

THE ORGANIZATION OF
PRISON VIOLENCE

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Prison and Society

Rational discussion of violence in prisons must be accompanied by a clear understanding that such violence has causes within the correctional system and in the outside society. While, there is no doubt that frustrations inherent in prison life are responsible for some violence and that prisons often provide situations in which violence can easily occur, critics of the correctional system over-emphasize these factors and ignore earlier sources of violence in the family and community experiences of the inmates. Note that some 71 percent of the inmates received in 1973 by the California prison system had a history of violence prior to their incarceration.

Rather than creating unique kinds of hostility, the prison setting concentrates the tensions and anger that exists in a dilute form in the outside community, racial tensions for example. In some cases, there may be a direct transfer of violence from the community into the prison and from the prison back into the community as in the activities of groups advocating violent solutions to social problems.

The outside society has influenced the climate of California institutions through an increased use of community-based programs, such as probation, that has reduced the percentage of convicted felons sent to prison from 30 percent to around 12 percent. As contrasted with ten years ago, the prisons now receive fewer property offenders, almost no check writers, more armed robbers, fewer skilled craftsmen, fewer genuine first offenders and more "state raised" inmates.

The search for ways of reducing prison violence is not apt to be successful without an understanding that remedies for the basic causes of such violence are no more easily available than are solutions to the problem of violence in the outside society. The relatively small size of a prison makes easier only oppressive controls, not basic solutions.

That violence inside and outside may have common sources is suggested by the fact that the rise in California prison violence during the past five years was matched by a similar increase in the community. Tensions between races and cultures are not apt to be alleviated in the prisons much before they are remedied in the outside society.

in attempts by other groups to strike out against the prison administration. The "Black Muslims" relate closely to their outside organization and to the power struggles within that sect. Recruiting measures sometimes become over-zealous. In recent months, some members of the Nation of Islam have shown interest in Maoist doctrines so that their roles may change.

Diligent efforts have been made to politicize the gangs by members of revolutionary cadres outside and by some politically sophisticated inmates. The Chicano groups have been particular targets for politicization because of their formidable nature and the great disruptive influence they could have if turned against the administration. However, these efforts have been unsuccessful, partially because the antagonisms run so deep between the Chicano factions and there are so many old scores to settle.

Periodically, there have been attempts to form a popular-front group made up of politically oriented inmates from all groups. The objective of these efforts is to divert the considerable energies inmates expend in assaulting each other for ethnic and inter-ethnic reasons into class conflict between inmates and the prison administration. The reasons for the consistent failure of such attempts are unclear although they undoubtedly involve both some concern about staff reaction and the unstable nature of these inter-ethnic alliances.

The Fantasy World of the Chicano Gangs

The reader of the literature and tables of organization produced by the Mexican Mafia and Neustra Familia (and the Black Guerilla Family) will feel immersed in a fantasy world that is composed of excerpts from the Infantry Manual and Alice in Wonderland. This feeling of unreality is heightened by reading the official accounts of these groups written by staff investigators who spend an inordinate amount of time trying to ascertain what rank particular inmates hold in the organizations.

Briefly, the Neustra Familia in all institutions is led by a Neustra Generale housed at one institution who manages to have his orders transmitted by an elaborate messenger system. Ten captains back up the generale. Lieutenants are next in order, having earned that rank by performing three kills or similar meritorious service. Membership is granted only after serious evaluation of the candidate, who upon acceptance into the group can never resign without fear of being executed.

The suspicion arises that inmates and employees are each feeding the others fantasy lives in an effort to erase the essential bleakness of life generally and prison life particularly. There is no doubt that conspiracies, election of leaders, execution of defectors, and laying of battle plans are far more emotionally involving for inmates than washing dishes or attending school, nor is there any doubt that chasing Neustra Generales is more stimulating than manning a guard post.

This does not mean that these organizations are not real and deadly. The body count attests to that. However, it may be hypothesized that these gangs are created to meet deep-set needs of inmates and that their perpetuation meets staff needs in fundamental ways. What may be a very loose-knot organization with limited membership can be fantasized as much larger, more deadly and more purposeful than it really is with the result that the inmate organization becomes exactly what the staff fears it was in the beginning.

Touching Briefly on Solutions

A discussion of solutions to the problem of prison violence can be little more than an overview because the long list of the experts's favorite theories are not matched by a list of satisfactory results. There are many measures that probably reduce violence somewhat, but nothing seems to come close to eliminating assaultive incidents. Some points of view are discussed following:

1. Sound, humane prison management. There can be no quarrel with measures that alleviate inmate frustrations as a means of improving the quality of institutional life. However, since the frustration of prison life are not the only sources of violence, institutional remedies are incomplete. Additionally, prisoners are subject to the effects of rising expectations so that improvements lead to the hope for more improvement, and the relative frustration level remains about the same. Finally, there is no way to relieve the greatest frustration of all, which is the loss of liberty.

2. Security and control measures. California has had nearly two years experience with the application of various restrictive controls including the almost complete shutdown of four major institutions for a period of several months. These controls resulted in the use of more makeshift weapons and a shift of violence from the general population to the security units.

Serious violence was largely restricted to two institutions instead of disrupting all ten male felon prisons. Complete control can be achieved only by reducing activities to nearly zero, a condition that is inherently unstable and ultimately brings about generalized outbreaks of violence.

Segregating and controlling leaders of the Chicano gangs did help to reduce gang-related violence somewhat and to restrict such action to the units in which these leaders were segregated. With the leadership off the yard, some gang members were able to defect although many of these defectors are now in protective custody status.

Efforts are now underway to structure whole unit in which there would be a maximum of normal program, but the clientele would be entirely violent inmates, although not those who have been top leaders or the most dedicated followers of gang leaders. Some success has been achieved, in part due to the participation of inmates in solving management problems.

3. Elimination of the indeterminate sentence. This is mentioned because it has been a major point of contention in California. There is no doubt that the indeterminate sentence as administered has been highly frustrating to nearly all inmates. However, it is highly speculative to say that removing uncertainties about length of prison term will have much influence on levels of violence. The present aim of the California Adult Authority is to grant fixed parole dates for some 80 percent of the inmates. If this is carried out, there will be an opportunity to assess the effects of this new policy.

4. Providing alternatives to gang membership. This is a desirable method, but nothing yet has been found to match the adventure of gang activities or to satisfy the machismo needs of the inmate gang members.

Some efforts to establish Chicano and Black cultural enterprises failed because leadership of these constructive groups became pawns in the power struggles of the violent groups. Staff fears of the rhetoric of these groups also contributed to their failure to fill an emotional role for the inmates. A suggestion that inmates be trained in the theory and practice of social change, including the methods of revolutionary change, also proved too threatening to the administration.

5. Make basic changes in the prison cultures of both staff and inmates. Some critics of the system feel that staff machismo needs, loyalties, and a perception of inmates as both inferior and dangerous, all of which creates a vast gulf between staff and inmates, support and encourage violence by inmates.

While there is some truth in this position, changes are most difficult to make within the limitations of the institutions. Both staff and inmates have deep-rooted attitudes that are most resistant to change, particularly for violent inmates and for those who must manage violent inmates.

Note that there is almost no problem of violence with milder prisoners housed in institutions of lesser custody. The task here is not to create a therapeutic community type of climate with minimum custody inmates but to do so in maximum custody units with inmates of demonstrated violent behavior, and with the traditions of particular ethnic groups.

In conclusion, California will apply a variety of part solutions to the problem of violence with the result that the levels of violence will change.

However, no one will know exactly what caused the levels to change. Prison administrators and others will probably believe the change was due to factors that were in fact irrelevant.

It will remain fairly clear that if the only way intense individuals are allowed to define themselves is through violence, then violence will occur. However, it will continue to be uncertain as to which means of personal definition an inmate will adopt given a wide spectrum of choices, a spectrum that in no event can be as wide as the society from which the prisoner came and which, in the majority of instances, was not sufficient to deflect the offender's violent impulse.