



Prison Violence Inquiry Project



By: JL

Inquiry Question: Thesis

Topic: Prison Violence

Question: Why has violence increased so much in prisons?

Thesis: Prison violence has increased significantly due to a number of reasons. Frequently cited factors include a lack of funding for additional prison guards, a lack of life-skills and education programs for prisoners, overcrowding of prisons and gang culture that continues to operate, even within prison walls.



Types of Attacks In Prison

- Violence in prisons occurs everyday. Some violence is spontaneous and some is pre-planned.
- The three types of violence that happen in prison are:
 1. Prisoner on prisoner
 2. Prisoner on guard
 3. Self-inflicted
- There are three kinds of violence in prisons
 1. Instrumental Violence - is premeditated, calculated and implemented - most frequently carried out by male prisoners.
 2. Expressive violence - spontaneous violence where dysregulated emotions are the main contributing factor to an assault. The emotions are often combinations of intense anger, fear or other emotions. This kind of attack is usually committed by female prisoners.
 3. Self-harm - Suicide and self-harm behaviour is much higher in the prison population than in non-incarcerated population. Many prisoners suffer from mental health disorders either predisposing or as a result of incarceration, and need psychiatric attention.



Causes of Violence In Prison

There are four reasons for violence in prisons:



1. **Indirect Supervision** - supervision is done through a security camera or from a booth, where the prisoners and guards have very little to no face-to-face interaction. If a violent act occurs, a special team of guards is deployed to respond. Many acts of violence take place in the camera's blind spots.
1. **Direct Supervision** - supervision is done by guards in a more face-to-face form (patrolling cells, watching directly and not through a screen, ect.). This form of supervision allows guards to talk to prisoners and helps lower stress and tension in the prison, but also exposes the guards to more danger, as prisoners may wait to commit violence when a guard is not paying attention or has their back turned.
1. **Overcrowding** - too many people in a prison, and not enough room for all. This raises stress levels in prisons, and those with anger issues often act out with little provocation.
1. **Staffing Levels**- Some prisons are understaffed for the amount of prisoners, this may lead to many prisoners committing more acts of violence because they know there aren't enough guards to deal with it all.

Security Threat Groups

- A significant cause of violence in prison is what prison guards call “security threat groups” or otherwise what is known as gangs. Prison gangs are the major source of prison violence. Gangs often target rival gang members in prison. Gangs issue a “bad list” a list of names that the gang wishes to attack in prison.
- People are placed on the list if they stole from a gang outside of prison, have a debt that is unpaid, or disclosed gang activity to authorities, known as “ratting someone out.”
- Prison gang violence is strategically planned out. Gang members communicate with each other through letters passed to each other via the drain pipes of their in-cell toilets. This allows them to communicate across cell blocks.



How Many People are Injured in Prisons Each Year?

- Around 2400 guards are injured in American prisons each year (Lincoln, Chen, Mair, Biermann and Baker, 2006) requiring medical attention. Most injuries are the result of crude weapons such as “shanks” or clubs.
- Out of a random sample of 6964 male prisoners, 2200 say they were physically assaulted by other prisoners and 200 say they were victims of sexual assault (Wolf and Shi, 2009).
- Researchers queried 101 United States prisons between 2002 and 2003, tallying a total of 1326 weapons confiscated or used to injure inmates and staff (Lincoln et al., 2006).



How Do Prisoners Get Weapons?

- Prisoners tend to be a creative bunch when it comes to weapons, and they strive to create inconspicuous tools or weapons that would avoid detection and confiscation by guards.
- Some examples might include a crucifix shiv made from a wooden crucifix. In this example below, inmates were able to hide a blade in the crucifix, repurposing it as a knife. Fully assembled, the crucifix hides in plain sight, hung decoratively on a wall.
- Some other examples of weapons include toothbrushes, plastic utensils with the ends melted down into a point, and pieces of metal fashioned into a knife. It has been reported that bags of water as heavy as 40lbs have been dropped onto other prisoners, with injurious effects.



Six Types Of Weapons

1. “Shank”

The shank is possibly the most common type of weapon found in prisons. They can be made with almost anything found in prison. The most common kind of items used are shards of metals or utensils shaped into a knife.



2. Lock in a sock

This weapon is possibly the easiest to acquire in prison. Prisoners put locks into socks and start swinging them around (hence the name.) Weapons like these are able to inflict lots of damage to victims and can easily be concealed or taken apart.

3. Paper Club

This weapon is made from paper found in cells. It is dampened with water and rolled up as tight as possible. When dried, the paper can become as hard as wood.



4. Wires and floss

Wires and floss can act as tools for strangulation in prisons. They can be easily concealed and hidden and often able to blend in, but can still easily kill someone if needed. As such, many guards are hesitant to give prisoners floss for this reason.

5. Can lids

Lids off of food tins such as tuna, can be removed from the rest of the can and bent to a point or made into a shank. Although these kinds of weapons are not always used for hurting other people (they are effective at cutting food) they are still prohibited items and pose a significant threat to both inmates and guards.



6. Razors

If an inmate is fearful of being attacked, they may hide a razor blade in the mouth so it is readily available to defensively slash a person in the face if needed. A common tactic in prison, these assaults can often be circumvented by punching the carrier in the face so they sustain internal damage.

How Easy Is It To Make Prison Weapons?

I wanted to see how easy it is to make weapons.

Here is a tattoo gun. I took a sewing needle attached it to a pen, which is then attached to a motor which allows it to go up and down. A prisoner could make the motor from parts of a watch or smuggled in from other areas of the prison.



Tattoo
Gun



Toothbrush/razor shank

Shank

I took a razor blade from my razor and melted part of the toothbrush. Then I stuck the melted toothbrush with the razor blade to create a small shank.

Summary

The rise in prison violence is due to many factors. Inmates affiliated to varying gangs still have obligations to fulfill as members, even in prison. This can mean that inmates who are on a “bad list” are attacked in prison. Second, many prisons are significantly over-crowded, which often leads to violent offenders mixing with non-violent offenders. The lack of space, and too many bodies in one cell often leads to violent outbursts where inmates and guards alike are hurt. Third, some prisons are run remotely and in an automated fashion; guards observe prisoners via camera, with minimal in-person contact. This type of surveillance system in prison often has blind spots where prisoners and or guards can be attacked. Finally, a lack of educational, life-skills and mental health programs in many prisons means that inmates are neither equipped for inmates for life inside prison, or for life in the public after their eventual release. This lack of programming is thought to be highly correlated to violent behaviours toward other inmates and guards.

How Can Prison Violence Be Reduced?

- Many prisons are taking steps to reduce prison violence. These include:
 - Reducing blind spots of prisons where indirect supervision is used.
 - Removing violent prisoners, as well as gang leaders, and putting those identified as violent or high profile, either into separate cells or solitary confinement.
 - Strategic matching of prisoners in cells for personality to reduce the possibility of trouble.
 - Increase staffing levels prisons, and increase staff training.
 - Increase proactive interactions between guards and staff, and teach practical life-skills such as cooking and cleaning. Additionally, seeking prisoner input about how the prison should be run may reduce violence levels.
 - Create education programs and allow for opportunities for high school completion, and even college diplomas or degrees.

References

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