



The implications of sentence length for inmate adjustment to prison life[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Prison scholarship suggests that the structural and cultural environment of prison and dimensions individuals “import” with them into prison have salient implications for inmate adjustment to incarceration. Theoretical and empirical analyses of inmate adjustment to prison life, however, have paid limited attention to sentencing characteristics like prison sentence length. This paper presents theoretical arguments that suggest sentence length likely influences inmate adjustment, and proposes that mixed effects in prior studies may be attributed to analyses that do not account for nonlinearities and conditional effects.

Methods: We use data on 35,582 convicted felony offenders admitted to Florida state prisons, and estimate a series of regression models to assess the influence of sentence length on inmate adjustment.

Results: Analyses indicate that sentence length influences inmate behavior, that its association with misconduct may take on an inverted “U-shape,” and that its effect is less salient for younger inmates and inmates incarcerated for the first time.

Conclusion: Results extend theoretical discussions of inmate adjustment, and underscore the need to more systematically test and incorporate court sentencing experiences and outcomes when examining patterns of inmate misbehavior in prison.

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Introduction

Maintaining order is a critical goal of prison systems. As such, there has been a resurgence of research aimed at understanding the factors and conditions that lead to inmate misconduct, especially disorder and violence in prisons. This resurgence builds upon classic studies of prison cultures and environments (e.g., Bottoms, 1999; Clemmer, 1940; Dilulio, 1987) and has led to the development of at least two central theoretical arguments about what factors or experiences most influence inmate adjustment, especially during early periods of incarceration. One argument emphasizes the effect inmate characteristics and experiences that are imported into the prison have on future behavior (Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Wright, 1991). A second argument suggests that deprivation features of the incarceration experience, i.e., the “pains of imprisonment” (Goffman, 1961; Sykes, 1958; Sykes & Messinger, 1960), dictate inmates’ behavior.

Rigorous examinations of a range of importation and deprivation dimensions exist in the literature and most find evidence in support of both (Gendreau, Goggin, & Law, 1997; Gonçalves, Gonçalves, Martins,

& Dirkzwager, 2014). For example, studies indicate that prison characteristics and experiences, such as security and classification levels, staff behavior, facility design types, the unpredictable nature of the environment, and program availability influence inmate adjustment and prison social order, as well as inmate characteristics such as age, gender, race, prior record, and cultural values, among other factors (Adams, 1992; Crewe, 2011; Drury & DeLisi, 2010; Flanagan, 1980; Gover, Pérez, & Jennings, 2008; Mears, Stewart, Siennick, & Simons, 2013). As such, the importation model may be viewed less as a rival of the deprivation model; instead many scholars view the models as complementary to one another, and recent studies examining inmate behavior integrate these two approaches. This integrated scholarship has been critical for advancing our understanding of prison experiences and adjustment (Bottoms, 1999; Thomas, 1977), and also for policy, as officials seek to improve inmate classification systems, or to otherwise anticipate behavioral risks (DeLisi, Berg, & Hochstetler, 2004; Harer & Langan, 2001).

Conceptualizations of the importation and deprivation approaches, however, have not typically included court-processing characteristics or sentencing outcomes in their analyses. For example, limited empirical research exists that investigates the influence of sentencing dimensions, such as sentence length, on inmate adjustment and behavior. This particular limitation is anomalous for several reasons. First, sentencing decisions are perhaps both the most proximate criminal justice experience inmates import with them into the prison environment, and also the first deprivation they experience as part of their prison

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sentence. Second, sentence length is easily measurable and can be easily incorporated into empirical analyses of inmate behavior. Third, strong theoretical arguments, rooted in prison, strain, and legitimacy literatures suggest sentence length should have a salient impact on adjustment and behavior. Fourth, and not least, understanding impacts of court sentencing dimensions on prison experiences is important considering “get-tough” policy shifts that have occurred in the past three decades that have resulted in longer prison sentences, and sentences for which offenders can anticipate serving larger proportions of the allotted time (Carson & Golinelli, 2014; Lopez & Light, 2009).

Against this backdrop, the goal of this paper is to systematically examine the impact of prison sentence length on inmate behavior during the initial period of incarceration. Towards this goal, we develop a series of theoretical arguments centered on sentence length’s potential effect on inmate adjustment, which include the possibility that sentence length effects are nonlinear and conditioned by individual characteristics. The paper utilizes data from the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) on a large, statewide inmate admissions cohort to test our hypotheses. Below, we discuss prior scholarship that provides the theoretical and empirical motivation behind our hypotheses, followed by a discussion of the data, analytic strategy, findings, and implications that flow from the paper’s results.

Background

Prison social order

Maintaining safety and order in the prison environment is a critical priority for prison systems. This, in turn, has motivated scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to focus ample attention on understanding the factors that promote or undermine prison social order. The prison environment has, however, changed dramatically over the past four decades. “Get-tough” punishment movements across states have led to substantially larger prison and corrections systems. The United States has a larger incarcerated population—correctional institutions house more than 2 million individuals—and a higher rate of incarceration than any other developed nation (Carson & Golinelli, 2014; Walmsley, 2013). Prison expansion has in turn created a large and growing population of Americans who will experience prison life and then return to their families and communities. This, paired with the challenges prison administrators face managing large, shifting, and often overcrowded populations of offenders with fixed space and limited budgets underscore the need to better understand how inmates navigate the prison experience and, specifically, the factors that lead to prison misconduct and violence.

Importation and deprivation approaches

A large body of scholarship has focused on trying to understand the factors that influence inmate behavior and social order. One framework, the importation approach, stems largely from classical work by Donald Clemmer (1940) and others (Flanagan, 1983; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Schrag, 1954), and has become, along with deprivation hypotheses, an archetypal model for understanding inmate behavior and compliance with prison norms and regulations. One of the first formulations of the importation model, devised by Irwin and Cressey (1962) and motivated by earlier work by Schrag (1954), argued that conditions prior to imprisonment, along with personalities and external experiences of inmates, influence behavior during imprisonment. A key dimension of Irwin and Cressey’s (1962) importation model was that inmate behavior is affected directly, and also conditioned, by a diverse range of characteristics that inmates bring with them into the prison environment.

In accordance with the importation thesis, classic and contemporary empirical studies have identified many different inmate characteristics that influence behavior and adaptation to life in prison. For example, studies indicate that certain inmates face greater challenges with adjustment and behaving normatively in prison, including inmates who are

younger, male, minority, and who have more limited social networks prior to entering prison (Craddock, 1996; Harer & Steffensmeier, 1996; Siennick, Mears, & Bales, 2013; Thomas, 1973). Theory and scholarship also indicate that inmates with records of serious or chronic offending have a greater propensity for violence and misconduct in prison (Berk, Kriegl, & Baek, 2006; Simon, 1993; Walters, 2003). And more recent work by Mears et al. (2013), in line with arguments of Clemmer and others (Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Lahm, 2008), expanded the scope of the importation perspective by assessing the effect of imported cultural norms on behavior, and found that inmates who bring with them to prison a more street-culture orientation pose a greater threat to prison social order.

By contrast, Sykes (1958) seminal work, which identified that inmates suffer from the “pains of imprisonment” that include loss of liberty, security, and autonomy and are inherent to the incarceration experience, argued that many aspects of prison life are conducive to further deviance and violence. This idea has spurred on numerous theoretical and empirical analyses of the deprivation thesis, which underscores the potential linkage between in-prison pains and inmate misbehavior. Extant studies have identified a wide range of viable deprivation measures associated with variation in prison misconduct. For example, poor prison management, overcrowding, victimization, and an overabundance of rules and regulations have been identified in the literature as prison experiences that make misconduct more likely (Crewe, 2011; Gaes & McGuire, 1985; McCorkle, Miethe, & Drass, 1995; Salive, Smith, & Brewer, 1989; Steiner, 2009).

Prior research on prison social order indicates that both deprivation and importation theoretical models have valid causal arguments (e.g., Gonçalves et al., 2014) and that considering the influences of both types of influences yields more explanatory power of inmate behavior (MacDonald, 1999). For example, Hochstetler and DeLisi (2005) used structural equation modeling techniques to simultaneously examine the effect of both static inmate characteristics and prison environments on misconduct, and their findings lend support to both importation and deprivation models. Other recent empirical examinations have identified similar results (see, e.g., Gendreau et al., 1997; MacDonald, 1999; Gover et al., 2008).

Thus, scholarship indicates that considering both importation and deprivation perspectives together provide a useful conceptual framework for understanding how the physical, social structural, and cultural dimensions of prison, along with the characteristics and prior experiences inmates import with them into a facility, exert a combined influence on adjustment, behavior, and overall prison social order. As we discuss below, this integrative perspective provides a useful framework for thinking about how court-sentencing dimensions, like sentence length, constitute factors that individuals both bring with them into prison and that must be coped with over the course of incarceration. And as we describe below, these factors may be especially salient influences early on during incarceration, as inmates seek to adjust to the prison environment.

The salience of sentence length for inmate adjustment

As suggested above, importation and deprivation perspectives are useful frameworks for considering the potential impacts of sentence length on inmate behavior. They are useful in part because these theoretical approaches underscore the possibility that many of the dimensions emphasized in general theories of crime causation that have focused on behavior *outside* of prisons may have similar effects on behavior that occurs *inside* prisons. By extension, these perspectives suggest that sentence length may exert a salient, adverse effect on inmate adjustment to the prison environment. Below, we provide two theoretical possibilities that would suggest, through the lens of importation and deprivation perspectives, that sentence length exerts such an adverse effect. We also describe why it is appropriate to focus specifically on the early adjustment period of incarceration when examining potential sentence length effects, and the theoretical arguments that

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