

The Social Context of Prison Violence

Kimmett Edgar and Carol Martin summarise their recent research on the causes and context of violence in prison.

Violence and disputes are commonplace in prisons. Fights and assaults are often defined as outcomes of the behaviour of 'naturally violent' individuals. The research we have carried out for the ESRC's Violence Research Programme, Conflicts and Violence in Prison, shows the reality to be very different.

Too often, responses to prison violence focus on the act itself without attempting to understand the dynamics between the people directly involved. We set out to understand the ways that conflict-management by inmates can reduce - or increase - the chances that a dispute will result in a fight or assault. Understanding prisoners' interpretations of the situations they face helps to show how decisions to use violence are often influenced by the particular social context of the prison.

Prisons differ from most other social institutions in that daily routines bring inmates into contact with others whom they do not know. Everyday situations require inmates to judge the intentions of other prisoners with whom they interact. Physically and legally, prisoners cannot leave the environment in which they feel at risk. Material deprivations foster a temptation to stretch one's budget

at the expense of others. All this makes for an atmosphere of distrust and anxiety. When conflicts arise within this social climate, presuppositions about what the other person is trying to achieve can aggravate the dispute and lead to violence.

The research was conducted over two years, across four prisons, and included a survey of 590 prisoners. The heart of the study was an investigation of 141 conflicts between inmates, almost two-thirds of which led to a fight or assault. We interviewed 209 prisoners about a recent conflict, 132 of whom had used aggressive force - that is, used force to inflict injury. Information about how prisoners interpreted the disputes in which they found themselves shows how the prison environment promotes violence. In this brief

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article we consider three general inferences prisoners make about the social context; namely, that prison society contains the potential for danger, intimidation and exploitation.

Danger

The survey showed that inmates believe that violence in prison is inevitable. Inmates' sense that their environment is dangerous colours their reading of specific encounters with others so that violence sometimes becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. At one extreme, prisoners who thought another prisoner was about to assault them decided to strike first.

I sat in my cell and thought I might as well do him before he can get to me, so I put a battery in a sock and I saw him queue up for dinner and I attacked him.

Pre-emptive strikes of this kind were comparatively rare, but they are a powerful illustration of the way a prisoner's interpretations can lead to violence. Much more commonly, prisoners believed that if they failed to stand up for themselves when challenged, they risked being victimised by others. Comments by three prisoners illustrate this point:

Most prison fights aren't about being angry. They're about what other inmates will think of you if you don't fight.

You got to go for it - good hiding or not. It will go on and on if you don't stick up for yourself.

I don't like anybody trying to take the piss. In here, you can't get up and walk out. If you let one do it, the whole place will.

Prisoners' concerns about the risk of being victimised were justified. Edgar and O'Donnell (1998) found that one in three young offenders and one in five adult male prisoners had been assaulted at least once in the previous month. Insults and threats were even more frequent. But, in fact, being aggressive did not protect them. Using force against other inmates increased the risk that they themselves would be assaulted (Edgar and O'Donnell). Further, the Conflicts and Violence in Prison study demonstrates that prisoners were not necessarily right to infer that the other person was looking for a fight. Many of those who used aggressive force did not want to fight but felt they had no option.

The influence of the risk of victimisation on an inmate's decision to resort to violence should not be over-stated. It is one explanation amongst many. Three-quarters of our sample explained their use of violence without referring to a need to show toughness. Other reasons must be found for inmates' decisions to use aggressive force when responding to a conflict.

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situations. Prisoners concluded that their counterparts intended to intimidate them when they were subjected to threats, glaring or other behaviour, such as:

shouting: *"In here the macho attitude is shout loud, stick your chest out. He had that mentality."*

ridicule: *"This other guy was calling me a sheep-shagger, because I am from Wales. If I would have been alone with him, I would probably have laughed. But in front of everyone else I felt intimidated."*

harassment: *"They were ... pushing into me, giving me bad looks, walking the walk."*

The presence - or perception - of intimidation increases the likelihood of an aggressive response. Despite the common perception that intimidation is a problem mainly amongst young offenders, we found that all prisoners - especially adult males - expressed concern about being intimidated.

Exploitation

The fear of being exploited was part of a wider concern that another prisoner might take advantage in some way. Opportunities for getting the upper hand included jumping queues (for the phone, food, or a game), winning a verbal sparring match, assuming the right to give orders, showing superiority in sport or 'play-fighting' or taking another person's possessions.

Economic exploitation - for example, fraud or dishonest dealing - was seen by women prisoners as particularly unacceptable. In the women's prison we explored 40 disputes, 12 of which involved possible

exploitation. Eleven of the 12 ended in violence. As a young woman who assaulted a suspected cell thief explained:

"We're 100 girls [on this wing] and we always leave our doors open. It sounds silly fighting over tobacco, but you can't let it go without losing your respect. You wouldn't fight about it on the out, but we are not on the out. We're in jail."

As the prison context is shaped by material deprivations, danger and the threat of intimidation, the fear that someone might take advantage takes on special significance. The importance of interpreting another person's intentions is highlighted in the following vignettes:

Darwen (all inmates' names are fictitious) and Brough were playing pool. They bet on the outcome, but then fell into a dispute about who had won. Each threatened the other, and Darwen began to feel that Brough was gaining an advantage over him.

"He was trying to show me up in front of other people. He was in my face. It was what he was saying, 'You ain't getting shit!' I told him to get out of my face and he's still there, mocking me, like."

As a consequence, he attacked Brough with the pool cue.

A young offender, Lechlade, was angry that his neighbour played loud music late at night. He shouted out the window to complain, but Sunderland did not take his concerns seriously. When Lechlade finally insisted, Sunderland threatened him. As a result, Lechlade went to Sunderland's cell in the morning and assaulted him. Lechlade explained:

"Even though he thought he could take a liberty, I just ignored him. Then he pushed it too far and I had to break him up a bit. People take kindness for weakness in jail."

Summary

This article has sketched three areas in which prisoners' interpretations of their counterparts' intentions are mediated through the particular contexts of everyday life in prison. When the problem of prison violence is considered, the focus on 'violent people' diverts attention from the interactions that lead up to fights or assaults. Our 'conflict-centred approach' shows that prison violence can always be traced back to conflicts between prisoners and the interpretations each party makes about the situation. We need to explore the why - not just the who - and the how - not just the how many. These dimensions enhance our understanding of how violent situations arise and indicate possibilities for prevention.

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References:

Edgar, K. and O'Donnell, I. (1998) 'Assault in Prisons', *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 38: 635-650.

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