “Vicente.” The process had begun for Sandoval. Garcia was not a member of the Texas Syndicate. He had an arranged agreement with them where profits from drug trafficking into the prison were split between himself and the Texas Syndicate. Garcia hoped that Sandoval would become his golden goose as he convinced Sandoval to light his cigarette (Draper, 1991). The favor increased from the lighting of a cigarette to mailing letters for the inmates as they claimed to lack stamps to do so. Letters may have contained coded messages concerning drug trafficking or other illicit activity. Stamps are also a form of currency within prisons. He was digging himself deeper into their clutches and soon found himself processing a money order of two hundred and fifty dollars and was paid a percentage of that. He had graduated quickly from menial tasks to more important tasks. He also placed phone calls for them to the outside world and relayed “harmless,” though highly likely coded, messages for their illicit activity. Lastly, he had finally gotten to the point where they tasked him with “muling” drugs into the prison and participating in package drop-offs that likely contained illegal drugs to be brought into the prison units. (Draper, 1991)

At this point Sandoval, along with other guards, or staff members became “the duck” and were now leveraged against by the inmates as the victims or “co-conspirators” dug themselves deeper into the clutches of the inmate’s bidding as a representative of a prison gang. Sandoval as a Mexican American “new boot,” at the ripe age of twenty-one, during the most violent period of Texas prison history succumbed and became a duck as employment for Mexican Americans was not taken for granted. Eventually, he became their golden goose.

Historically, prison gangs had been built along strict racial guidelines regarding membership, but also for those who participated in gang activity. Prison gangs were generally very isolated and closed off to non-members which generally also meant separation from non-ethnic members. This influenced who the prison gang incorporated into their monetary endeavors. In the case of Luis Sandoval, while he was not a member, the “Texas Syndicate preferred that Garcia deal directly with Sandoval, a fellow Hispanic.” Sandoval’s acceptance and willingness to acquiesce was alleged in part, because as one inmate stated “Sandoval always seemed to be hurting for money” (Draper, 1991). Their gang activity in this case was approved because of racial kinship. It simultaneously illustrated that race was crucial to membership, belonging, and trust, but it was also used as a predatory and manipulative tool to further

advance their objectives of revenue creation. Ethnicity played various roles in prisons.

A myriad of factors may have explained why Sandoval took on the tasks by the Texas Syndicate. He quite simply may have wanted or needed the money. Other factors that were possible motivators were being part of an economically disadvantaged social group, the reality of low wage work as a prison guard, or merely feeling trapped because of the fear of reprisal by prison gang members. Amidst Sandoval's alleged deeper involvement with this gang activity, he faced a larger problem.

Under Sandoval's watch on December 17, 1986 Joe Arredondo, a Texas Syndicate member was found murdered. He was stabbed approximately twenty times in the B-Wing of the Ellis I Unit in Huntsville. But, soon after the murder of Joe Arredondo, Sandoval was charged with the crime and inmates who were allegedly present provided corroborating details. Some inmates who testified against him were prison gang members including those who were eventually convicted of the murder. He became the first guard to be charged with homicide. "Sandoval was charged with criminal homicide under state law that provides penalties for persons who aid in a killing but do not actually participate in the act" (Buentello, 1987). He was eventually terminated from the Texas Department of Corrections. But the circumstances surrounding the murder also exposed internal issues of the prison system which the trial brought to light.

"Authorities said Sandoval unlocked a door to a hallway between a chapel and recreation yard at the Ellis I Unit and then left his post so gang members could attack Arredondo" (Fair, 1991). The murder took place in a corridor of the prison unit that was hidden from the view of prison guards. Steve Fischer [Sandoval's attorney], however, "contends that Sandoval had not unlocked the door and that officials there knew that guards frequently left the door unlocked" (Fair, 1991). During Sandoval's trial, "witnesses told a Walker County jury that doors in the Ellis I prison unit's south end were routinely left unlocked by guards in 1986. Testifying for murder defendant and former Ellis I guard Luis Sandoval, a string of prison employees said the doors were left open despite a policy requiring that they be locked at all times" (McKay, 1991). On the other side of the argument, "prosecutors contend that Sandoval left open a hallway and allowed the Texas Syndicate to carry out the planned murder of Joe Arredondo" (McKay, 1991).

While the lawyers made their arguments for and against Sandoval's case, Sandoval expressed the state's impetus to charge him which he argued was based on an entirely different motivation. He claimed the state's justification in charging him was based on the fear of a lawsuit. Sandoval "contends that the door was kept unlocked and that he was framed because officials at the prison feared they would be held liable in Arredondo's death" ("News Briefs," 1991). A lawsuit against the Texas prison

system and Sandoval was underway by Arredondo's family. He charged that Texas prison officials "have a very big stake in finding me guilty, because it will take the liability off them in the lawsuit." Sandoval "testified that Arredondo's family filed a \$2 million lawsuit against him and the Texas Department of Criminal Justice" (McKay 1991).

The earlier allegations explored in the section on the "downing the duck process" was brought up by the prosecution. It however, only played a brief part of the court proceedings of Sandoval's murder trial. Sandoval's lawyer Steve Fischer argued for their removal from the murder trial. He wanted the removal of "any evidence of extraneous acts or offenses that are not directly related to the current charge, unless the defendant Sandoval has been duly convicted of such offense" (The State of Texas vs Luis H. Sandoval, 1991). The charges leveraged were allegations that "Sandoval smuggled drugs into the prison, was involved in illegal drugs or an illegal drug transaction, and that Sandoval acted as a messenger or delivery boy for any gang member" (The State of Texas vs Luis H. Sandoval, 1991). His lawyer argued that these allegations were "extremely prejudicial and are solely calculated to provoke anger and hate for the defendant by the jury." In certain ways, Fischer contended that these allegations "criminalized" Sandoval for illegal activities he may or may not have committed, but had not been convicted of, a process easy for Mexican Americans to succumb to and for the rest of the general population to accept (The State of Texas vs Luis H. Sandoval, 1991). This exposed the longer historical process of Mexican Americans in United States history being perceived as bandits and criminals without full legal recourse. These incidents were also discussed with the journalist Robert Draper. However, Sandoval later recanted the statements he made to Draper concerning these acts.

Before Sandoval could stand to face trial though, he fled. He crossed into Mexico into Ciudad Juarez and allegedly stayed with an uncle there. "Sandoval claimed he skipped the court date and hid out for three weeks in California because he feared prison officials. He alleged that internal affairs investigators had beaten him when he was arrested on the murder charge"



(McKay, 1991). While Sandoval hid from authorities prior to the trial he wrote and sent a 24-page letter to his mother Delia Sandoval, whom he asked to then send it to members of the media. In the letter, he was critical of the Texas prison system. This was especially insightful because it was written with the viewpoint of a prison guard. Sandoval's letter was a scathing criticism of the "TDCJ's good ol' boy system, which Sandoval claimed 'has ruled with an iron fist since the penal system was first established' (Draper 1991).

Sandoval also highlighted the racial issues that Mexican American prison staff faced. "Hispanic guards, he said, were 'either coerced into quitting or found doing something wrong.' He also stated supervisors treated inmates 'like animals' (Draper, 1991). He further wrote, "I am not the only one who worked there that knows that TDCJ is linked to the gangs and their illegal activities. Inside the walls of each prison is drugs, prostitution, gambling, extortion, and grand theft, but no investigation into any of these things has ever been made" (Draper, 1991). These allegations of internal issues of the TDCJ leveraged by Sandoval may not have been directly addressed, however, a new development became the designated base where prison officials addressed criminal concerns inside the walls of Texas prisons. It was the recently formed arm of the TDCJ that investigated Sandoval's involvement in the murder. The roots of its foundation were directly connected to prison gangs.

### **The Special Prison Prosecution Unit**

The prosecution of Sandoval occurred through a new development in the Texas prison system. Sandoval was charged with the murder of Joe Arredondo through the special prison prosecution unit which was founded in 1984 to directly combat the escalation of prison gangs' activity. This occurred amidst the war between the two prominent Mexican American prison gangs that forced the state to act. Prior to the creation of this new prosecutorial arm of the Texas prison system, individual prison units handled internal criminal or objectionable acts and handed out punishment that they perceived fitting for the crime outside the confines of courtrooms. Some of these punishments for example were longer durations behind bars, beatings enacted by the building tenders, or being sent to solitary confinement.

Sandoval was eventually found not guilty on May 29, 1991 after jurors deliberated for only approximately half an hour. Travis McDonald, the prison prosecutor for Texas stated, "It's hard to try a case against a guard in Huntsville. People here don't want to believe a guard would do something like that" (McKay, 1991). And while Sandoval was acquitted, his criminal proceeding unleashed denunciation. Immediately after the trial, the community responded. "On Wednesday, May 29, the jurors milled around outside the courtroom and vented their disgust with the state's case to the media" (Draper, 1991). Their

criticism may have largely rested on the divisiveness of race. In fact, "one juror phoned Sandoval's brother that afternoon and told him that in her view the case against Sandoval was racially motivated. A week later another juror wrote Sandoval a four-page letter, expressing her chagrin that he had been put through all the agony" (Draper, 1991). These members expressed their concern, similar to those leveraged by Sandoval in his 24-page letter, that the state used Sandoval as a Mexican American scapegoat for the corruption and problems occurring in the prison system as they became visible to the public during a tumultuous period following Texas prison reform.

Another trial focused on the parties who were responsible for the murder of Arredondo was underway. Carlos Rosas, a 31-year old from Dallas, a Texas Syndicate sergeant was tasked with the murder and fulfilled the "hit" for his prison gang, the Texas Syndicate. Arredondo had been ineffective for the prison gang, and failed them on several occasions. He largely failed in attempts to procure streams of revenue, namely from drug trafficking for the Texas Syndicate. Rosas eventually "confessed to actually stabbing Arredondo but was offered a favorable deal in exchange for his testimony [against Sandoval]; and Ruben Ortiz, a convicted murderer and TS sex slave [...] was paroled after he agreed to testify" (Draper, 1991). Ortiz was the cellmate of John A. Hernandez, a high-ranking member of the Texas Syndicate. In his testimony, Ortiz alleged that while in his cell with Hernandez, he was told about Sandoval's role of leaving his post and leaving the door unlocked (Fair, 1991). "Hernandez, who was serving a life sentence plus eight years for Travis County convictions of attempted capital murder and illegal possession of a firearm, was the second-in-command of the Texas Syndicate prison gang. He convened a meeting at which members voted to have Arredondo killed, according to prosecutor Tuck Tucker" (Fair, 1991). Hernandez was eventually "sentenced to 25 years for the murder of Joe Arredondo" (Fair, 1991). Sandoval's attorney, Steve Fischer, had helped Sandoval in his trial by successfully eliminating the option for the prosecutor to illustrate the connection of Sandoval to the criminal activity. The jurors in Sandoval's trial "weren't convinced that Sandoval worked for or with the gang in any way" (McKay, 1991).

Sandoval's case was unique as the only guard to be charged with a homicide at this point, but other guards were charged with other crimes. In 1991, for example, a prison guard who worked at the Ellis I unit where Sandoval had once worked was indicted with "drug muling." In fact, from roughly 1986 to 1991, the special prison prosecution unit charged at least sixty Texas prison guards with felony offenses (Draper, 1991). Two guards, Joel Lambright Jr. and Alex Torres, were also charged in 1994 with murder after Sandoval was charged and convicted (Smith, 1994). Both were also newly employed prison guards, a continuation of the 1980s-increased-hiring-wave. Travis

McDonald, the primary prosecutor for the state's recently developed prosecution unit headed this charge against crime inside of prisons. The issues of guards becoming corrupted continued and continues well into the 2010s.

## Conclusion

The Sandoval and Arredondo incident illustrated the complexity that went into relations between Mexican American guards and inmates. Luis Sandoval's interactions and troubled story highlight the importance of race within the Texas prison system between Mexican American inmates and Mexican American guards, but also largely under a white prison administration. This moment was set during the height of prison gang violence that struck the TDCJ during the mid-1980s. This story illustrates the harsh reality of prison gang violence, but also the non-violent ways prison gangs influenced guards. These actions were either through bribery, profit, blackmail, and even threats of violence to the guards or their families. This would also provide an insight into the reach of prison gangs like the Texas Syndicate towards prison guards.

Ironically, this historical and troubling development came on the heels of the significant victories of prison reform cases which were meant to curtail the conditions of prisons, yet set the stage for prison gangs and gang violence to foment. When prison gang violence arose, the state was quick to blame the reforms as the cause of the violence. Sandoval was caught in the crossfire of prison changes. While Sandoval was found not guilty and was vindicated, it came at a cost. He ultimately lost his job, his wife divorced him, he was in a car crash during this period that left him in debt and suffering from the injuries. He could not return to employment at the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. But Sandoval, Mexican American prison gangs, and the larger story of the Mexican American experience within the context of prisons illustrate themes of criminalization, hegemony, and self-determination, topics wholeheartedly important to Mexican American history. Ultimately, as the histories of prison continue to expand, the inclusion of Mexican Americans as an integral population to its history is necessary; we grow to contest the views of Mexican Americans as a criminalized population, discern an increased incarcerated population, and also recognize them becoming institutional operatives of the prison system itself. 

\*Alfredo Aguilar is a doctoral candidate in the department of history at Texas Tech University

## References

- Buentello, S. *Texas Syndicate: A Review of Its Inception, Growth in Violence and Continued Threat to the TDC*. Un-published manuscript, Texas Department of Corrections, 1986.
- Draper, Richard. "A Guard in Gangland." *Texas Monthly Press*, August 1991. Accessed on October 10, 2018. <https://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/a-guard-in-gangland/>
- Klimko, Frank. "TDC guard indicted in 1986 slaying of inmate." *Houston*

*Chronicle*. November 13, 1987.

Riggs, Robert. "Robert Riggs Reports "Blood In. Blood Out, Texas Prison Gangs." Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2SjyCPZ-NU>

Statistical Atlas. "Race and Ethnicity in Alice, TX. Accessed on December 12, 2018. <https://statisticalatlas.com/place/Texas/Alice/Race-and-Ethnicity>

The State of Texas vs Luis H. Sandoval Case No. 14764 03/20/1991 278TH Judicial District Court