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Reducing Prison Violence

Conflicts in prison

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Penny was in the upstairs association room. Behind her were Kay and Kay's cellmate. Penny heard Kay make a rude remark about Penny's cellmate. She turned round and told Kay to shut up. Kay denied she had said anything rude. She told Penny to shut up. Penny became verbally abusive. They stood facing each other, two inches apart. Penny was furious. She saw Kay's hands, about to grab her.

Conflict and violence

This sequence illustrates how interactions between prisoners escalate into fights or assaults. At each step, Kay and Penny made decisions about how to react. The way they handled the situation was based on interpretations of their opponent's intentions. For example, when Kay told Penny to shut up, Penny perceived that Kay was trying to belittle her. Penny explained that when Kay stood up to face her: *'I was thinking it's physical – she is confronting me. And she is not big enough.'*¹

Penny head-butted Kay, breaking her nose. Other prisoners stepped in to separate them.

This paper discusses situations that result in violent incidents among prisoners. It is based on empirical evidence gathered for the book, *Prison Violence: The dynamics of conflict, fear and power*.² This research included a large prisoner survey to measure the prevalence of verbal abuse, theft, assault, threats of violence and other forms of victimisation; and an in-depth investigation of 141 fights or assaults among prisoners.

The prevention of violence depends on understanding what led up to it. A useful way to analyse prison violence is to explore it as conflict. Conflicts are:

Situations in which there are competing interests which the parties pursue in uncompromising ways.

Some of the factors that contribute to violence include:

- ☐ Tactics, such as intimidation or threats, that tend to aggravate disputes
- ☐ Theft, exploitation, and other forms of victimisation
- ☐ Racial and cultural tensions and misunderstandings
- ☐ Emotions, such as frustration, anger and shame
- ☐ Transitory relationships; lack of familiarity with peers
- ☐ Low self esteem

Limited access to goods and services in prisons creates competition among prisoners. It also helps to explain why the risk of being exploited is a widespread concern. The fear that someone might take advantage (e.g. by gaining a place in the queue for food) assumes special significance. Values and attitudes also fuel conflicts; disputes can arise over honour, loyalty, fairness, respect, or other values. For example, a prisoner accused of cheating may fight to defend their personal honour, even when there is no material interest at stake.

A common cause of conflict is anti-social behaviour. The 2004 version of PSO 2750 stated:

The risk of being victimised, for example by theft of property, verbal/racist abuse, fraud, creates the conditions in which prisoners might be tempted to use violence to defend their interests.

There may be a temptation to infer that prisoners can be divided into the vulnerable, who must be protected, and the predators who need to be monitored. But conflicts that lead to violence are rarely so one-sided.

A conflict-centred analysis of prison violence differs significantly from approaches that distinguish between bullies and victims. The harmful behaviour that escalates disputes toward violent outcomes is usually reciprocal. It follows that the most effective measures against violence will focus on two aspects: intolerance of all victimisation and the promotion of conflict resolution.

Most of the conflicts that lead to violence in prison occur between parties where the power balance is yet to be determined. Established bullying relationships, in which one person dominates and exploits a victim, are atypical. In part, this ties in with the transitory nature of relationships in prison, which is exacerbated by large establishments and by high turnover.

Power contests

The most common form of conflict that culminates in violence is a power contest, where two prisoners size each other up through mutual attempts to intimidate each other. Prisoners tend to respond to these situations with tactics such as accusations, threats, ultimatums, and challenges ('What are you looking at?' 'Who do you think you're talking to?').

1. Names have been changed. Quotes from prisoners in the text are drawn from this research, unless otherwise noted.

2. Edgar, K, O'Donnell, I and Martin C (2012) *Prison Violence: The dynamics of conflict, fear and power*, London: Routledge.

Conflicts often begin over a clash of interests: One person wants to stay on the phone with his girlfriend; those in the queue become more anxious as bang-up approaches. Or, one person plays his radio loud, late into the nights; his neighbour needs his sleep. Power contests emerge when the interests at stake become less important for both parties than personal dominance.

The conflict between Penny and Kay was a typical power contest. The problem began when Penny heard Kay make a disparaging remark about her cellmate. Their dispute became a power contest when each commanded the other to shut up.

When Penny told Kay to shut up, Kay felt that:

She was trying to intimidate me. She thought I would just sit down and shut my mouth.

When Kay reacted by telling Penny to shut up, Penny thought:

She felt she could intimidate me. She thought she could push me about.

Rather like the duels of the 18th century, both parties to power contests are intent on 'satisfaction' and that can come only through the submission of their opponent.

When a power contest is triggered by a dispute over a piece of property, there may be a temptation to trivialise the conflict as a fight over a pot of yogurt, a borrowed CD, or a game of pool. But these contests are fought to preserve self-respect and to win the respect of one's opponent.

When their dispute became a power contest, Kay and Penny forgot about the original problem – comments made about Kay's cell-mate – and concentrated on finding the other's weak points. The important shift was when both perceived that the conflict was about who would establish control over the other.

In power contests, both participants attempt to show the other person that they cannot be dominated. Whatever the original source of the dispute, each sets a new objective, which is to demonstrate their strength to the opponent. They rely on hostility, both to protect themselves and make the other person back down. Each judges the behaviour of the other to be aggressive. The decisions each make in response to

their foe in a power contest put them on a collision course towards violence.

Many conflicts can be resolved by practical steps that provide something for each party to gain. The person who needed his sleep could ask for a cell move. Power contests are more difficult to resolve because they are about the quality of relationships, and the balance of power can be impossible for outsiders to assess.

Purposes of violence

The conflict approach shows how arguments escalate into violence, but it also provides insights into why people decide to use force as a response to conflict.

The following is not an exhaustive list, but illustrates how the prisoner's objectives can shed light on why they considered violence a feasible option.

A common motivation for the use of force is to demonstrate toughness. Richard McCorkle³ analysed assaults in prisons in Tennessee (USA). He described the challenge prisoners faced:

Unless an inmate can convincingly project an image that conveys the potential for violence, he is likely to be dominated and exploited.

Prisoners who used force to demonstrate their toughness expressed a fear that other inmates would consider them to be weak and vulnerable. Their use of force was intended to send a message to the other inmates on the wing — the sea of unfamiliar faces — to establish a reputation that would protect the attacker from future victimisation.

If it wasn't for the other inmates, we wouldn't have fought. Most prison fights aren't about being angry. They're about what other inmates will think of you if you don't fight.

An analysis of violence reduction by the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman found a considerable variation among different prison populations in feelings of safety:

. . . perceptions of safety can often contrast with a relative rate of recorded assaults. YOIs, for example, may appear the most 'unsafe' from assault statistics, but prisoners' own perceptions across functional types did not

3. McCorkle, R.C. (1992) 'Personal precautions to violence in prison', *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 19: 160-173.

reflect this. Perceptions of safety were at their lowest in the dispersal (or high security) prisons, despite the rate of recorded assault incidents being below the average for all types of establishments.⁴

The social consequences of demonstrations of toughness are counter-productive. An individual feels at risk, and believes that using force will make him safer. He commits an assault, and in so doing, makes his environment more dangerous for everyone.

Yet it is important to bear in mind that the majority of prisoners who used force were not motivated by a perceived need to demonstrate their toughness.

Among young offenders, fights were often used attempting to settle their differences. The young offenders seemed genuinely to believe that violence could provide a solution to their differences, in contrast to the sense of resigned necessity evident among adults who fought.

Toby was arguing with an officer about his food. An orderly, Manny, told Toby to be quiet and take his food back to his cell. Toby told him it had nothing to do with him. Manny came out from behind the servery, removing his jacket. An officer stepped between them. That afternoon, Manny told Toby off for the way he had spoken to him at the servery. He invited Toby to the showers. Toby followed, carrying a sharp plastic blade. Others ran to watch, alerting an officer who arrived in time to prevent the fight. Later, on association, Manny came to the pool table and threatened Toby. Toby explained that at this point in the conflict he was thinking,

Talking, talking — I was getting tired of this. We had to settle this, we had to have a fight.

Violence to resolve conflict was often signalled by fights taking place by prior agreement.

Another reason prisoners used force was punishment, for example, in reaction to ‘grassing’, cell theft, or defaulting on a debt. Sara and Kate learned that Mary had informed on them. Sara threatened her; then, later, Kate assaulted Mary. Sara explained:

She’d grassed people up. She broke the worst rule ever. If you let someone get away with it, it is telling others it is no problem. You got to be seen doing something. She has got to pay for it.

These purposes — to demonstrate toughness, to settle differences, or to punish — were the most commonly cited reasons prisoners decided to use force. The picture becomes a bit more complex, as the purposes differ across types of prison. As stated, while young offenders fought to resolve a conflict, adult prisoners — male and female — almost never said they believed a fight would settle their differences. The use of force to punish a prisoner who had broken a code of behaviour was most common among women prisoners.

The purposes reflect prisoners’ perceived needs; meeting their needs more effectively will help to reduce the occasions where violence is considered a pragmatic option.

Managing conflict

The escalation of conflict into violence is not inevitable. In every conflict, there are chances to divert the course into a non-violent outcome.

Overnight on the induction wing, the men in neighbouring cells struck up a conversation about football. It transpired that they were supporters of arch enemies. The chat turned into an argument, with each trying to outdo the other’s insults about their team. One lost his temper and became racially abusive. The conversation ended with mutual insults. In the morning, when the first door was opened, the wing’s diversity rep was standing next to the officer. He told the man, ‘I’d like to welcome you to this prison. We all understand how emotional people get about football. But we heard you use a term that isn’t tolerated here. I hope you can understand that we all have to respect each other and part of that is that we don’t tolerate racism. Let me know if you need anything and I’ll try to help.’⁵

Rachel came to Bobby’s cell and asked to borrow her radio. Bobby, who was serving a sentence for a

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4. Prisons and Probation Ombudsman for England and Wales (2011) Learning from PPO investigations: Violence reduction, bullying and safety, London: Prisons and Probation Ombudsman.
5. Described on a prison visit to investigate effective responses to racist tensions, see Prison Reform Trust (2010) *A Fair Response: developing responses to racist incidents that earn the confidence of black and minority ethnic prisoners*, online: http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/fair_response%20developing%20responses%20to%20racist%20incidents%20.pdf

serious assault, told her no. The next day, on association, Bobby went to her cell and saw her radio was missing. She rushed down the wing to find Rachel chatting to others, with the radio on. She pointed her finger in Rachel's face and told her she was 'out of order'. Rachel stood and told her, 'Don't ever talk to me like that.' Bobby returned to her cell, with Rachel following close behind, shouting and making threats. An officer stood between them and told Rachel to return to her cell. A group of women asked Bobby to explain the problem. They then went to Rachel and heard her point of view. Just before bang-up, the women returned to Bobby's cell to tell her that Rachel was sorry.

Ideas about how to make prisons safer from violence are often reduced to two: tighten up the regime, or make it more liberal. Coercive controls, such as lock-downs and discipline, can keep prisoners separate, but this path tends to increase frustrations and resentment.

Ross Homel and Carleen Thompson reviewed research on prison violence and concluded:

... the more coercive the prison environment the greater the potential for violence. This is especially so where the prison management and treatment of prisoners are perceived by prisoners as illegitimate, as this strengthens prisoner solidarity in opposition to the authorities.⁶

Alternatively, creating opportunities for personal responsibility enables some prisoners to find positive roles, but for a few prisoners, such tolerance is seen as an opportunity to victimise and exploit peers.

Both strategies assume that the problem of assaults in prison is predominantly a function of discipline, and that the solution lies in how rules are made and enforced.

A conflict-centred strategy provides a fresh alternative to the dichotomy between strict and liberal regimes. Managing violence begins by exploring the conflicts among prisoners in each establishment; working to minimise the sources of conflict; encouraging officers to adopt a more pro-active role in preventing conflicts from escalating; and setting up schemes to facilitate conflict resolution.

There is a continuum of attitudes within prisoner culture toward violence from respect for an assailant, through resigned apathy about violence, to disapproval and a positive commitment to everyone's safety. For example, most long-term prisoners know they are not moving on soon, and therefore have an incentive to maintain a stable environment. On wings with enhanced privileges, prisoners may feel that they have too much to lose, and have a motivation to intervene to prevent two inmates arguing.

Prisoners who prioritise safety and who could contribute to a safer environment may be inhibited by a culture that condones the use of force. In prisons that do not prioritise safety, there is a lack of opportunities available to prisoners to resolve their conflicts non-violently: no wing forums, impartial mediators who are trained to intervene in disputes, or formal opportunities to negotiate win-win solutions.

Measures for preventing violence

The prison inspectorate's expectations on violence reduction contain steps that, practised consistently, have great potential for preventing conflicts from escalating into fights or assaults.⁷

In particular:

1. Build a knowledge base about factors that contribute to

conflict in each prison.

Effective prisoner surveys establish prisoner perceptions of safety and the findings are used to inform regular reviews of the strategy and the nature and seriousness of incidents.

An inherent weakness of violence reduction strategies is a lack of detailed knowledge about the causes of fights or assaults among prisoners. Regular prisoner surveys about victimisation provide evidence about underlying factors contributing to violence: the extent to which prisoners are dealing with exploitation or threats, or criminal activity such as thefts or assaults. Surveys can provide evidence upon which to refine strategies, for example by revealing basic human needs which prisoners believe are not being met. Prisoners should also be asked, directly, to contribute ideas about how to prevent violence.

6. Homel, R and Thompson, C (2005) 'Causes and prevention of violence in prisons', in Sean O'Toole & Simon Eyland (Eds.), *Corrections criminology* (pp. 101-108), Sydney: Hawkins Press.
7. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2012) *Expectations: criteria for assessing the treatment of prisoners and conditions in prisons*, London: HMCIP.

Prisons run by management and staff who are determined to improve the service to prisoners are good at bringing conflicts to light and working with prisoners to try to find solutions. They need to be resourceful in trying to learn from prisoners what their main concerns are about. For example, they might use a prisoner council to raise and resolve some of the basic, structural conflicts in the prison.

2. Focus officers on confronting the harmful behaviour that escalates into violence.

Staff supervise prisoners, confront unacceptable behaviour and are consistent in challenging these behaviours.

Or, as the expectation for women's prisons states:

Staff have the necessary training and skills to promote positive and supportive relationships, and to consistently identify and challenge problematic behaviour.⁸

Prison officers play a number of crucial roles in preventing violence. When they protect all prisoners from harmful behaviour, staff foster a culture of mutual respect and counter the impact of anti-social behaviour in escalating disputes. Rules against drugs, weapons, and other contraband are rigorously enforced. 'High-crime' areas within the prison are closely supervised. Dynamic security enables officers to recognise signs of trouble early and employ conflict resolution, persuading the foes to discuss their differences non-violently.

In developing the skills staff need, governors should focus on supporting staff in:

- ☐ identifying aggressive tactics and intervening to prevent prisoners using behaviour such as insults, threats, accusations, or hostile gestures
- ☐ improving communication between the parties
- ☐ striving to create a culture that favours negotiation and the fulfilment of basic human needs over coercive controls.

The House of Commons Justice Committee highlighted the crucial role of prison officers:

The main foundation of a safe prison is dynamic security, established through

consistent personal contact between officers and prisoners, enabling staff to understand individual prisoners and therefore anticipate risky situations and prevent violence.⁹

3. A whole-prison commitment to conflict resolution

Interventions are aimed at achieving sustained and agreed changes in behaviour and include mediation and conflict resolution.

Non-violent responses by prisoners are rewarded. Prisoners' skills in responding to conflict are developed. Improving skills at resolving conflicts can reduce their risk of assaulting others and their risk of being assaulted.¹⁰

The prison should ensure that mechanisms for resolving conflicts among prisoners are easily accessed by all prisoners. Mediation should be widely available to provide prisoners with a choice of non-violent means for resolving their differences. Mediation could be provided direct by voluntary sector organisations or by prisoners trained in mediation and/or restorative justice.

Regular wing meetings discuss causes of tensions. As a prisoner explained to the Prison Reform Trust's study of prison councils:

'You get anger in other prisons. You walk past another con and you feel the anger welling up. Soon you feel that with every other prisoner. You feel the tension all of the time. Here, you bring it up in the wing meeting, and settle it.'¹¹

Reducing violence is a huge and complex challenge in a prison. Detailed data about the conflicts that lead to violence can enable managers to make well-informed decisions about the most effective ways to implement a conflict resolution approach to preventing violence. The sources of fights and assaults can be minimised by:

- ☐ fulfilling prisoners' basic human needs
- ☐ protecting prisoners' personal safety
- ☐ providing opportunities to exercise personal autonomy, and
- ☐ building in mechanisms for prisoners to resolve conflicts.

8. HMCIP (2014) Expectations: Criteria for assessing the treatment of and conditions for women in prison, London: HMCIP.

9. House of Commons Justice Committee (2015) Prisons: planning and policies, Ninth Report of Session 2014-15, HC 309, online: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201415/cmselect/cmjust/309/309.pdf>

10. Examples of organisations providing conflict resolution training are: Leap Confronting Conflict; Khulisa (Silence the Violence); and AVP Britain (workshops and a correspondence course, Facing up to Conflict).

11. Prison Reform Trust (2004) *Having their say: The work of prisoner councils*, by E. Solomon and K. Edgar, London: Prison Reform Trust.