

NONPRECEDENTIAL DISPOSITION

To be cited only in accordance with FED. R. APP. P. 32.1

United States Court of Appeals
For the Seventh Circuit
Chicago, Illinois 60604

Submitted November 13, 2025*

Decided November 14, 2025

Before

MICHAEL B. BRENNAN, *Chief Judge*

DIANE S. SYKES, *Circuit Judge*

AMY J. ST. EVE, *Circuit Judge*

No. 25-1599

ISAAC FELTON,
Plaintiff-Appellant,

Appeal from the United States District
Court for the Southern District of
Indiana, Indianapolis Division.

v.

No. 1:22-cv-02133-JRS-KMB

SAMMY JOSEPH,
Defendant-Appellee.

James R. Sweeney II,
Judge.

ORDER

Isaac Felton, an Indiana prisoner, appeals the dismissal of claims arising from his designation as a member of a security-threat group. He contends that the designation violated his First Amendment right to freedom of expression and Fourteenth

* We have agreed to decide the case without oral argument because the briefs and record adequately present the facts and legal arguments, and oral argument would not significantly aid the court. FED. R. APP. P. 34(a)(2)(C).

Amendment right to due process. Because the security-threat designation is reasonably related to a legitimate penological interest and Felton lacks a protected liberty interest in prison programs, we affirm the judgment.

Fans of the music group Insane Clown Posse commonly refer to themselves as “Juggalos.” Felton is incarcerated at New Castle Correctional Facility, in New Castle, Indiana, and is a fan of Insane Clown Posse who identifies as a Juggalo and has multiple tattoos to show for it. In 2011 the FBI classified Juggalos as a “loosely-organized hybrid gang,” and following this lead, prison officials, including those at New Castle, have identified Juggalos as a “security threat group.” Felton alleges that because of his status as a member of a security-threat group, he is excluded from certain programs, including a mental-health program, that could help him earn good-time credits. He further states that other inmates have harassed him because of his security-threat designation. Felton alleges that he reported these issues to Sammy Joseph, head of internal affairs at New Castle, but Joseph upheld his classification.

Felton sued Joseph, several higher-level officials within the Indiana Department of Corrections, and two program managers at New Castle. At screening, *see* 28 U.S.C. § 1915A, the district judge concluded that Felton failed to state a claim under the First Amendment based on his freedom to express his appreciation for Insane Clown Posse’s music. The judge determined that prison officials’ labeling Juggalos as a security-threat group was consistent with the FBI’s report and rationally related to prison security. The judge further rejected a due-process claim because he concluded Felton did not have a protected liberty interest in the prison programs from which he was excluded. The judge allowed Felton to amend his complaint, and Felton did so, this time naming only Joseph and the New Castle program managers. The judge again dismissed any First Amendment claim but permitted Felton to proceed on a “class-of-one” claim under the Equal Protection Clause against Joseph—on the theory that only a subset of Juggalos were labeled as threats. Eventually, the judge granted Joseph’s motion for summary judgment and entered final judgment, leading to this appeal.

On appeal Felton challenges only the screening orders. We review the dismissal of these claims *de novo*, taking Felton’s allegations as true. *Gomez v. Randle*, 680 F.3d 859, 864 (7th Cir. 2012). Felton argues that the district judge wrongly deferred to the prison’s determination that Juggalos were a security-threat group under *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U.S. 78 (1987). Under *Turner*, a prison regulation is a valid restraint on a prisoner’s constitutional rights if it is reasonably related to legitimate penological interests. *Id.* at 89. We have extended the *Turner* framework to resolve whether prison officials have

unlawfully deprived a prisoner of benefits because of his protected speech. *See Bridges v. Gilbert*, 557 F.3d 541, 551 (7th Cir. 2009). Dismissal under § 1915A is appropriate when the complaint reveals the prison's legitimate interest and the bridge between that interest and the restriction. *See Munson v. Gaetz*, 673 F.3d 630, 634 (7th Cir. 2012).

Even if we accept that Felton's tattoos and his identification as a Juggalo are speech or implicate associational rights under the First Amendment, he fails to state a claim that this expression is protected under *Turner*. Several factors are relevant in reaching this determination, including whether there is a connection between suppression of speech and a valid and neutral government interest and whether there are alternative means of exercising the constitutional right. *Turner*, 482 U.S. at 89–90.

Gang suppression is undisputably a legitimate penological interest. *Westefer v. Snyder*, 422 F.3d 570, 575 (7th Cir. 2005). It is likewise undisputed that Juggalos were recognized as a "loosely-organized hybrid gang" according to the FBI's 2011 report. The report described hybrid gangs as "difficult to track, identify, and target as they are transient and continuously evolving." NAT'L GANG INTELLIGENCE CTR., 2011 NATIONAL GANG THREAT ASSESSMENT – EMERGING TRENDS 22 (2011); *Parsons v. U.S. Dep't of Justice* (*Parsons II*), 878 F.3d 162, 165 n.1 (6th Cir. 2017). To contest this report, Felton relies on *Parsons v. U.S. Dep't of Justice* (*Parsons I*), 801 F.3d 701 (6th Cir. 2015), in which the Sixth Circuit held that Juggalos had standing to challenge their inclusion. But the court ultimately dismissed the Juggalos' claims as unreviewable under the Administrative Procedure Act—thus leaving the Juggalos in the report. *Parsons II*, 878 F.3d at 171.

Regardless, we have recognized that prison "gang symbolism is not static; symbols change and are added as gangs expand their bases and combine with other groups." *Koutnik v. Brown*, 456 F.3d 777, 785 (7th Cir. 2006). For this reason, we defer to prison officials' expertise in identifying and managing gang-related expression. *Id.* Felton cannot overcome this deference merely by observing that not all Juggalos are violent and asserting that he is among the nonviolent group. Prison officials "need not wait for a problem to arise before taking steps to minimize security risks," *Hadi v. Horn*, 830 F.2d 779, 785 (7th Cir. 1987), and so may take preemptive measures before Felton or other Juggalos exhibit gang-like activity at New Castle.

The other *Turner* factors also do not weigh in Felton's favor. Felton suggests that prison officials are not acting neutrally because fans of other artists, like Snoop Dogg or Taylor Swift, are not similarly considered security-threat groups. Even if we assume that fans of other artists could be but are not designated security-threat groups,

“inconsistent results are not necessarily signs of arbitrariness or irrationality.” *Munson*, 673 F.3d at 636 (quoting *Thornburgh v. Abbott*, 490 U.S. 401, 417 n.15 (1989)). A policy is “neutral” under *Turner* if officials draw distinctions between groups “solely on the basis of their potential implications for prison security.” *Thornburgh*, 490 U.S. at 415–16. Prison officials have determined that Juggalos present a greater risk of harm than other music fans, and we must defer to their expertise. And Felton, like fans of other artists, still has means to exercise his rights: he attested that he is permitted to listen to Insane Clown Posse’s music despite the designation.

Felton otherwise contests the process leading to the security-threat group designation, insisting that the prison never introduced evidence of his relationship to a criminal organization that is admissible under the Indiana Rules of Evidence. But prison officials are not bound by the rules of evidence when making decisions about prison security and discipline. *See, e.g., Crawford v. Littlejohn*, 963 F.3d 681, 683 (7th Cir. 2020). Regardless, the judge correctly recognized that Felton fails to state any due-process claim because he has no protected property or liberty interest in prison programs, even if they would help him earn good-time credits. *Zimmerman v. Tribble*, 226 F.3d 568, 571–72 (7th Cir. 2000).

AFFIRMED