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The Implications of Research Explaining Prison Violence and Disruption

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THE 15TH anniversary of the prison riot at Attica, which took place on September 13, 1971, renewed public and professional awareness of the need to examine the causes of violent behavior by inmates. Apart from the documents related to the investigations of the Attica riot, the majority of research studies on prison violence (e.g., Cokes et al., 1976; Farrington and Nuttal, 1980; Megargee, 1976) have focused on violence between inmates. There has been little effort to explore the motivations for inmate aggressive behavior toward prison staff.

This article presents the findings of a research study on patterns of inmate violence toward guards at two correctional institutions. The data was collected by student interns from Kent State University who were assigned to a Federal correctional facility and a state correctional facility.

Related Research

The fear of experiencing assaults from prisoners is part of the daily mindset of a prison guard. Morris and Morris (1980: 251) state that the prison officer knows only too well that violence is seldom far below the surface of prison life, and Jacobs and Retsky (1977: 61) characterize the guard's world as increasingly pervaded by fear and uncertainty. Fogel (1975: 70) stated that a guard performs in a world of fear of the unanticipated.

The research studies which have examined assaults within prisons have focused on inmate attacks on other inmates rather than on assaults on guards. Gayes and McGuire (1985) note that much of the literature related to assaultive behavior in correctional institutions explores three influences: facility crowding levels, inmate age, and factors tied to prisonization, such as deprivation and continuation of violent, aggressive, unacceptable previous behavior patterns in the prison setting. Megargee (1976) and Nacci et al. (1977) found that amount of space per inmate and the density of inmate population were positively related in inmate misconduct. Ekland-Olson et al. (1983: 43) found that age was a good predictor of assault levels. However, these

studies generally did not consider assaults against guards and staff. Gayes and McGuire (1985: 51) found that the rate of inmate to inmate assaults when a weapon was not used increased until a level of 35 percent overcrowding was reached and then leveled off. They also discovered that age was not an important determinant of inmate-staff violence when a weapon was not involved. Assaults with weapons by inmates declined as crowding increased (57).

Lombardo (1984: 82) concluded that aggressive behavior on the part of both inmates and guards could be partially explained on the basis of both groups acting on stereotypical images that comprise their mutually distorted collective images. That is, both think the other is prone to violence and conduct their interactions based on this stereotype of each other.

Methodology

This research involved data collection from incident reports used in the two correctional facilities (one Federal and one state) which formally accused inmates of violating institutional rules. Each incident report described the violation in question, the conditions which existed prior to the violation, the names and number of persons involved, the kinds of staff members who were present, the date and time of the violation, and the location in the institution where the violation took place. Files in the central records of these institutions were also examined to gather data on the age and race of each inmate involved in an assault.

For the purposes of this research, assaults were defined as "minor" or "serious." A minor assault involved such actions as pushing or shoving an officer, spitting on him, throwing liquid substances (water, milk, urine, etc.) on him, or throwing other types of objects (feces, toilet paper, food, etc.) which were not physically threatening to the officer. These minor assaults did not involve danger of physical harm from what transpired. A serious assault was defined as one in which the officer was struck forcibly by the inmate with his body, by an object in his hand, or by an object thrown which struck the officer. Pain

and discomfort were felt by the officer, medical attention may have been required, and the threat of serious injury to the officer was present.

According to these definitions, the majority of the assaults which occurred at the Federal facility were minor. Of the 94 incidents in which an inmate assaulted an officer, 54 (57 percent) were minor. Forty assaults (43 percent) at the Federal facility were defined as serious assaults. At the state institution there were 57 assaults on guards, of which 18 (32 percent) were minor and 39 (68 percent) were serious.

The Federal facility where this research was conducted was a medium security institution for males, and the state facility involved was a combined medium/maximum security facility for males. All of the incident reports at both facilities involving any form of inmate assault on staff were analyzed for a 3-year period. The scope of the research was limited to information available in the incident reports and the inmates' case files. The data for the Federal facility were collected for the years 1979-81. For the state facility, the data was collected for the years 1983-85.

To examine violence by inmates against staff members, seven specific factors were considered:

1. Location in the institution where the assault occurred,
2. Shifts when the assaults occurred,
3. Work experience of the correctional officer assaulted,
4. Sex of the correctional officer assaulted,
5. Age of the assaulting inmate/s,
6. Presence of other staff members when the assault occurred, and
7. Assaults on officers occurring after inmates threatened officers prior to the assaults.

These seven factors involve personal demographic considerations (age, sex, and work experience of assaulted staff members), structural factors (location in the institution where the assault occurred, shift on which it occurred), and situational factors (presence of other officers, existence of a confrontation before the assault). Each of these factors will now be examined to determine if the data indicates any relationship between this factor and assaults on officers. In addition, when applicable, each factor will be further examined according to the "serious" or "minor" nature of the assault.

Findings

Location

At the Federal institution, nearly three-fourths (71 percent) of all assaults on officers occurred in one

cell block of the facility, the detention unit. It should be noted that this unit houses less than 10 percent of the total inmate population. Sixteen percent of all assaults on officers occurred in the dormitory units, 5 percent in the cafeteria, and 8 percent in "all other areas."

For the state institution, a somewhat similar pattern occurred. Sixty-eight percent of the assaults against officers occurred in the cell block areas. Although the high security unit had the greatest concentration of assaults against officers, the assaults were more evenly distributed in the various inmate housing units in the state facility than they were in the Federal facility. A comparison of the prison locations where assaults occurred in the Federal and state facilities is shown in table 1.

TABLE 1. LOCATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ASSAULTS

Location	Federal Facility Assaults		State Facility Assaults	
	N	%	N	%
Detention/High Security	67	71%	20	35%
Dormitories/Other Cell Blocks	15	16%	10	33%
Cafeteria	5	5%	5	9%
All Other Areas	7	8%	13	23%
TOTALS	94	100%	48	100%

When the assaults were categorized as minor and serious, the same pattern is present as when examining all assaults on officers, as shown in table 2.

TABLE 2. LOCATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ASSAULTS BY MINOR AND SERIOUS NATURE

Location	Minor Assaults				Serious Assaults			
	Federal		State		Federal		State	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Detention/High Security	44	82%	10	56%	23	57%	10	26%
Dormitories/Other Cell Blocks	5	9%	4	22%	10	25%	15	38%
Cafeteria	0	0%	2	11%	5	13%	3	8%
All Other Areas	5	9%	2	11%	2	5%	11	28%
TOTALS	54	100%	18	100%	40	100%	39	100%

As shown in table 2, the detention/high security units had the highest percentages of minor and of serious assaults. The high percentage of assaults occurring in this area in both the Federal and the state institution is of particular concern because it would appear that inmates would be in a position to assault officers less frequently in these areas than in other parts of the institutions. In these units, bars and locked doors generally separated the officers from in-

mates. In addition, these areas house only a small fraction of the institution's population. It is evident from this finding that the highest percentages of minor and serious assaults occurred in these areas and that working in these areas constitutes a hazard for guards.

It should be noted that more minor assaults than serious assaults occurred in the detention/high security units. It seems that minor assaults (such as throwing liquid or solid substances at officers) can still occur in the units where bars separate officers and inmates. However, the presence of barriers between prisoners and guards makes it less likely that serious assaults will occur. The majority of assaults on officers outside of the detention/high security units were serious assaults. Inmates housed outside of detention/high security units had opportunities to commit serious assaults while those held in detention/high security areas generally did not.

Shifts When Assaults Occurred

Table 3 reports the shifts on which assaults occurred.

TABLE 3. ASSAULTS ON OFFICERS ACCORDING TO SHIFTS

Shift	Assaults			
	Federal		State	
	N	%	N	%
Morning—				
Midnight to 8 a.m.	6	7%	4	7%
Day—				
8 a.m. to 4 p.m.	51	54%	27	47%
Evening—				
4 p.m. to midnight	37	39%	26	46%
TOTALS	94	100%	57	100%

It is not surprising that the lowest percentages of assaults occurred during the morning shift, since there is a minimum amount of interaction between inmates and officers at that time. Activity is at a near standstill, the majority of the inmates are asleep, and the number of officers on duty is lowest during this shift.

The highest percentages of assaults occurred during the day shift. This is a somewhat surprising finding, since during the evening shift more officers are on duty at positions where they interact with inmates. Also, the evening hours are not as structured as the day shift hours for most inmates. During the evening shift, the inmate is relatively free to choose his own activities, and has greater potential for violating institutional rules. During the day shift, inmates have a more structured schedule and are in-

teracting with non-custody staff more frequently than with officers. At most job sites, such as prison industries, mechanical services, and food services, non-custody staff member supervise the inmates. Those few inmates who are in the units during the day shift are also supervised by the counselors assigned to that unit. The only exception would be those inmates who are locked up for disciplinary reasons.

However, during the day shift inmates in the detention/high security areas are supervised by correctional officers. Also, during the day shift the officers in detention/high security areas have more interaction with the inmates than during the morning and evening shifts. Meals are served to the inmates in these units during the day shift by correctional officers, and inmates are taken out of their cells for Institutional Discipline Committee hearings, Unit Discipline Committee hearings, attorney visits, personal visits (when permitted), and for daily recreation. Therefore, inmates in detention/high security areas have increased interaction with officers during the day shift, and assaults occur.

Work Experience of the Correctional Officers Assaulted

In this research, the correctional officers were divided into three groups: trainees with less than 1 year on the job, senior officers with 1 to 3 years experience, and seasoned officers with more than 3 years experience. In the Federal facility, 35 percent of the assaults were directed against the trainees, 59 percent against the senior officers, and 6 percent against the seasoned officers. In the state facility, 2 percent of the assaults were directed against the trainees, 51 percent against the senior officers, and 47 percent against the seasoned officers. In the Federal facility, trainees constituted 15 percent of the custody staff, yet they were the victims of 35 percent of the assaults. In the state institution, the trainees represented 2.5 percent of the staff and received 2 percent of the assaults. Apparently the correctional officer turnover rate is low at the state facility but represents a rather significant factor at the Federal facility. Table 4 compares the percent of assaults on Federal and state institution officers according to their percent of the custody staff and their work experience.

As shown in table 4, the percentage of assaults on trainees at the Federal facility was more than twice their percentage of the custody staff. It appears, then, that officers with less than 1 year of experience are more at risk for assaults in Federal facilities than

those with greater experience.

The same pattern existed when the assaults were divided into "minor" and "serious." Trainees received a disproportionately high number of both minor and serious assaults in the Federal facility. Because of the small number of trainees in the state institution sample, no generalization can be made.

TABLE 4. ASSAULTS ON CUSTODY STAFF BY AMOUNT OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Work Experience Level	Federal Facility		State Facility	
	Percent of Custody Staff	Percent of Assaults	Percent of Custody Staff	Percent of Assaults
Trainee/Less than 1 year	15%	35%	2.5%	2%
Senior officer/1-3 years	76%	59%	2.5%	51%
Seasoned officer/more than 3 years experience	9%	6%	95.0%	47%
TOTALS	100%	100%	100.0%	100%

Age of Officers Assaulted

While the amount of work experience of officers appeared to be related to their endangerment for assault, age did not emerge as a significant factor. For both institutions, more than half of the officers assaulted were ages 31 to 40. Typically, correctional officers had been unemployed at several other jobs before entering correctional work. The minimum age for employment at both institutions was 21. Therefore, many of the officers were mature in terms of age, but were relatively inexperienced as correctional officers.

However, when the age of the inmates making the assaults was considered, a significant relationship between age and involvement in assaults emerged. In the Federal facility, 75 percent of the assailants were age 25 and under, while in the state facility 56 percent were age 25 or under. The Federal facility is specifically designed for young offenders, and a concentration of assaultive inmates in this age group would be expected. Fifty-seven percent of the inmates in the Federal facility were age 25 or younger. In the state facility, the inmate age distribution was more varied, with approximately one-third of the inmates age 25 or younger. Still, assaults on staff were concentrated among inmates in the age 25 or younger category. Both minor and serious assaults were also concentrated in this age group. This finding is consistent with other research, which has discovered age to be an important determinant in explaining prison violence.

Sex of Correctional Officers Assaulted

As shown in table 5, the great majority of officers assaulted at the Federal facility were males, with females receiving only two assaults. The great majority of the officers in this institution (92 percent) were males. In the state facility, nine percent of the assaults were directed against females, who made up 12 percent of the custody staff.

TABLE 5. ASSAULTS ON OFFICERS BY SEX AND PERCENT OF STAFF

Sex of Officer	Percent of Assaults		Percent of Custody Staff	
	Federal	State	Federal	State
Male	98%	91%	92%	88%
Female	2%	9%	8%	12%

It should be noted that in the Federal facility females did not work in the detention unit, where the majority of assaults occurred.

Presence of Other Staff Members When the Assault Occurred

In the Federal facility, more than half of the assaults occurred when the officer was alone, while in the state facility only 15% of the assaults occurred under this condition, as shown in table 6.

TABLE 6. LEVEL OF STAFFING WHEN ASSAULT OCCURRED*

Staffing Level	Assaults			
	Federal		State	
	N	%	N	%
Officer Alone	48	51%	8	15%
Other Staff Present	46	49%	45	85%

*No staffing information on four cases.

When assaults were considered as "minor" or "serious," it was discovered that the majority of minor assaults occurred when the officer was alone, while the majority of the serious assaults occurred when other staff members were present with the officer who was assaulted. As noted earlier, the greater concentration of both serious and minor assaults was in the high security/detention areas. Policy at both institutions requires that officers assigned to these units work in pairs. Even so, the potential for serious assaults exists when the inmates are brought out of their cells for transportation, showers, or recreation. During such periods, two officers are present. It appears, then, that the presence of more than one custody staff member did not have a significant deterrent effect on either serious or minor assaults.

Assaults on Officers Occurring After Inmate Threats

The existence of typical circumstances or situations which generate assaults on officers was explored. It was found that at the Federal institution only 3 percent of the assaults occurred when an officer was attempting to break up an inmate fight, while at the state institution 32 percent of the assaults occurred in such a situation. Generally, when an officer is called upon to break up a fight, he or she requests back-up assistance, and this show of force may be sufficient to dissuade inmates from attacking officers who intervene. An inexperienced officer may try to handle such a situation alone and become the object of an assault. In the state institution, in the majority of instances when an officer was assaulted while intervening in a fight the inmate was not directly attacking the officer. Rather, the officer was accidentally kicked or punched when attempting to restrain the inmates involved in the fight.

It was also discovered that assaults on officers generally occurred without much warning or verbal exchange. In the Federal facility, 19 percent of the assaults were preceded by a verbal threat or a heated exchange between the officer and the inmate, while at the state facility 9 percent were preceded by such threats or exchanges. Many officers were punched, pushed, or bitten when performing routine duties such as escorting an inmate back to his cell, conducting a cell search, or observing inmate behavior in the dining hall. If an incident involved both verbal and physical exchanges, the likelihood of assault on an officer increased.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined seven factors in relation to assaults on correctional officers. It was found that four of the seven factors were related to assaults. The *location* in the institution where the assault occurred was significant, with more than 70 percent of the assaults occurring in the detention/high security areas. *Shift* was also important, with the majority of all assaults occurring during the day shift. *Work experience* was also a factor, with trainees receiving a disproportionate number of assaults. Although the age of the officer was not important, unless related to amount of work experience, the *age of the assaulting inmate* was a significant factor. The majority of all assaults were committed by inmates age 25 and younger. Of these four factors, work experience stands out as most important for future research consideration.

The data showed convincingly that work experience was a factor in assaults on officers. The least experienced officers made up 14 percent of the custodial staff at the Federal institution studied. They had less than 1 year of work experience. A relatively high staff turnover rate is characteristic of this institution. Staff members move to other positions in the U.S. Bureau of Prisons or find employment in industry. Although the officers go through a training period, the "know how" of handling explosive situations, feeling inmates' moods, being able to sense when to be extremely cautious and when to call for back-up assistance can only be learned through on the job experience. New officers will be exposed to a period of testing. Inmates will see how much they can get away with. When a high turnover rate exists, it is difficult to establish a state of equilibrium between guards and inmates. This is particularly true in the detention unit, where the inmate has already lost most privileges.

At the state institution, only 2.5 percent of the custody staff had less than 1 year of experience. At this institution, new officers received 90 hours of training and always worked with more experienced officers. Although the state institution is twice the size of the Federal institution (1,200 prisoners as compared to approximately 600), it had a lower total number of assaults than the Federal institution.

The high turnover of officers and the high percentage of assaults on first year officers found in this research may indicate problems with training at the Federal institution studied, and a critical examination of the training and support given to first year officers there is advisable. It would be helpful to examine the patterns of assaults at other institutions, to determine if high percentages of assaults on novice officers are common, so that training and supervision practices could be adjusted to reduce these assaults.

Although the sex of the correctional officers was not found to have an important relation to assaults, the increasing number of females choosing corrections as a career makes additional research on their roles in the system vital. Each year, more female correctional officers are securing employment at institutions for male inmates. Opposition to their employment centers on two concerns: the safety of female officers within the institutions and their ability to maintain order. The research presented here revealed that female officers did not appear to have a greater chance of being assaulted than did male officers. The incidents involving assaults on females were not different in nature from the assaults on males. They involved injuries while breaking up fights, unprovoked striking with a cane by an older inmate, and an

assault while returning an inmate to his cell.

The presence of more than one staff member when assaults occur is another factor which requires additional research. Economic constraints caused the Federal system to place a lone officer in each unit except detention/high security during the evening and morning shifts. The officers in several units must attempt to control dormitories which each house over 100 inmates. Other institutions have made similar staffing changes because of budget pressures. Two objections to these changes have been voiced: the safety of the officer is compromised, and a single officer may not be able to maintain control and order. In this research, the presence of another officer was not demonstrated to be a deterrent to assaults. Based on the situations described in the incident reports, it appeared that most assaults were spontaneous and minor in nature, and it is doubtful if the presence of more than one officer would have prevented them. The majority of serious assaults occurred in the detention/high security areas, where two officers were always present.

In summary, if unusual situations such as riots or inmate strikes are excluded from consideration, and day by day institutional situations are examined, it appears that the possibility of assaults on correctional officers will always exist, because the assaults appear to occur spontaneously. A closer examination, however, suggests that these "spontaneous" assaults can be anticipated. For example, if prisoners with few privileges are denied them, a spontaneous angry response, caused by frustration, is likely to result. Such activities as access to medical care when daily rounds are conducted or reception or posting of mail may be viewed with great importance by prisoners and denial of these services can result in angry retaliations. Life in prison is so sterile, and the privileges enjoyed are so few, that any interference with the privileges can trigger an outburst. In addition, any unusual event, such as denial of parole, a death in the prisoner's family, or word that a spouse

is seeking a divorce, may trigger an impulsive outburst. Guards who are aware that such events have taken place can act with caution in anticipation of an emotional reaction.

Increased training and education for correctional officers, including additional on the job training, would appear to be helpful in reducing assaults. The training should not focus entirely on self-defense or self-preservation techniques, but should also include training in interpersonal relations. Officers should be trained to recognize symptoms of a disturbed mental attitude in the prisoners and to pick up cues that are predictive of explosive behavior.

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