

Assaults on Staff in WA Prisons

Background

Prisons are a difficult environment. They contain troubled individuals, held against their will, with many having a history of violence.¹ Prison officers are responsible for exerting authority upon these involuntary held individuals, with this relationship therefore fraught with potential danger.² A large body of research has examined violence in prisons, however the vast majority of research has focused on prisoner on prisoner violence rather than prisoner on staff violence. This may be due to prisoner on prisoner violence being more common, with a United States study finding that 1 in 5 prisoners reported being the victim of assault.³ Prisoner on prisoner sexual violence has been a particular area of focus in the United States' literature.

Assaults against staff, especially serious assaults, are thankfully rare according to international research. The Texas Department of Criminal Justice reported that only 1.4 per cent of prisoner disciplinary convictions in the state were due to serious staff assaults.⁴ In another study conducted in the United States, a survey of prisoners found that 4 per cent had assaulted prison staff in the past. Research from Australia on prison violence, whether against other prisoners or against staff, is noticeably absent. Violence against prison staff has been widely reported in the media, and has resulted in mandatory imprisonment laws, introduced in 2009, for assault occasioning bodily harm against prison staff. This was extended to include youth custodial officers in 2013.

Researchers have attempted to explain violence in prison from a multitude of perspectives, examining individual variables, management practices, situational characteristics, and the interaction between all of these factors. A number of individual risk factors for committing assault have been identified by the literature, including:

- Younger Age⁵
- Being Male⁶
- Serving a longer sentence⁷
- Psychological Characteristics (e.g. aggression)⁸
- Mental Health Issues⁹

¹ Homel, R. & Thomson, C. (2005). Causes and prevention of violence in prisons. In Sean O'Toole & Simon Eyland (Eds.), *Corrections criminology* (pp. 101-108). Sydney: Hawkins Press

² Hepburn, J. R. (1989). Prison guards as agents of social control. In L. Goodstein & D. L. MacKenzie (Eds.), *The American prison: Issues in research and policy* (pp. 191-206). New York: Plenum.

³ Individual characteristics related to prison violence: A critical review of the literature. Schenk, Allison M.; Fremouw, William J. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 2012, Vol.17(5), pp.430-442

⁴ Texas Department of Criminal Justice (May, 2010). *Emergency Action Center select statistics: April 2010*. Huntsville: Author.

⁵ Inmate Assaults on Prison Staff : A Multilevel Examination of an Overlooked Form of Prison Violence, Karen. F. Lahm. *The Prison Journal* 2009 89: 131

⁶ Serious assaults on prison staff: A descriptive analysis Jon R. Sorensen a, Mark D. Cunningham b, Mark P. Vigen c, S.O. Woods. *Journal of Criminal Justice* 39 (2011) 143–150.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*

Being of African-American ethnicity was another frequently cited predictor of violence in American studies,¹⁰ however it is unknown whether Aboriginal Australians are similarly over-represented in prison assaults.

Research has shifted from a focus on the physical characteristics of prisons (for example blind spots, security cameras), to paying more attention to situational characteristics and management practices. Some promising though not proven examples of situational methods to decrease assaults include:¹¹

- Reducing overcrowding
- Increasing prisoner control over their environment
- Increasing the proportion of female staff
- Increasing the heterogeneity of prisoner ages in a unit
- Increasing the staff to prisoner ratio

Findings were sometimes contradictory between studies and given the lack of Australian research there is some concern that these findings are not generalizable to the Western Australian context.

Purpose of the review

The purpose of this review will be to identify the factors underlying staff assaults in the Western Australian prison system. The individual and prison level risk factors of staff assault will be identified, and the effectiveness of the Department's strategies to reduce the frequency of staff assaults will be assessed.

Terms of Reference

- What are the common risk factors and triggers for staff assault in prisons?
- Are individual and prison risk factors appropriately identified and mitigated?
- Does the Department's system of reporting critical incidents align with consequences that can be imposed on those committing staff assault?

⁹ Inmate Assaults on Prison Staff: A Multilevel Examination of an Overlooked Form of Prison Violence, Karen. F. Lahm. *The Prison Journal*, 2009 89: 131

¹⁰ Serious assaults on prison staff: A descriptive analysis. Jon R. Sorensen a, Mark D. Cunningham b, Mark P. Vigen c, S.O. Woods. *Journal of Criminal Justice* 39 (2011) 143–150.

¹¹ Wortley, R. (1996). "Guilt, Shame and Situational Crime Prevention." *The Politics and Practice of Situational Crime Prevention*, Crime Prevention Studies Vol. 5. editor. Ross Homel. Monsey, New York: Criminal Justice Press.