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**MANAGEMENT OF INMATE VIOLENCE:  
A CASE STUDY SUMMARY**

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## **Management of Inmate Violence: A Case Study Summary**

Correctional institutions have historically been troubled by inmate violence. In recent years, though, this violence has escalated, both in frequency and in severity. Moreover, this violence is increasingly committed by individuals rather than groups. The rise in inmate violence, coupled with the shift toward individualized acts, requires different management strategies than have previously been used by correctional administrators. At present, however, little information is available concerning what steps are being taken to control inmate violence and how effective these measures are.

To help bridge this informational gap, the National Institute of Justice awarded Correctional Services Group, Inc., a grant to conduct an 18-month case study of inmate violence management. The subject selected for this case study was the Arizona State Prison Complex (ASPC)-Florence, a maximum security institution comprising six units that house approximately 3,200 inmates. In November 1984, following a mass disturbance, ASPC-Florence subsequently experienced a complete change in administration. The new administration subsequently instituted a comprehensive approach to control the complex's growing violence problems. Thus, the Florence complex offered a unique opportunity to study a carefully devised plan for managing inmate violence and then assess its effects.

### **CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY**

Because project staff could not control for the multitude of factors that might influence the incidence of inmate violence, it was not possible to employ a formal, experimental design to study violence management at ASPC-Florence. Consequently, project staff decided that the most effectual design would be an evaluative comparison of conditions at the complex before and after the change in administration. A 24-month time frame was established for the case study. This time frame was then divided into two 12-month periods--one prior to the administrative change and one afterward--that would allow project staff to identify and assess changes at the institution.

In order to obtain a thorough account of conditions at ASPC-Florence during the case study time frame, project staff conducted three separate but interrelated activities:

- Interviews with current and former administrators and staff;
- Questionnaire survey of staff and inmates; and
- Analysis of agency records pertaining to inmate violence.

The interviews with agency staff were designed to identify changes introduced by the new administration and elicit practical assessments of these changes. Twenty-six staff members, ranging from the Director of the Arizona Department of Corrections to Correctional Service Officers at ASPC-Florence, participated in this part of the case study. The interviews were semi-structured in nature and averaged one hour in length. They covered both events and conditions at the complex prior to and following the change in administration.

To supplement information obtained from the interviews, a questionnaire was distributed to approximately 10% of the staff and inmates who had been at Florence during the entire case study time frame. All of these individuals had volunteered for the survey. Completed questionnaires were received from 42 staff and 111 inmates, or approximately 7% of each subsample population. Separate questionnaires were developed for staff and inmates, but for the most part the questionnaires differed only in regard to personal background items. Both questionnaires were structured so as to elicit perceptions of conditions at Florence before and after the administrative change. The questionnaires addressed such areas as security measures, inmate programs and services, violence-related behaviors, problems relating to violence, inmate gang activity, and personal safety.

The last, and most objective, activity in the case study entailed an analysis of departmental records pertaining to inmate violence. Project staff, with the assistance of agency personnel, collected and analyzed data for five variables normally associated with inmate violence:

- Inmate violent disciplinary infractions;
- Damage to property;
- Inmate grievances;
- Staff grievances; and
- Staff turnover.

Once again, data for the two time periods were compared to determine whether any differences existed.

The findings for each of these three activities are summarized below, followed by a brief discussion of the case study's conclusions.

#### **STAFF INTERVIEW FINDINGS**

The interviews conducted with current and former staff of the Arizona Department of Corrections revealed considerable satisfaction with, and support for, the new

administration at ASPC-Florence. Under the previous administration, conditions at the complex had been seen as deteriorating. According to staff interviewed, facilities had been in disrepair, security had been too lax, staffing had been inadequate, and inmate programming had been limited. As a result, staff morale had been low and turnover had been high. Inmates were also dissatisfied, leading to continuing escalations in violent and disruptive behavior.

The new administration, emphasizing a teamwork approach to institutional operations, solicited staff input in identifying problems related to inmate violence and preparing comprehensive strategies for managing it. Interviewees stated that the involvement of staff, combined with greater administration backing for staff actions, strengthened morale.

Of even more importance, staff said, were the policies and procedures instituted to reduce inmate violence. Many of these changes focused on Central Unit, where much of the past misconduct had occurred. Provisions for maintaining security in the unit--particularly the control of inmate movement--were greatly enhanced. In addition, double-celling was eliminated, and staffing was augmented. These improvements were also thought to have played a major role in lessening discontent and tension throughout the complex.

Other identified changes made by the new administration included:

- Repair and renovation of physical plants;
- Improved planning for emergencies;
- More training for staff;
- Greater delegation of responsibility to Deputy Wardens;
- Segregation of gang leaders and inmate agitators;
- Implementation of an internal classification system designed to separate predators and victims;
- Institution of a swift and judicious inmate disciplinary system;
- Racial balancing of inmate housing and activities; and
- Enhanced programming and services for inmates.

Interviewed staff believed that these changes, taken together, promoted a more safe, secure, and orderly institution. Staff also stated that inmate violence had been reduced.

### **QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY FINDINGS**

The questionnaire survey of staff and inmates at ASPC-Florence found that each group held an intricate--and occasionally perplexing--set of ideas about conditions before and after the change in administration. Despite the complexity of their views, staff and inmate respondents demonstrated a surprising amount of consensus in their comparisons of conditions during the two time periods.

Substantial disagreement was found in just three areas. First, inmates thought that poor administrators were an increasingly serious problem, but staff believed the quality of administrators had improved. The inmates' perception is probably a reflection of their dislike of tightened security under the new administration. Most staff, in contrast, welcomed the increased security as well as other perceived improvements in policies and procedures.

Second, staff and inmate respondents attributed violence to differing problems. Inmates tended to view inadequate programs and services as serious problems leading to violence under both administrations. Staff, while acknowledging such shortcomings under the previous administration, believed these areas had generally been enhanced. They attributed most inmate violence to drug and/or alcohol use and gang activity. Inmates did not perceive these behaviors as serious problems, apparently more willing to place blame on the administration than on the conduct in which they admittedly engaged.

Finally, considerable disparity was found in regard to the safety of the average inmate. Staff generally thought that the typical inmate was more safe following the administrative transition, most likely due to increased security and staff control. However, most inmates felt the average inmate was less safe. This perceived decrease in safety is probably the result of several factors. It is likely, for instance, that a racial disturbance which occurred three months prior to the conduct of the survey unduly influenced inmate views of conditions at Florence. The divergent views may also stem from differing degrees of personal involvement. Staff are usually not faced with the same daily concerns, fears, and events as inmates. Equally important, staff are able to assess conditions more objectively by examining incident reports and statistical data that place unusual occurrences into a more realistic perspective.

For the most part, however, staff perceptions coincided with those of inmates. Both respondent groups felt that the average staff member was safer after the change in administration. Staff were seen as having greater control over inmates, and staff were, according to self-report by both groups, subjected to fewer physical assaults. On the negative side, staff and inmates alike indicated that adequate inmate programming was a more serious problem, probably due to the burdensome demands placed on limited resources by a larger prisoner population. On the whole, however, neither staff nor inmates perceived much substantial change--positive or negative--under the new administration.

Thus, the principal finding of the survey is that respondents perceived only slight changes after the administrative transition at ASPC-Florence. It should be noted,

though, that most of these changes seemed to improve conditions for staff and the majority of inmates. The survey also found that the new administration managed most inmates effectively and that few participated in violence-related conduct. However, self-report data suggest the existence of a group of hard-core difficult-to-control inmates who continued to engage in violent, disruptive acts. This group presented a substantial risk to institutional security and order, and it appears to have elicited considerable concern for personal safety--especially among inmate respondents--contributing greatly to the general perception that little change occurred under the new administration.

### RECORDS ANALYSIS FINDINGS

The analysis of agency records found that, following the change in administration at ASPC-Florence, positive change occurred for five variables associated with inmate violence. Examination of records for the before and after periods revealed a drop in violent rule infractions under the new administration, with the rate per 100 inmates falling from 33 to 29. The analysis also indicates that this decline was probably not a result of system-wide changes in policies and procedures or transfers of Florence inmates.

Decreases were also evident in regard to:

- Property damage, dropped by 31%;
- Inmate grievances, reduced by 16%;
- Staff grievances, down by 62%; and
- Annual staff turnover rate, decreased by 46%.

These reductions are particularly noteworthy because they occurred during potentially turbulent times both within the Arizona Department of Corrections and at ASPC-Florence--a period when facilities were overcrowded and inmate gang activity was on the rise.

The decreases found in these variables seem to be more than coincidentally related to the changes in policies and procedures introduced by the new administration. Rather, they appear to be associated with these changes, although it is impossible to determine the strength of the relationship when all independent variables cannot be controlled. Nevertheless, it seems likely that strategies aimed at controlling inmate violence did contribute substantially to the reduction of various violent behaviors, the enhancement of personal safety, and the heightening of staff and inmate morale.

## CASE STUDY CONCLUSIONS

A review of the three case study activities reveals some discrepancy between the findings of the questionnaire survey and the results of the records analysis and staff interviews. The latter two activities found that the new administration had effected improvements in the management of inmate violence and degree of safety at ASPC-Florence. However, neither staff nor inmates responding to the survey noted much change following the administrative transition.

Several factors may account for these variant findings. For instance, the difference may simply be a reflection of divergent perspectives. The staff interviewed for the case study were predominantly supervisory and administrative personnel, while survey respondents were primarily line staff and inmates. Upper level staff have access to information and statistical data that provide a more all-inclusive picture of institutional operations and events. As a result, they are more likely than line staff or inmates to be cognizant of broad changes or trends in violence management. On the other hand, line staff and inmates may be alert to more information than administrators and supervisors, or recordkeeping systems. Inmates, for example, are aware of events that are not observed by staff and, thus, go unreported. Moreover, both inmates and line staff are on the front lines of policy implementation and know firsthand whether changes are being effected as intended.

The most likely reason for the dissimilar findings, however, is a racial disturbance that occurred three months before the survey was conducted. The incident involved nearly 200 inmates and resulted in one inmate death. Despite a period of relative calm during the preceding 12 months, it would not have been difficult for inmates and line staff to conclude that conditions were returning to their former state. In addition, psychological reactions to the disturbance were likely to have lingered for some time, thereby biasing the perceptions required to complete the survey. Equally important, the disturbance could not have influenced the other case study activities because it took place after the interviews were conducted and fell outside the time frame established for the records analysis.

Despite the case study's divergent findings, several basic conclusions can be drawn regarding the strategies developed to manage inmate violence at ASPC-Florence. First, it appears to have been effective to devise a broad-based approach to violence management. The new administration not only introduced measures to control violence but also took steps to alleviate conditions conducive to violence. Consequently, its approach encompassed everything from improved physical facilities to increased inmate supervision to upgraded programs and services.

Second, in spite of these measures, the administration did not seem to have much impact on line staff and inmate perceptions of conditions at Florence. Perceptions are difficult to influence, but clear explanation of the reasons for changes in institutional operations can be of assistance in implementing and ensuring the effectiveness of new policies and procedures.

Finally, the case study findings suggest that a small group of especially violence-prone inmates remained difficult to manage following the change in administration. To maintain institutional security, safety, and order, such inmates should be housed in a special unit, like Florence's Cell Block 6, that permits total control of their environment.