The problem of sexual assault and violence in jails is receiving greater attention from policymakers, correctional staff, and criminal justice officials. About 3.1 percent of inmates in local jails reported being sexually victimized by inmates or staff during a 12-month period, according to data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Beck et al. 2010), while another study found that one in five inmates at 14 state prisons reported being physically assaulted by another inmate during the previous six months (Wolff et al. 2007). The rate of self-inflicted violence is also high in prisons and jails. The suicide rate in local jails (an average of 42 suicides a year per 100,000 inmates) is more than four times the rate among comparable nonincarcerated populations, according to the most recent national figures (Noonan 2010).

The causes and consequences of sexual assault, physical violence, and self-harm are often related. Similar situational and environmental factors—such as overcrowding, inadequate supervision, and inmate access to weapons—can create opportunities for all three types of offenses. But those factors can, in many cases, be changed to inhibit such acts rather than enable them.

To test this theory, Urban Institute’s Jail Sexual Assault Prevention (JSA P) project worked with jail administrators to identify the underlying drivers of violence and self-harm in each facility, recommend strategies to deter violence, and evaluate their effects. Interventions were put in place in the summer of 2009 and monitored for a 12-month period. High turnover in the jail population and other changes made it difficult to determine the success and effects of each intervention. While the findings were tentatively positive but ultimately inconclusive, researchers did come away with lessons for other jails aiming to improve safety, as well as directions for future research.

Preventing Violence and Sexual Assault in Jail: A Situational Crime Prevention Approach

Nancy G. La Vigne, Sara Debus-Sherrill, Diana Brazzell, and P. Mitchell Downey

With help from Urban Institute researchers, three county jails adopted strategies to prevent sexual assault and violence among inmates by increasing the effort required to commit violent acts and by making perpetrators more likely to get caught. Rather than changing the underlying motivation behind offending behavior, these strategies used a situational crime prevention approach to change the environment and how it is managed, closing off opportunities for crime (Clarke 1997). Fewer triggers and opportunities to commit violence should translate into fewer offenses—and the jail environment is, in most cases, easier to control than individual behavior.

Rather than changing the underlying motivation behind offending behavior, the studied strategies used a situational crime prevention approach to change the environment in three county jails.
When surveyed after the new cameras were installed, fewer inmates believed that consensual and forced sexual activity were likely to occur in comparison with surveys of inmates conducted before the cameras were put in place. Violence was also perceived as less likely to occur, and a smaller percentage of inmates reported being threatened or getting involved in fights. However, inmates were unsure whether the cameras increased safety overall, and the analysis of the incident reports was inconclusive. Although no change in incidents was detected, it is possible that, as with Site A, the effects of greater detection masked a reduction in violent incidents. The camera equipment, infrastructure, and installation cost $315,656, while labor costs for planning the system and reviewing footage were estimated to be another $50,260. However, Site B saved on labor costs because no new employees were hired and the facility was able to fold new camera monitoring responsibilities into existing labor hours.

Site C: Training Officers in Crisis Intervention
Site C took a different path, choosing to train officers in crisis intervention and educate them about mental illness, suicide, and sexual assault. By improving officers’ interactions with inmates, Site C aimed to reduce inmates’ stress and frustration and to cut down on confrontations that might provoke inmates to act violently. Officers were taught how to resolve intense situations calmly and nonviolently and how to recognize and respond to symptoms of mental illness, self-harm, and sexual victimization. This strategy was a good fit for Site C because the jail was primarily used to house inmates requiring medical and psychiatric treatment.

When conducting a thorough analysis of each jail’s weaknesses and needs, the researchers identified several areas for improvement. The first area targeted the creation of safer jails and suggested that situational crime prevention may be a useful tool in correctional settings.


References
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Site C: Training Officers in Crisis Intervention

Site C took a different path, choosing to train officers in crisis intervention and educate them about mental illness, suicide, and sexual assault. By improving officers’ interactions with inmates, Site C aimed to reduce inmates’ stress and frustration and to cut down on confrontations that might provoke inmates to act violently. Officers were taught how to resolve intense situations calmly and nonviolently and how to recognize and respond to symptoms of mental illness, self-harm, and sexual victimization. This strategy was a good fit for Site C because the jail was primarily used to house inmates requiring medical and medications and many of those inmates had mental health issues. During the evaluation period, the inmate population changed significantly, as Site C switched from holding maximum security inmates to primarily holding inmates who required daily medications. Because of this change, incident reports and inmate surveys could not be used to gauge the training’s effectiveness. Instead, researchers analyzed surveys of corrections officers who participated in the training, interviews with jail management and line staff, and observations of the training. Overall, participants believed the training was positive and recommended it for other corrections officers. The survey analysis found that the training increased participants’ confidence in knowing how to respond to problems and improved attitudes and knowledge related to sexual assault, mental health, and suicide and self-harm. Some staff perceived that inmates became more compliant as a result of better interactions with officers. Without incident reports and inmate inter- views, it is unclear whether the training reduced violence in Site C; jail and it was not possible to conduct a cost-effectiveness analysis. The findings suggest, though, that crisis intervention training is a promising strategy to help corrections officers define potentially violent situations.

Recommendations

One overarching theme that emerged was the importance of correctional staff. Indeed, the success of any intervention ultimately rests on staff’s ability to conduct their jobs with consistency, accountability, and professionalism. Many of the recommendations distilled from this study represent sound operating practices that come with testing strategies in correctional settings. Some of these recommendations include:

• When developing strategies to reduce violence, keep in mind that the causes, contextual factors, and opportunities to commit violent acts may differ by the type of violence or type of population (e.g., women versus men). Targeted interventions may be required.

• Inmates said cells were high-risk locations for violence and contraband. Cells are the only places not under constant supervision or surveillance, and privacy requirements restrict jails from putting cameras in cells. Cameras can, however, be positioned to record who goes in and out of cells when inmates are in the dayrooms. A more constant officer presence—either through more frequent rounds or through direct supervision—may also improve safety.

• Physical and sexual violence are often inter- connected, so assessing both is important. Also, inmates perceive—and incident data appear to confirm—that physical violence is more likely than sexual assault.

• Preventing contraband can greatly reduce violence. Focusing on this issue should also help address staff misconduct, as contraband is often a sign of security breaches.

• Corrections administrators should adopt a zero-tolerance policy regarding staff sexual misconduct and consensual sex between inmates. Both are potential triggers for violence and can make more serious sexual coercion or force.

• Inmates’ inability to get medicine or mental health care could lead to violence or self-harm, so jails should improve the quality of and access to correctional health care.

• When asked what changes could lead to a safer jail environment, inmates consistently recommended improving the quality of staff. Corrections administrators should seek ways to train and motivate officers to act profes- sionally and should develop and implement accountability and performance measures.

• Working in a real-life setting has its benefits and challenges. Researchers should be prepared for the unexpected changes, data collection limitations, and other setbacks that come with testing strategies in correctional settings.

As with many evaluations, this study raises more questions than it answers and cannot conclude with certainty how effective the interventions were. That said, all three strategies were related to positive changes in how staff and inmates perceived safety and how staff performed their jobs. Furthermore, all three were guided by a thorough analysis of each jail’s weaknesses and how they could be strengthened. Overall, the findings offer lessons for researchers, practition- ers, and, importantly, on how to design and implement safer jails and suggest that situational crime prevention may be a useful tool in correctional settings.


References


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