Violence and Order in Prison

Maintaining Order in Prisons

“When people think of prisons, they tend to consider their physical aspect: walls, fences, a building with locked doors and windows with bars. In reality, the most important aspect of a prison is the human dimension....The key to a well-managed prison is the nature of the relationship between prisoners and those who watch over them.”

—Andrew Coyle, A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management, 2002

> How do we define prison violence?
> How do we measure the scope of prison violence?
> How common is lethal and non lethal violence in prison?
> What are the theories around prison violence?
> What factors (individual, environmental, and administrative) contribute to prison violence?
Why Are Prisons so Difficult to Manage?

Deprivation Theory
Problem is the prison environment

Importation Theory
Problem is the inmates

Administrative Control
Problem is the management

Deprivation Theory

Gresham Sykes
Psychologist in a maximum-security prison in NJ

*Society of Captives* (1958): Maintaining order was a delicate balancing act involving exchange and reciprocity

Wrote about “defects of total power and institutional control.”

Deprivation Theory

- Authority of the government was not considered legitimate by inmates
- Psychological pains of prison as damaging as physical punishments
- Outlined 5 “pains of imprisonment.”

Deprivation Theory

- Loss of liberty
- Loss of autonomy
- Loss of goods and services
- Loss of heterosexual relationships
- Loss of security

Pains of Imprisonment

In response to these pains, inmates will “reject the rejectors”

Shared deprivation gives inmates a basis for solidarity.

When the pains get too severe, which they inevitably will, violence and disorder prevails; riots occur

Deprivation Theory
System of rewards and punishments is flawed: Prison authorities have too few legal rewards to offer inmates to secure their cooperation.

Thus, to keep the inmates happy, COs have to let some contraband circulate and disregard petty infractions.

Gresham Sykes: Defects of Institutional Control

- These defects were structurally induced and thus couldn’t be eliminated by better paid or trained staff.
- Any prison reform aimed at gaining more control that did not heed the culture of inmates was bound to fail.

Defects of Institutional Control

"We run the prison with permission from the inmates."

—New York State Correction Officer, Greenhaven Prison

John Irwin & Donald Cressey

- Prison society is shaped by forces outside of prison
- Prisoners bring with them their life experiences, social and intellectual deficits, criminal values, and embrace of violent behavior.

Importation Theory

- Prisons reinforce criminal values
- Implication: If criminal values are imported and criminal ties are reinforced on the inside and outside, there is little the prison can do to instill new values.

Importation Theory

Administrative Control Theory


Studied the quality of prisons in Texas, California, Michigan

Variables: Safety/Order, Amenities, Services

Finding: Administration matters most
• How prisons are managed is more important than the individual characteristics of inmates and the institutional characteristics.
• Prisons with a strict division of labor, detailed rules and routines, and a strong and visible leader will have less disorder.
• Walk-about style of management is critical to prison order

Concept of “Legitimation”
• Fairness of Staff
• Fairness of Regime
  • Inmate Grievance and Discipline System
  • Distributive Fairness

Perceptions of Fairness

Administrative Control
Institutions that have been able to balance remunerative with coercive controls have greater order and less violence.

Coercive Controls (Stick):
Physical sanctions – solitary confinement, loss of privileges, loss of good time
Remunerative controls (Carrot)
Incentive – early release, decent food, programs, recreation, conjugal visits.

Collective Violence
• Riots (organized/unorganized)
• Inmate Disturbances
  • Nonviolent: hunger strikes, work stoppages, voluntary lockdown
  • Violent: burning/destroying state property, flooding cellblocks, surrounding/intimidating guards

Types of Violence

Interpersonal Violence
• Inmate Assault on Staff
• Inmate Assault on Inmate
• Staff Assault on Inmate (excessive use of force)

Types of Violence

Data about deadly violence show decreasing rates nationally of homicide and suicide, but we do not have equally reliable data about the much larger universe of non-lethal violence.
A riot of 300 inmates broke out in a private prison for immigrant detainees, leaving one guard dead and 20 inmates injured. Inmates set fires and used broomsticks and shanks (homemade knives) as weapons.


A report by The Equal Justice Initiative found that Alabama’s women’s prison is the site of pervasive sexual assault by male guards. Guards have impregnated at least two inmates. The report says inmates are punished for reporting sexual misconduct.

May 22, 2012 *The New York Times*

50 inmates in Virginia’s supermax prison began a hunger strike to protest abuse by correction officers, indefinite sentences in solitary confinement and horrendous living conditions including uncooked meals and filthy, unsanitary cells. Prisoners allege being beaten by guards and bitten by dogs.

May 22, 2012 *Washington Post*

The U.S. Department of Justice released a study indicating that nearly 10% of all prisoners are sexually victimized during confinement. Nearly one-third of victims reported bruises, sprains and other injuries as a result of abuse.

23% reported more severe injuries, such as broken bones and lacerations.

May 17, 2012 *U.S. Dept. of Justice*

Vera Institute of Justice

*Confronting Confinement: A Report by the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons (June, 2006)*

Finding: Violence remains a serious problem in America’s prisons and jails
• National data on assaults: too flawed to draw conclusions.

• “I cannot measure well the level of assaults using administrative records as they exist today,” Allen Beck, U.S. Dept. of Justice BJS chief statistician, 2006.

Commission on Safety and Abuse in America’s Prisons

• In 26 states, 50% or more of prisons reported zero inmate-on-inmate or inmate-on-staff assaults in 1995 or 2000.

• Several large state prison systems reported improbably low total assault numbers:
  • PA reported just 17 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults among an inmate population of 36,000.
  • VA reported 61 prisoner assaults despite an average daily population of 30,000 inmates.

Under-Reporting: Major Issue

• There are no national measures or reporting requirements of inmate-on-inmate violence and excessive use of force by staff against prisoners.

• Inmate-on-inmate assault:
  • Underreporting (by inmates and staff)

• In 13 states, 10% or more of prisons failed to report ANY inmate-on-inmate or inmate-on-staff assaults to BJS in 1995 and 2000.

Measurement Problems

• Reduce overcrowding
• Increase external oversight
• Conduct regular institutional searches
• Provide mechanisms for confidential reporting
• Use direct supervision
• Use force and non-lethal weaponry only as a last resort

We know which conditions fuel violence and, therefore how to prevent violence

• Increase Correction Officer training
• Provide incentives for COs to resolve dispute without force
• Promote a culture of respect
• Reduce idleness
• Employ surveillance technology
• Create separate therapeutic housing units for inmates with serious mental illness
• Place strict limits on use of solitary confinement
• Hold wardens accountable for violence and disorder

Prisons can be managed