



Individual characteristics related to prison violence: A critical review of the literature[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2012

Received in revised form 7 April 2012

Accepted 21 May 2012

Available online 26 May 2012

Keywords:

Prison violence

Risk

Individual characteristics

Inmate

ABSTRACT

At the end of 2010, prisons in the United States incarcerated over 1,605,127 inmates, yielding an imprisonment rate of 497 per 100,000 residents (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). Approximately 15.6% of correctional officers have been the victim of an inmate assault (Duhart, 2001) and 21% of inmates reported being victims of violence in prison (Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Siegel, & Bachman, 2007). However, which inmates are more likely to perpetuate these violent acts while incarcerated? The present paper critically reviews the empirical literature on the relation between individual characteristics of inmates and prison violence. Variables are divided into three general categories: demographic, criminal history, and psychological variables. From over 500 studies, a representative sample of 20 studies from 1990 to 2011 was reviewed based on specified inclusion criteria, such as adult males incarcerated in English-speaking countries. Although there are some discrepant findings, a general conclusion can be reached regarding most variables. These characteristics are compiled into a prototype of an inmate at “high” risk and an inmate at “low” risk for prison violence. Methodological limitations of the research are presented, as well as suggestions for future research directions.

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[☆] There was no conflict of interest in conducting and submitting this research. There was no funding or financial incentive provided for this research.

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The United States incarcerates more people per capita than any other country in the world (Walmsley, 2009). At the end of 2010, 1,605,127 adults were incarcerated in the U.S., 93% of which were men (Guerino, Harrison, & Sabol, 2011). By its very nature, prisons house people that have been deemed too dangerous to live in society. Therefore, it is no surprise that the aggregation of people with antisocial tendencies confined in close proximity and with limited freedoms has the potential for violence.

Examination of actual rates of prison homicides provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics instead show that in 2002, prison homicides occurred at a rate of 4 per 100,000 inmates (Mumola, 2005). Surprisingly, this rate is lower than the average homicide rate in the community of 11.2 per 100,000 people (as cited in Cunningham, 2008). Although the rate of homicides in prison is believed to be infrequent and reliably documented, there are greater discrepancies between official assault records (not ending in death) and unofficial estimates of prison violence due to underreporting and subjectivity in staff documentation. According to Bryne and Hummer (2007), 34,000 inmate-on-inmate assaults were reported across state and federal correctional facilities in 2000, but the “unofficial” total was estimated to be closer to 300,000 assaults. This approximation was based on self-report studies that found assault victimization to be at least ten times greater than official records. Using self-report data from 7221 male inmates across 13 prisons, 21% of inmates reported being victimized by another inmate in a six month period (Wolff, Blitz, Shi, Siegel, & Bachman, 2007).

Based on the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the rate of violent assaults on prison officers is 155.7 per 1000 persons (Duhart, 2001). This rate is more than double the rate of violent assaults on both professional mental health workers (68.2 per 1000) and custodial mental health workers (69.0 per 1000; Duhart, 2001). Unfortunately, these are the most up-to-date official, nation-wide statistics available. A more recent investigation of serious inmate-on-prison staff assaults (requiring more than first aid treatment) in one state's correctional system had a serious assault rate of 53 per 100,000 in a 14-month period (Sorensen, Cunningham, Vigen, & Woods, 2011). The frequency of assaults on staff decreased as the severity of the attacks increased in this study.

Violence within prison has a severe impact on the inmate population, staff, and institution as a whole. Because studies have found that particular inmates disproportionately perpetrate the majority of violent acts (DeLisi, 2003), it is important to identify these inmates. People's actions are influenced by a combination of environmental influences and individual characteristics. Setting variables in prisons include aspects such as crowding, inmate-to-staff ratio, security level of the prison, and programming available to inmates. A comprehensive review of setting variables and prison violence was recently written by Gadon, Johnstone, and Cooke (2006). Because Gadon and colleagues already reviewed the influence of contextual variables on prison violence, this critical review will focus specifically on individual characteristics related to prison violence. This will fill a significant gap in the current literature by providing a comparable review of individual variables that are related to prison violence to the current published review of contextual variables.

1. Common methodological issues

Research on individual inmate variables and the relation to prison violence is of interest to different disciplines, such as criminology and

psychology. Within these fields, there are different research backgrounds and goals, resulting in different methodologies. Additionally, this research relies on multiple correctional departments, which creates jurisdictional differences such as variations in defining violence in prison, dissimilarities in the housing of inmates with certain crimes or sentences, and different documentation standards. Despite this variability, there are several recurrent, common methodological issues in this area of research. Some of these methodological concerns are issues commonly found in most research, such as random assignment, operational definitions, under or biased reporting, and generalizability (Kazdin, 2003). Other issues are more specific to this topic, such as the statistical modifications necessary for this type of data and variable measurement periods (Sorensen & Cunningham, 2008). To help guide the reader, these issues are described before the literature to make the following critiques more meaningful and the reoccurring nature of these issues more salient.

The most notable methodological issue is the lack of random assignment to conditions or type of prison. Inmates cannot be randomly assigned to a prison to help control for differences between groups, but rather are sentenced to institutions of varying security levels based on their crime, risk to self and others, and escape risk, as well as availability of space. As a result, all research in this area is correlational or predicative, not experimental or causal.

A major issue is that the definition of violent misconduct varies across research, and often includes non-violent acts (e.g., threats) or acts that have the potential to be violent (e.g., possession of a weapon). The use of a broad definition of violence that includes non-violent acts inflates the base rate of violent misconduct reported in studies and leads to inaccurately identifying correlates (Cunningham & Sorensen, 2006a).

Another issue is the low base rates of reported violence in prisons with a large number of observations clustered at zero (Cao, Zhao, & Van Dine, 1997). Due to this positive skew, an ordinary least squares regression is inappropriate and instead, a negative binomial regression should be utilized to account for the skewness of the count data (Sorensen & Cunningham, 2008). With low base rates and a non-normal distribution of violent acts, appropriate statistical modifications must be made.

Related to the low base rate is the issue of under-reporting violence by inmates and subjectivity in documentation by prison staff (Bryne & Hummer, 2007). Staff report misconduct at their discretion and may over-report certain acts of misconduct or particular inmates and under-report others. As a result, some studies are beginning to examine self-report data. Self-report data comes with additional limitations, such as social desirability biases and recall error (Kazdin, 2003). Also, some inmates may not report violence to staff in fear of retaliation.

There also are common problems with generalizability of the research due to the available samples. Often inmates engaging in violence within only one particular prison will be studied. These findings are not generalizable to other prisons with different situational characteristics, such as security level and crowding. Furthermore, the geographic location of the prison impacts the demographic composition of inmates and staff, and ultimately, the generalizability of research findings. For example, a prison in California would have a different racial composition than a prison in West Virginia.

Lastly, there is no standardized measurement period for examining the frequency of violence in prison. The frequency an inmate engages in violence can be studied in terms of when the inmate first was

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