PRISON VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

Michael Braswell
Steven Dillingham
Reid Montgomery, Jr.

PRISON VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

Edited by

Michael Braswell
Steven Dillingham
Reid Montgomery, Jr.

PRISON VIOLENCE IN AMERICA

Cover Design by Ross Heck

This volume is dedicated to the Pennsylvania Prison Society which was instituted in 1787. All royalties from sales of this book will be donated to the Society.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

FOREWORD

Violence is a tragic part of life behind bars, just as it is a tragic part of life in the streets in many American cities. Yet, in many important ways, prison violence differs from the violence found beyond prison walls. In general, the violence within the prison city is more prevalent and serious than that of the outside city counterpart. Also, major differences are apparent in the three areas of (a) architectural design; (b) personalities and behaviors of inhabitants; and (c) type of activities, jobs, and programs available.

The prison as we know it today is typically designed by architects inclined toward duplicating the mistakes of the past. These architects are influenced by prison wardens, administrators, clients and politicians with traditional mind-sets. Architects in urban settings normally spend countless hours considering the mission or purpose of an envisioned structure, along with the behaviors of the occupants, prior to finalizing the design. Considerations such as open space, privacy, colors, lighting, acoustics, aesthetics and landscaping are examples of variables carefully evaluated. For example, when university buildings are constructed, it is fair to assume institutional purposes and the needs of those residing in its halls are reflected in the chosen design. This process, however, is not typically found in prison construction. When prisons are designed, the basic needs of privacy or a safe and therapeutic environment are a realtively low priority. In fact, architects use yesterday's standards in modeling prisons and utilize outmoded features which inevitably neglect both occupant needs and institutional goals. As a result of such faulty planning, the serious mistakes of the past are repeated, and the violence associated with such environments is magnified.

Of the many factors to be considered in correctional design, one that always surfaces as a contributor to institutional violence is that of insufficient prison space. Prisons are usually designed and built with extremely limited

spacing, despite the fact that its residents are impacted by this environment every hour of every day. The tension that results from such close confinement certainly contributes to prison life. This type of environment significantly differs from that of a community or city when instances of violence or strife occur. For instance, if a police officer or correctional officer arrives upon a scene of mayhem, either may have to rely upon force to quell the disturbance. But, after the dust has settled, the disputants in the city are able to retreat to their homes or separate areas with opportunities for avoiding further confrontations. In prisons, however, the combatants continuously interact and live in close proximity, which can continue to engender feelings of intense discomfort and hatred.

Another explosive factor in this formula for violence is the inmate personality. Most violence and riots take place in maximum security institutions. The populations of these prisons are inordinately composed of individuals who have experienced violence both as victims and perpetrators. Recent studies indicate that lengthier sentences and higher levels of serious criminal behavior are creating a "society of lifers," whose institutional behaviors are becoming more and more difficult to manage. The potential of explosive violence resulting from this trend is increasingly being recognized.

Boredom and the absence of meaningful employment, educational, and vocational opportunities are also contributing factors to prison violence and riots. American prisons are unable to achieve high levels of meaningful employment for their inmates. Programs aimed at preventing violence by providing beneficial and productive programs have proven difficult to institute by financially disadvantaged administrators. For instance, it has been easy to purchase firearms or to rewire an electric chair, yet extremely difficult to fund programs aimed at changing personalities and behaviors. Building inmate self-esteem or raising educational aspirations have likewise received little or no attention. The consequence has been the abandonment by the inmates of one of the most important control functions of an institution—HOPE. As a result, antiquated prisons packed with populations of violent individuals lacking in productive activities or programs and devoid of hope pose serious threats to institutional safety and tranquility.

Is there a way to manage American prisons with these limitations and still reduce the potential for violence? While the solutions and alternatives are not always obvious, the answer is an unequivocal, "yes". Such improvements will require major changes in the management and administration of correctional institutions, and necessitate an improved understanding of correctional dilemmas, along with the support of the community as a whole.

Correctional officials and employees who can identify, understand, and resolve problems which instigate violent behavior are critical. The fear of violence and riots can dominate the thinking of a warden to the point where he/she contributes to its occurrence. The warden whose total effort is directed toward outmoded security measures for yesterday's crisis is in fact feeding the fire of violence. There have been documented accounts of some annual mini-riots stemming from the fact that prisoners and administrators have come to expect them as regular annual events. Dedicated workers should be able to reduce the risk of such events through proper and insightful planning and the implementation of recognized preventive measures. Administrators must realize that the supervisory techniques successfully employed in prison industries may be utilized in other areas. They typically involve focusing attention upon the individual, properly structuring incentives toward desired goals and the achievement of climates conducive to desirable behaviors. It should be recognized that serious personnel problems will continue to exist until employees have the requisite supervisory skills required of their positions. The recruitment, selection and promotion of qualified professionals into positions of authority are essential for coping with increasingly violent and disruptive behaviors.

Change is also an important factor which must be understood by administrators in managing their prisons. The casual and hasty promulgation and acceptance of rule changes may cause ripples of discontent that soon increase in magnitude. Each time a new rule or policy change emerges, employees and inmates are threatened by perceptions of how their lives may be impacted. The thinking warden uses the planning process to document the need for changes and to reassure those affected that the consequences will not be adverse to their interests. Changes should be announced in advance so that potential obstacles may be identified and appropriate adjustments made.

Qualities of leadership cannot be overestimated in managing prisons. People will follow a leader who has consistent policies and follows them without bias, and is willing to be flexible or depart from rigid enforcement when an exception or compassionate departure is in order. In far too many institutions those subjected to regulations feel that they may not be treated the same as the neighboring cell mate, or in a manner reasonable under the circumstances. Effective leadership can avoid such pitfalls.

Administrators must also focus their attention upon the primary client of the correctional system--the inmate. Often the administrative office structures an organizational chart of his/her employees which only reflects paid employees and not the inmates who are, in actuality, the primary actors within the system. Administrative planning must therefore consider the inmate's needs and perspectives if prison operations are to prove successful.

Communication is another concern that is frequently mentioned in corrections, but rarely understood or systematically developed within correctional operations. All too often, the various constituent groups of the organization fail to trust or talk openly with each other. This fragmentation and distrust frequently solidifies, fed by the recalcitrance of competing officers, middle managers, inmate groups and others. Wardens must seek to avoid such stalemates by refusing to remain isolated in the front office and by actively managing, measuring and leading the institution. A prison administrator who communicates with his entire organization and regularly deals with surfacing problems is more likely to avoid prison disturbances through early detection and diffusion practices.

A topic related to improved organizational communications is that of participatory management. Within every institution, inmates and employees have a need to feel that they have some voice in institutional management. People who are allowed to participate in management decisions will take more active roles within the organization. Individuals who do not feel a part of the organization will tend to criticize and work against such systems. By effectively delegating and sharing responsibilities, workers will learn that success in institutional control will be enhanced. Often the best ideas for improvement emanate from the individuals closest to the problems. Corrections administrators must seek and adapt the proven management techniques of private

industry, such as "work simplification" (utilized by Texas Instruments and Ford Motor Company), to bring an organization together.

Positive motivation is an additional concern to organizations in need of improvement. Most correctional systems are viewed by society as failures, and such perceptions can easily permeate the organizations themselves. Wardens too frequently permit the negative forces in their organization to dominate its operation and direction. The effective warden will develop programs that promote positive attitudes regarding the institution, leaving the few disgruntled members without a following. It should be remembered that prison disturbances require more than just a few followers or participants to develop into full-fledged riots.

Finally, some consensus concerning a reasonable, rational goal in corrections by politicians, professionals and the public is essential if further progress toward reducing violence is desired. A working consensus on the mission to be served by prisons would obviously facilitate their operation and management. Recognizing that punishment is indeed the crux of current imprisonment policies dictates that attention must be devoted to the realization that past prison practices have frequently made inmates and releasees even more violent. Will correctional staff and society as a whole have to continue suffering these ills? Does punishment really require the deprivation of an individual's personhood, self-worth, or even his or her life?

In answering the tough questions of modern prison reform, the issue of prison violence remains central. The prison of tomorrow will probably continue to seek punishment through confinement. Still, if changes promoting the safety of all who reside or work within the walls of these institutions can be instituted, the benefits will eventually extend to society as well. The amalgam of factors mentioned here and those discussed in the following text will hopefully provide a working formula for reducing future prison violence.

Ellis McDougall

Distinguished Professor of Criminal Justice and former Commissioner of Corrections in South Carolina, Connecticut, Georgia, Mississippi, and Arizona.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Erich Fromm (1973) in his classic work on human destructiveness suggested that "malignant" aggression is specific to the human species, while not being present in most other mammals. One might suggest that there is no ongoing social environment where such malignant aggression is better represented than in many of today's prisons. Whether one is talking about the extreme examples of the Santa Fe and Attica riots or the more sporadic incidents of various kinds of assaults in most other prisons, there does often appear to be a malignant dimension of aggression and violence inherent in the physical and psychological world of prisons. The situational dynamics that are present in prison environments seem to provide a fertile atmosphere for bringing out the worst in both the keepers and the kept. Zimbardo's (1975) simulation study utilizing students as guards and prisoners emphasized in a rather dramatic way the power of the situational aspects of prison. "Good" students acting increasingly abusive as guards and "normal" student prisoners having to be removed from the study because of extreme depression offered ample demonstrations. Zimbardo concluded ". . . in the contest between the forces of good men and evil situations, the situation triumphed (p. 47)."

Prison violence continues to be a pervasive problem in America's correctional systems and poses a substantial challenge to contemporary judicial/correctional processes. Lieber (in McNamara, 1982) quotes a judge in stating, "We had Attica in 1971, New Mexico nine years later, and next year, it could be Indiana. God knows, haven't we learned anything? (p. 105)." The judge's response accurately notes the frustration that many citizens and officials are sensitive to regarding not only the problems associated with prison violence, but with the failure of the system of justice in general. It often seems that we, as the public, want both our retributive "pound-of-flesh" from the offender as well as a "corrected" individual at the end of the subject's period of incarceration. It appears

unlikely that the two expectations can be accomplished on the same level of priority, if at all. This seems to be particularly true given the emotional needs satisfied by retribution and the requirements of reason necessary to increase the system's odds of being able to "correct" its charges.

Violent episodes victimize nonviolent as well as violent offenders, as evidence in the New Mexico State Prison riot where 14 of the 33 men murdered were nonviolent offenders who did not have to be housed in a maximum-security prison (McNamara, 1982). The public and political response to such violence is typical from the perspective of what Sherman & Hawkins (1981) call the "Crisis Mentality." This perspective is inclined to shift critical policy debate and decision toward short-term, quick-fix solutions which may do more damage than good in the long-run.

This text will examine the topic of prison violence from a variety of perspectives, and attempt to offer new information and ideas on the topic in view of recent developments and trends. The aim of this approach is three-fold: (a) to advance current knowledge on many of the selected issues surrounding prison violence and inmate misconduct; (b) to provide policy options and remedial measures for implementing more effective prevention and coping strategies; and (c) the promotion of further attention and research on issues relating to growing public and professional concerns.

The readings selected for this text reflect an amalgam of major concerns associated with prison violence in America. As the following brief descriptions indicate, future remedies and reforms need to be based upon a better understanding of the nature and dynamics of prison violence, the conditions conducive to reduced levels of violence, and the attainment of improved management practices and treatment/educational techniques.

In "An Essay on Prison Violence," Lee Bowker discusses a typology for studying violence that incorporates various forms of behavioral control, the interplay of instrumental and expressive goals, and the importance of roles and power relationships. This typology is useful in categorizing the forms of direct and indirect control which exist in most prison environments. By focusing upon the instrumental and expressive dimensions of prison violence, a closer insight may be gained into the rational and nonrational forces that shape violent behavior. Finally, the concentration upon power

differentials associated with institutional roles and the emerging nature of correctional staff orientations, serves to portray significant changes which are occurring with correctional systems.

Steve Dillingham and Reid Montgomery provide an overview of the costs, causal theories and key concerns related to prison riots in their article "Prison Riots: A Corrections' Nightmare Since 1774." By identifying the nature and importance of staff and inmate attitudes, the authors support the design and implementation of preventive and diagnostic techniques. These innovations are deemed critical for effective management in violence-prone institutions.

Hans Toch synthesizes existing literature on prison violence in formulating a more comprehensive explanation of the phenomenon. His article, "Social Climate and Prison Violence," promotes the view that the interplay of personal dispositions with situational stimuli better describes the emergence of violent behavior than the traditional emphasis placed upon either of the singular variables. A set of realistic recommendations follow his insightful analysis.

"The Anatomy of Another Prison Riot" by Israel Barak-Glantz examines the history of prison riots and addresses many of the evolving concerns and causal elements associated with rioting. Barak-Glantz concentrates on the social organizational characteristics of prisons in his analysis, and utilizes the correctional system of Michigan as a case study. His lessons prove important to policy-makers in dealing with both general and specific problem areas.

Sue Mahan's essay, "An 'Orgy of Brutality' at Attica and the 'Killing Ground' at Santa Fe: A Comparison of Prison Riots," compares the tragic occurrence of two major prison riots and investigates similarities and differences. The comparison serves both the purposes of factually describing the elements of violent behavior and of defining different levels of responsibility. The case study further illustrates and provides insight to the "human dimensions" of prison anxiety and violence.

While prison riots are frequently the most noticed and publicized forms of prison violence, Daniel Lockwood examines the importance of focusing upon specific forms of violence, such as sexual harassment. In "Issues in Prison Sexual Violence," the author observes the less visible forms of punishment (i.e., sexual harassment) may indeed have some

serious results and dysfunctional consequences. Many of the existing myths associated with prison sexual behaviors are critiqued, and realistic recommendations presented.

Sentencing practices have often been assumed to be associated with prison misconduct, Martin Forst and James Brady study this relationship in their article "The Effects of Determinate Sentencing on Inmate Misconduct in Prison." Their research on this topic raises questions about the impact of determinate sentences on inmate misconduct. The implications of this research serve to identify additional factors (e.g., prison overcrowding) which may be added to the list of compounding variables, and raise new issues concerning sentencing reforms.

The paper by David Farrington and Christopher Nuttal, although based on English prison research, appears to have substantial application for the American prison experience. In "Prison Size, Overcrowding, Prison Violence, and Recidivism," the authors highlight the dysfunctional consequences of prison overcrowding. They attempt to establish that prison size is not a direct or singular cause of violent behaviors, and that recidivism rates may be linked to the problems of overcrowding. The findings of this study appear to bolster recent American research (e.g., 1983 recidivism study in Massachusetts) that associates higher rates of recidivism with long-term confinement and overcrowded prisons.

"Empty Bars: Violence and the Crisis of Meaning in the Prison," by Peter Scharf, argues that the reality of modern prison policies and practices is the absence of a treatment philosophy and policy which matches resources with goals. Hence, the malaise of the American prison system is largely attributable to the failure of correctional leaders in defining rational goals and devising new metaphors to replace the unsound principles and practices of the past. This call for new vision and leadership in corrections appears particularly critical in view of the nation's frequently unpredictable and unstable political climate regarding correctional and other criminal justice issues.

John Conrad reconsiders the experience of incarceration from the late forties to the present in "The Society of Lifers." Quite predictably, Conrad pinpoints certain major transformations in prison life which deserve the attention of both prison management and reformists. The reforms needed in modern penology, argues Conrad, should promote strong community controls rather than unrealistic utopian desires.

Finally, Michael Braswell targets the need for developing effective teaching and training techniques in dealing with the subject of prison violence. In his essay, "Understanding the Dynamics of Prison Violence: An Experiential Model for Teaching and Training," Braswell highlights the substantial benefits of experiential case studies in educational and training programs which address prison violence. As the problems depicted in the case studies illustrate, decisions regarding prison violence involve interpersonal skills, ethical and professional judgments, and time/resource constraints which may be enhanced through experiential learning.

REFERENCES

Fromm, E. (1973) **The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness.** New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

McNamara, D. (1982) **Criminal Justice 82/83.** Guilford, CT: The Dushkin Publishing Group, Inc.

Sherman, M. and Hawkins, G. (1981) **Imprisonment in America.** Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Zimbardo, P. (1975) "Transforming experimental research into advocacy for social change." In M. Deutsch and H. Hornstein (eds.), **Applying Social Psychology: Implications for Research, Practice, and Training.** Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.