# Violence in Prisons: The Influence of Regime Factors

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Abstract: Violence in British jails is increasing. Explanations of this rise are often couched in terms of the psychological characteristics of the perpetrators. This paper argues that the characteristics of the regime have a significant role in the etiology of violent incidents. The evidence relating to violent incidents in prisons, special hospitals and secure units is reviewed. It is concluded that regimes which allow more inmate participation, increased contact with the outside world and which are operated by more highly trained prison officers, are likely to have a positive effect on the rising tide of violence in British jails.

Violence is increasing in British prisons. Dramatic evidence in support of this contention comes from the spate of serious disturbances, including roof-top demonstrations, riots and hostage-takings apparently triggered

FIGURE 1

Number of Hostage Takings, England and Wales
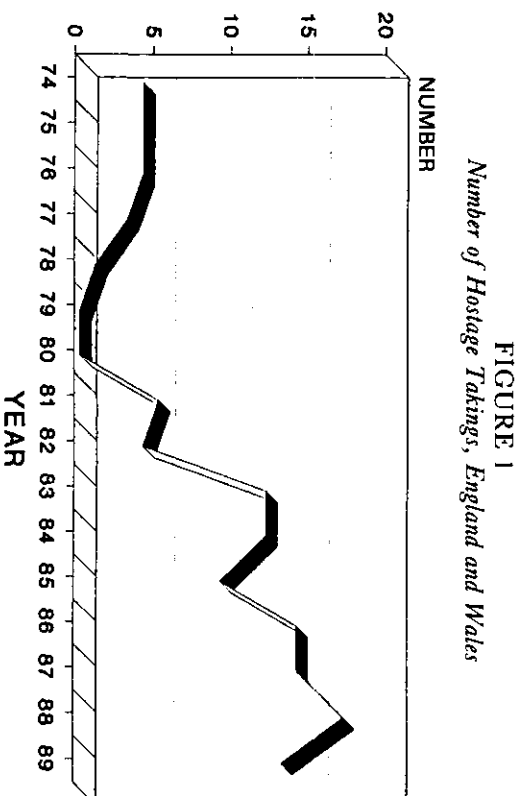
(Source: from personal communications)

by the riot at Strangeways prison. These events in the English prison system parallel events which occurred in the Scottish prison system in the late 1980s. Statistical evidence indicates that the prisons in England and Wales have experienced a significant rise in the number of hostage-takings in the eighties (see *Figure 1*).

While riots and hostage takings are the most public side of violence in prisons they are:
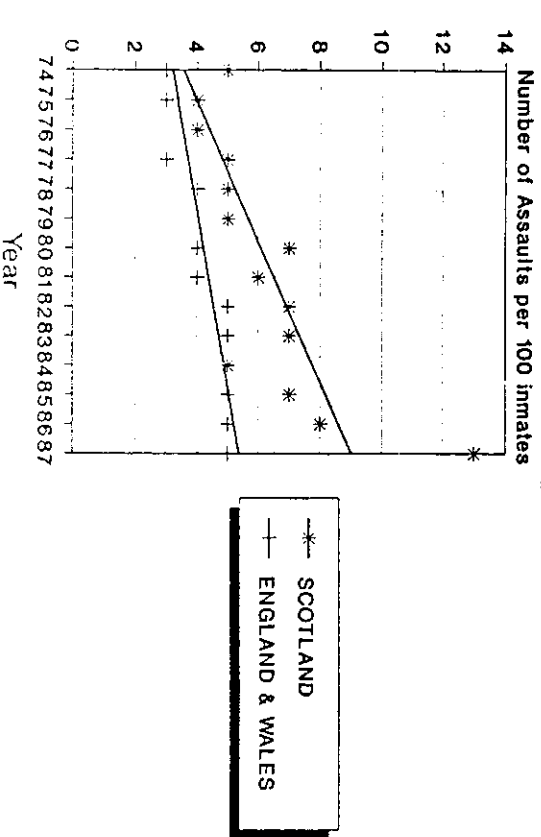
... the most visible of what is, in effect, a daily struggle to maintain reasonable relationships in intrinsically unreasonable situations. (McDermott and King 1988, p. 372)

There can be little doubt that these public events are underpinned by a substantial rise in the rate of assaults within the adult male populations of these prison systems (see *Figure 2*).

For example, within the Scottish male adult population the mean rate of assaults doubled between the mid-seventies and the mid-eighties. There is further evidence suggestive of a rise in aggressive behaviour. In a study of a local Scottish prison using the AIMS procedure of Quay (1983) 28%, or around 270 prisoners, were identified as behaving in an 'Aggressive-Hostile' manner (Cooke, Walker and Gardiner 1990) (see *Figure 3*).

'This insidious rise in the level of interpersonal aggression and violence in British prisons will be the focus of this paper. It is likely, however, that there will be some degree of commonality between the causes of riots and the causes of assaults, thus, where deemed relevant the literature on riots will be alluded to.
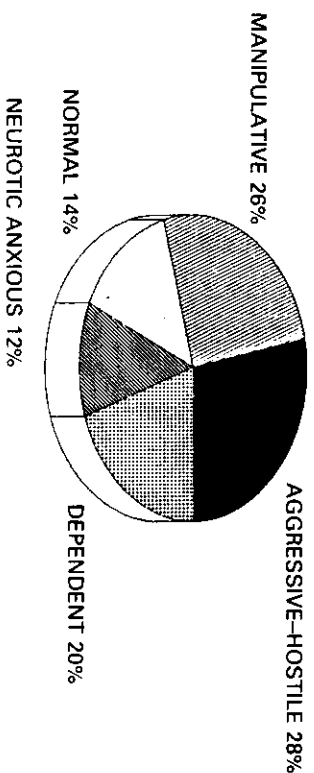
FIGURE 2

Rate of Assaults, Scotland, England and Wales

Number of Assaults per 100 inmates

✳	SCOTLAND
+	ENGLAND & WALES

14 —
12 —
10 —
8 —
6 —
4 —
2 —
0 —

74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87

Year

Adult males

FIGURE 3

Disturbed Behaviour in Barlinnie Prison, May 1988

Distribution of AIMS Categories

MANIPULATIVE 26%   AGGRESSIVE–HOSTILE 28%

NORMAL 14%   DEPENDENT 20%

NEUROTIC ANXIOUS 12%

AIMS PROCEDURE

The Aetiology of Violent Behaviour

A proper response to the problem of violence in prison requires a full understanding of the circumstances which produce violent behaviour. Violent incidents result from the interaction of psychological character-istics and situational characteristics. Traditionally, psychiatrists and psychologists have focussed on the 'fixed' psychological characteristics of the aggressor – psychiatric diagnosis, personality and dangerousness – and laid little emphasis on situational characteristics, when attempting to predict or prevent violent behaviour. Megargee (1982) has provided a valuable taxonomy of violent offenders which encapsulated many of the psychological processes underpinning violent episodes; he described six types of violent behaviour:

(1) 'Normal' well-socialised individuals exposed to extreme provocation.
(2) Individuals committed to a violent life-style, members of a sub-culture which rewards violent behaviour.
(3) Individuals where the control over violent feelings is diminished by functional or organic disorder.
(4) Overcontrolled individuals who are inhibited about expressing violent feelings whose violent behaviour can be extreme when the inhibition against violence breaks down.
(5) Individuals who have a high internal level of aggression or anger due to frustration, revenge, jealousy and other causes.
(6) Individuals who use violence in an instrumental way to achieve goals other than injury of a victim.

All these types of offenders will be found in prisons. Taxonomies of this type are a valuable contribution towards understanding prison violence, however, they only tell part of the story.

Situational factors – characteristics of the milieu in which the violent incident takes place rather than characteristics of the individual (Megargee 1982) – including the nature of the prison regime, the behaviour of the victim, the presence or otherwise of onlookers have a significant influence. Situational factors are often ignored in accounts of prison violence. For example, the traditional approach of focussing on the psychological characteristics of the aggressor has been adopted by the Scottish Office in their analysis of the recent disturbances in Scottish prisons. In 'Assessment and control' (SHHD 1988) it is argued:

It suggests that rather than looking to changes in the way in which the Prison Service as a whole goes about its task . . . a more productive approach may be to concentrate attention on the individual personality and 'repertoire' of particularly disruptive and violent inmates. (para. 2.11)

Unfortunately, this approach is unlikely to be productive. Although there appears to be a general association between psychiatric pathology and disruptiveness (Toch and Adams 1986), there appears to be little relationship – for individual cases – between measures of personality, psychiatric diagnosis and other psychological characteristics and future violent behaviour (for example Steadman and Cocozza 1974; Thornberry and Jacoby 1979; Steadman and Morrissey 1981; Monahan 1981; Palmstierna and Wistedt 1990).

Interestingly, the position of the Scottish Prison Service as enunciated in 'Assessment and control' (SHHD 1988) is at variance with the position presented by the Research and Advisory Group on the Long-Term Prison System (1987):

Difficult prison behaviour is a function of many factors in addition to the prisoner's own character; these factors can include, on occasion, inappropriate prison regimes or mistaken handling of prisoners by staff. Except perhaps in the case of those prisoners whose behaviour is the product of mental disturbance or abnormality, all our experience suggests that most 'troublesome prisoners' present control problems only at particular times or in particular contexts. (p. 11)

This position, with its emphasis on 'particular times or particular contexts', is closer to contemporary theories of violent behaviour. There is increasing evidence that situational factors – in this context, regime factors – have importance. For example, Felson and Steadman (1983), in a study of 159 incidents of homicide and assault, demonstrated that the outcome of an aggressive incident was not predetermined by the psychological characteristics of the perpetrator, but was influenced by situational characteristics. In this study, victims who behaved in an aggressive manner and victims who displayed a weapon were particularly likely to be killed.

In this paper it is argued that our understanding of violent behaviour can only be enhanced by shifting the emphasis of our analysis from psychological characteristics of the violent offender to characteristics of regimes.

Refining our understanding of the role of prison regimes in violent episodes has four major advantages. Firstly, we may change prisoners'

behaviour to a greater extent by modifying their environments than we can by attempting to modify their psychological functioning (Clarke 1985). Secondly, many aggressive individuals will not co-operate with treatment, and thus, modifying situational determinants of aggressive behaviour remains the only means of reducing the probability of violent incidents. Thirdly, it may enhance attempts to predict violent behaviour: attempts based on psychological individual characteristics have been notably unsuccessful (Monahan and Klassen 1982). Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, it should make prisons safer, not only for all those who work within them, but also for all those who are incarcerated within them.

The Influence of Regime Factors

This paper reviews the evidence that there are situational determinants of violent behaviour which can be identified; studies from a variety of institutional settings including psychiatric hospitals, secure units and prisons are considered. The literature pertaining to psychiatric hospitals and secure units has relevance to the prison population both because many of the problems are shared but also because there may be a significant overlap in the populations of these institutions. Scott (1973) noted:

Prisons, hospitals and reception centres for vagrants and the homeless are basically asylums which to a considerable extent share a stage army of handicapped persons. When mental hospitals are full, prisons are relatively empty, and the present day scene suggests that the converse is equally true. (p. 55)

A diverse range of regime factors is important, but perhaps the core of features of any regime are the characteristics of the staff who deliver the regime to the prisoners. Research has shown that the four most important elements in this area are staff-inmate communication, staff training, staff experience and staff morale.

Staff-Inmate Communication

The quality of staff-inmate communication appears to have a critical role in reducing violent behaviour. Gunn et al. (1978) argued that good staff-prisoner communication has an important influence towards less violence in Grendon Underwood prison. This is paralleled by research into non-situational characteristics. In this study, victims who behaved in an aggressive manner and victims who displayed a weapon were particularly
Zeeman et al. (1977) analysed the circumstances leading to severe prison disturbances; they provided empirical evidence that alienation – the breakdown of staff-inmate communication – was a powerful determinant of prison disturbances.

Davies and Burgess (1988a) demonstrated a reduced rate of violent offences while the prison was under the management of a particular governor; they attempted to explain the processes which underlay this observation. They attributed the reduction in violence to changes made

by this governor in particular, the introduction of staff-inmate committees and meetings. It is likely that these meetings served to reduce the overall level of tension in the prison by allowing prisoners to air their grievances in an appropriate way. Prisoners had less opportunity to ruminate about their grievances and, thereby, the tension which often leads to aggressive behaviour was avoided. These groups provided a channel for the short-circuiting and defusing of aggressive feelings.

Love and Ingram (1982) examined strategies for reducing the frequency of prison disturbances based on the experience of the Federal Correctional Institution at Butner. The lower than expected rate of prisoner-on-prisoner violence, as compared to equivalent prison establishments, was attributed to the approach to the management of prisoners which staff were forced to adopt:

Without some of the traditional mechanisms of coercion to exercise control over prisoners, staff at Butner FCI are disposed to a more objective and equal treatment of the prisoners, i.e. towards a more 'professional' orientation. (p. 409)

Within the United Kingdom, perhaps the strongest evidence of the impact of good staff-inmate communication comes from the Barlinnie Special Unit. This Unit was established in 1973 to contain some of the most violent individuals in the Scottish Prisons, only two assaults have taken place in the Unit since its inception (Cooke 1989). Some commentators (for example, West 1980; Watmore 1987; Fitzgerald 1987) have argued that staff-prisoner relationships are of central importance in the success of the Special Unit:

What made the Unit unlike any other place was the way staff and prisoners were allowed and encouraged to sit down and talk together. This was the single most important factor of the Unit. (p. 11)

A decade prior to this Boyle (1977), perhaps the best known ex-inmate of the Special Unit, noted:

The Special Unit . . . demonstrated the general proposition that relations between staff and prisoners are at the heart of the whole prison system, and that control and security flow from getting that relationship right. (Fitzgerald 1987, p. 149)

Within the Special Unit 'community meetings' serve as an important focus for staff-inmate communication. In particular, these meetings provide a safe setting for the expression of aggressive feelings. Community meetings allow angry prisoners to discharge their aggressive feelings verbally rather than use their habitual physical mode of expressing aggression. Of great importance is the fact that prisoners can call a meeting at any time, and thus they have immediate access to a forum where grievances can be discussed and perhaps resolved. As Davies (1982) emphasised, grievances should be dealt with quickly if aggression is to be avoided.

Good staff-inmate relationships have long been recognised as an important element in maintaining good order. The Inspector of Prisons for Scotland (1844) noted:

. . . in some prisons an unusual degree of good conduct is induced, and the number of punishments kept low, by the personal influence of the officers, and by their care in reasoning with prisoners before resorting to punishment. (quoted in Coyle 1987)

Thus, this emphasis on good staff-inmate relationships is not new: it merely requires reiteration and the structures to achieve it.

Staff Experience and Training

The level of staff experience and training can influence the amount of violence observed in a prison or a secure hospital. Hodginson et al. (1985) demonstrated that nurses in the training grades are assaulted more often than expected while nursing assistants are assaulted less often than expected. Davies and Burgess (1988b) found parallel results with prison officers. Officers with less experience were more likely to be assaulted than officers with more experience irrespective of their age. It has been argued that older prisoners are more likely to assault younger officers because they do not like taking orders from younger officers; this was not substantiated by this study. Length of experience was the critical factor.

Why is experience important? In both studies it was argued that the experienced staff adopted a different approach to prisoners as compared with the inexperienced staff. It appeared that those in the training grades, or those with less experience, were assaulted more often because they were less circumspect and more confronting. It may be the case that lack of experience may make prison officers and nurses less competent at observing and judging the mood of prisoners or patients.

Fortunately, these are skills which can be learned, not just through experience, but also through training. Infantino and Musingo (1985) demonstrated that assaults and injuries amongst nursing staff trained in aggression control techniques — verbal de-escalation skills and physical 'control and restraint' techniques — were much reduced. Only one trained staff member was assaulted compared with nearly half of those who were not trained.

Staff Morale

The morale of staff can influence the aggressive behaviour of those in their charge. Lion et al. (1976) argued that poor staff morale and inter-staff conflicts are a salient feature in violence 'epidemics' and may have effects on small units and wards. Kingdon and Bakewell (1988), in evaluating the level and causes of aggressive behaviour in a psychiatric unit, indicated that staff morale is 'fundamentally important' in ensuring that the level of assaults is minimised. They suggest that morale can be maintained and enhanced if staff feel supported, in an unambiguous way, by senior nursing and medical staff.

It is difficult to provide systematic evidence of the role of staff morale in the onset of violent incidents in small regimes, however, the author's clinical observation of the Barlinnie Special Unit suggests that the most

recent of the two assaults in the Unit history came at a time when staff morale was particularly low at this time, staff were feeling alienated from the prison administration. As Lion et al. (1976) noted, violence amongst inmates of small units often reflects staff splitting and dissension. Mahony (1984) studied the effects which a 31-day strike had on the operation of Bathurst gaol, he noted that inmates became antagonistic towards the prison officers because they felt that they were pawns in somebody else's battle. These feelings of antagonism led to both staff and inmates retreating from each other.

Visitors

It is not only the quality of relationships between prisoners and officers which is important but also the quality of relationships between prisoners and their outside visitors. A potent ingredient in King and McDermott's (in press) recipe for prison trouble is poor facilities to maintain family ties:

Say that you wish to encourage family ties through visits and telephone – but make sure that visits take place in circumstances where no meaningful contact is possible, don't provide facilities for children, and don't provide 'phones or time for prisoners to make even booked calls. (p. 3)

Glaser (1984) argued that recidivism may be reduced by maximising the contact between prisoners and non-criminal persons from without the prison. Access to visitors may have other positive benefits. Units such as Bathurst and the Barlinnie Special Unit allow prisoners to have visits seven days a week with no limit being placed on either the duration or frequency of these visits. Whatmore (1987) indicated that personal visitors can act both as a significant control over violent behaviour and a stimulus for change:

Staff have no doubt that frequent contact with specific personal visitors has had both a stabilising and maturing effect upon a number of inmates. The fact that an inmate's behaviour might be discussed by staff with appropriate visitors has had the positive effect of bringing the incomer's personal influence to bear on specific personal problems. (p. 257)

Crowding

Overcrowding has been implicated in violent incidents in both secure hospitals and prisons. Megargee (1976) and Nacci et al. (1977) found that violent behaviour within prison settings was inversely related to the amount of living space available to each prisoner. Dooley (1986) attributed the increase in assaults on Sunday to a higher than normal patient density in recreational areas on that day. Other researchers have failed to identify an association between density and violent incidents; Ditchfield (in press) in his comprehensive review argues that a relationship probably exists between crowding and discipline problems but that it is not always detected because it is mediated by a range of inmate and regime factors

Crowding may influence aggression in a variety of ways: the inability to control or avoid unwanted interaction or stimulation, fear and the lack of any means for maintaining personal identity, may all contribute to the effect of crowding. In overcrowded conditions staff may be unable to protect individual prisoners from a major pain of confinement – being with other prisoners.

It's not only the number of prisoners in a particular wing that is important but also the mix of prisoners. Quay (1983) developed a classification system which uses prison officer's observations of prisoner's behaviour to classify prisoners into one of five types; 'Aggressive-Hostile', 'Manipulative', 'Normal', 'Dependent' and 'Neurotic-Anxious'. The first two groups – the 'heavies' – represent the predators while the second two groups – the 'lights' – represent the prey. Given the differences in their behaviour, Quay argued that prisoners should be separated and placed in different types of regimes. For example, he argued that staff should treat inmates in the first two groups ('Heavies') in a no-nonsense, by the rules manner. Those in group three ('Normal') should be treated in a 'Hands off', direct only as needed fashion. Finally, those in groups four and five ('Lights') should be treated in a supportive and highly verbal manner.

Quay (1983) reported that the rate of inmate-staff and inmate-inmate assaults dropped significantly in a large maximum-security penitentiary during the four years after inmates were separated on the basis of this classification. This study provides suggestive evidence that there are certain 'toxic mixes' of prisoners and that concentration rather than dispersal of 'difficult' prisoners may reduce the level of prison violence.

Quay's (1983) work may explain an apparent contradiction in the literature. Authors such as Glaser (1984), Whatmore (1987) and Robson (1989) suggest that prisoners who are living in smaller groups are less likely to engage in offences against prison discipline. This view is at variance with the analyses carried out by Megargee (1976, 1977) which suggests that it is not size of prison population per se which is important, but rather, the social density. Farrington and Nuttall (1980), on reviewing the literature, concluded that there was no empirical evidence to support the view that prisoners in large prisons were more likely to engage in violent behaviour than prisoners in smaller prisons. Their findings may apply to the generality of prisoners but not to the sub-group known as 'difficult' prisoners: bigger prisons tend to have different types of prisoners than smaller prisons. As Whatmore (1987) and Robson (1989) indicate, the management of even the most difficult prisoners can be achieved in small groups. Small units allow prisoners and staff to develop relationships based on greater tolerance and trust.

Stimulation and Frustration

The monotony, frustration and poverty of institutional life may promote violence. Hare (1970) suggested that psychopathic prisoners, in their search for stimulation, may act to liven up their institution by manipulation or violence. Zeeman et al. (1975) indicated that staff as well

as inmates may act to break the monotony of the routine, prisoners may be 'wound up' by their letters being destroyed, by their visitors being excluded or by the arbitrary refusal of legitimate requests.

This point is illustrated by McDermott and King (1988) when they describe a clear case of 'rust-out' – a psychological condition which unlike 'burn-out' is produced by under rather than over stimulation – which resulted in an officer refusing to let a prisoner go to the lavatory:

The less you do in this job the less you want to do, until, in the end, you don't want to go down that end of the landing even though it's your job, and that's all your job is. (p. 362)

Patients may be provoked to rehearse their disordered ideas for the amusement of staff. The 'unprofessional orientation' (Love and Ingram 1982) of staff can only be altered by training: training directed at an understanding of the effect that their behaviour has on the behaviour of the prisoners in their charge (Cooke, Baldwin and Howison 1990).

Megargee (1982) argued that the general frustrations of prison life, as exemplified by closed visits, letters going missing, lack of work, limited access to education and poor food, acts as a significant situational determinant of violence. Dooley (1986) argued that lack of stimulation and distraction was a possible cause of violence in her patient sample.

Ideally, daily activities should be purposeful and not imposed merely as a means of filling time. Within the Barlinnie Special Unit no formal routine of activities is imposed because the sub-cultural norms which the prisoners bring to the Unit are anti-work. However, prisoners are encouraged and resourced to pursue their own interests and set their own level of stimulation: most engage in constructive activity. Robson (1989) describing the regime at Bathurst Goal emphasised the important role that meaningful activities – most notably trade training and education – had on the morale and behaviour of prisoners.

Level of Security and Control

High levels of overt security and control may act to increase the probability of violence. Ward (1987), describing the effects of strict security in an American prison, found that the greater the security measures imposed, the greater the amount of violence that occurred. More recent evidence suggests that tight security may successfully limit violent behaviour (Ward, personal communication). This contrasts with the evidence presented by Bidna (1975). He found that the implementation of strict security in Californian prisons – so called 'lock-down' – although it resulted in a reduction of stabbings in medium-security prisons, it resulted in an increased rate of stabbings in strict security institutions.

Much violent behaviour is predicated on the desire to 'save face'. Felson and Steadman (1983) argued that when the 'saving of face' is a critical concern, the behaviour of one antagonist is a powerful determinant of the behaviour of the other. Aggression escalates in a trial of strength. Jenkins (1987) made the point very clearly with regard to prisons:

Concentration on control is likely to stimulate resistance; tuning in to prisoners' needs reduces the emphasis upon control and the need for it. (p. 277)

Thus, if prison management provide an overly rigid, inflexible and authoritarian style of management that is, if it provides a target to be knocked down, prisoners may resort to violence as a means of saving face, to show that they can resist the regime.

Evidence from regimes where control is diffuse supports this view. Within the Special Unit, prisoners are responsible for their daily routine, they can influence the day-to-day running of the regime and they can be involved in taking decisions about their own progress and that of their peers. Robson (1989) describes a similar pattern within Bathurst Gaol, in particular, staff and prisoners make collective decisions on which new prisoners can enter a Unit. It is important to emphasise that authority is still maintained by the prison staff, however, it is more diffuse, control is less overt and is less likely to stimulate resistance.

Administrative Uncertainty

Administrative changes and uncertainty can affect the observed level of violence. King and McDermott (in press) identify uncertainty as a potent ingredient in their recipe for trouble in prison:

. . . surround them with rules that are supposed to govern virtually every aspect of their lives, but which are applied inconsistently from prison to prison, from wing to wing and from shift to shift by a staff who start with a mountain to climb in terms of earning the respect of their charges and get precious little training and support for good or wise practice. . . . Keep them on tenterhooks waiting decisions for as many decisions as possible, and then don't give them the reasons for the outcome. (p. 3)

Armond (1982) demonstrated the importance of a predictable routine for certain psychiatric patients. He argued that patients became violent when transferred to rehabilitation programmes or when short-stay patients were admitted to a semi-secure ward. A parallel finding comes from the prison literature. Ellis (1984) noted that where there is high 'transiency' – a high turn-over of prisoners in a particular jail – then the rate of violence is higher. He argues that this is because inmates no longer have a stake in keeping their living area under control and because it inhibits the establishment of staff-inmate and inmate-inmate attachments. It is likely that that new jails are particularly vulnerable to violent behaviour until both staff and inmate cultures are established. Schnelle and Lee (1974) found that the introduction of a clear unambiguous time-out procedure for disruptive inmates led to a significant decrease in behavioural offences including violence. Ward (1987) reported that the legislative hearings into 120 stabbings in a six-month period in Folsom prison, suggested that chaotic administration contributed to the high rate of violence. Gentry and Ostapiuk (1988) emphasised the importance of clear unambiguous boundaries for staff and patients showing that the consistent application

of clear and fair rules reduced the tension generated by uncertainty. James et al. (1990) argued that 39% of the variance in violent incidents in a psychiatric ward could be attributed to a change in policy which resulted in temporary staff being used – 'transciency' amongst staff.

The importance of a clear operational policy is illustrated by the functioning of the Barlinnie Special Unit. This Unit operates on the basis of established and explicit norms of good behaviour. These norms are policed and enforced by the community because the community in general, and the inmates in particular, have a stake in ensuring that good order is maintained. Felthous (1984) argues that norms against violence must not be announced and forever after forgotten; such norms need to be maintained through a variety of methods, through community meetings, through individual staff-inmate discussions and perhaps, most importantly, through discussions between inmates who have a stake in the community and new arrivals.

Unfortunately, irrespective of the clarity of the internal organisation of a regime, outside influences can have a detrimental effect. This point can be illustrated with reference to the Barlinnie Special Unit. Several years ago the uncertainty over whether the Special Unit would be moved to another prison increased the tension in the Unit for many months and adversely affected the behaviour of the prisoners.

Conclusion

The rate of violent behaviour in British prisons is rising. There is a danger that an emphasis on the intrinsic psychological factors that lead to violence – for example, high internal drive to aggression, psychopathic personality and low frustration tolerance – will lead policy makers and prison administrators to ignore the significant role that regime factors play in the generation of prison violence. The empirical evidence demonstrates that regime factors play a significant role. The evidence which has accumulated both in penal establishments and psychiatric establishments should allow us to develop tentative taxonomies of the characteristics of regimes which either increase or reduce the probability of violence. Regimes which allow more inmate participation, increase contact with the outside world and which are operated by more highly trained prison officers, are likely to have a positive impact on the rising tide of violence in British jails.[1]

Notes

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