

Prison Victimization and the Informal Rules of Social Control⁽¹⁾

The current trend in prison research marks a departure from the research conducted by the pioneers of penology and criminology. Much of the early work on prisons focused on developing and refining theoretical frameworks for analyzing social relations in prisons. In contrast, more recent prison research aims to identify factors related to prison violence. Consequently, the theoretical work of earlier decades has remained at an impasse.

The Prison Victimization Project attempts to bridge the gap between these two bodies of research. The primary goals of the project are, first, to estimate the extent of victimization in a sample of male prisons and to examine factors associated with victimization, and second, to develop a theoretical understanding of social relations in prisons. This paper summarizes the results of the Prison Victimization Project. ⁽²⁾

Limitations of Official Statistics

A recent cross-jurisdictional analysis of prison violence⁽³⁾ found that specific forms of violence were significantly higher in Canadian federal prisons than in other North American corrections jurisdictions. While the study concluded that rates of violence in Canadian prisons were high, the extent of the violence was difficult to determine. To date, the bulk of knowledge on violence in Canadian prisons comes from official (reported) data, but victimization research in the community has shown that official data greatly underestimate the actual extent of illegal activity.

Methodology

One of the goals of the Prison Victimization Project was to overcome the inherent problems of official statistics by administering a victimization survey to a random sample of male inmates in federal prisons. Interviews were conducted with 117 inmates in five prisons, spanning three security levels in one region. Each respondent completed a Victimization Screening Questionnaire that identified whether or not he had been involved in any of six victimization incidents⁽⁴⁾ while housed in a federal prison during a 12-month period.

A respondent was classified as a "victim" if he reported being the victim of at least one of the six types of incidents on the Victimization Screening Schedule and, based on his account of the incident and data collected on an Incident Report Form, he was judged not to have provoked the incident.⁽⁵⁾

Inmates were also asked a series of questions about specific aspects of prison life to acquire data on the inmate code.

Inmate Victimization Statistics

Of the 117 respondents, 55 (47%) reported a total of 107 separate victimization incidents during the 12-month period. Of these 55 victims, 32 (58%) reported one victimization and 23 (42%) reported more than one. This includes six inmates who reported four or more victimizations.

The most frequently reported victimization was theft, which accounted for 42 of the 107 victimizations (39.3%). In total, however, personal victimizations (robbery, sexual assault, assault, threats and extortion) were more frequently reported than victimizations involving property (theft and vandalism). Table 1 shows the breakdown of victimizations by incident type.

Table 1

**Table 1
Incidents and Victims by Victimization Type**

Type of Victimization	Number of Incidents	Rate per 1,000 Inmates	Number of Victims	Rate per 1,000 Inmates
Robbery*	4	34.2	3	25.6
Sexual Assault	6	51.3	1	8.6
Assault**	30	256.4	22	188.0
Threats**	23	196.6	21	179.5
Extortion	2	17.1	2	17.1
Theft	42	358.9	23	196.6
Vandalism	0	-	0	-
Personal Victimization	65	555.6	49	418.8
Property Victimization	42	358.9	23	196.6

* Includes attempted robbery
 ** With/Without weapons

The most commonly reported personal victimization was assault, which accounted for 46.2% of the personal victimizations and 28% of all victimizations. Assaults and threats of assault constituted the vast majority (82%) of all personal victimizations.

Assaults ranged from minor altercations where a few punches were thrown to assaults of greater intensity involving weapons. Weapons were present in about one third of personal victimizations (22 of 65). The most common weapon was a knife, next was a pipe. Five prisoners received medical attention as a result of an assault. Medical attention ranged from minor first aid to major dental reconstruction.

With the exception of one incident, all property victimizations were cell thefts. Financial losses from these ranged from \$1 to \$125, with an average (median) financial loss of \$12. Easily consumed or hidden commodities such as tobacco, drugs and jewellery were most frequently stolen. In no cases of cell theft was the thief identified or the stolen property recovered.

How Serious Is the Problem?

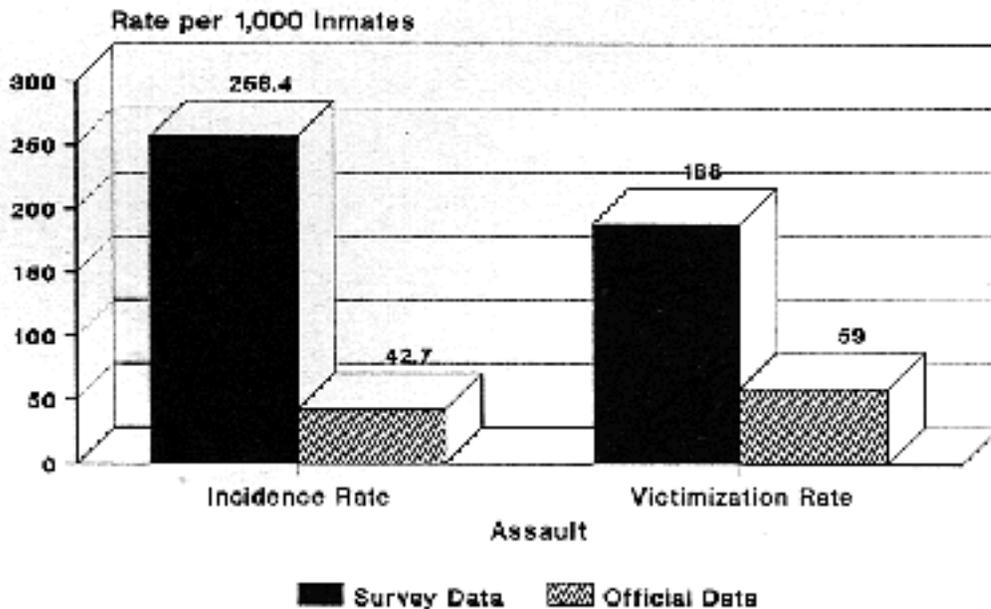
To assess the magnitude of victimization in prison, data from this study were compared with official regional data on prison security incidents and with community rates of victimization. Only one victimization category from this study could be compared directly with official data.

Figure 1 shows that the incidence rate for assaults (excluding threats) was approximately six times

higher, and the victimization rate approximately three times higher, than comparable official statistics on major and minor prisoner assaults and fights for the region. This suggests that official statistics on prison violence dramatically underestimate the magnitude of violence in prison.

Figure 1

Figure 1
Comparison of Survey and Official Data
on Assault Rates per 1,000 Inmates



* Note: Data excludes threats.

The magnitude of victimization in prison is also underlined when the prison victimization rate is compared with victimization rates in the community. Table 2 compares data on selected prison victimizations with similar data reported by the General Social Survey (GSS).⁽⁶⁾

The General Social Survey reported an overall rate of personal victimization (for robbery, sexual assault and assault, including threats) of 90 per 1,000 males over the age of 15. The rate for males aged 15 to 24 was 214 per 1,000. The comparable rate for similar personal victimizations in the five prisons was dramatically higher at 538.46 per 1,000.

The victimization data provide a much needed supplement to official security-incident data. They suggest that the real rate of victimization is much higher than is revealed by official statistics. What remain to be addressed are patterns of victimization and the role or place of victimization in the prison community. For this part of the study, inmates were asked a series of questions concerning the inmate code.

The Inmate Code: Does It Exist?

The most detailed description of the inmate code was provided by Sykes and Messinger,⁽⁷⁾ who claimed the inmate code consists of a series of behavioural rules that guide a prisoner's interactions with other

prisoners and correctional staff. They suggested the inmate code includes the following five maxims:

1. Don't interfere with others.
2. Refrain from arguments with fellow prisoners.
3. Don't exploit inmates.
4. Don't weaken.
5. Don't give respect to guards or the world they represent.

Rules derived from these five tenets include "don't break your word," "don't steal" and "never rat."

Table 2

Tableau 2
Comparaison des taux de victimisation chez les hommes dans les prisons et dans la collectivité

Type d'incident	Taux pour 1 000 détenus	Taux de l'EGS pour 1 000 hommes ^c	
		tous les âges	15 à 24 ans
Vol qualifié	34,18	17,00	49,00
Voies de fait**	452,99	74,00	166,00
Personnel	538,18	90,00	214,00

* Source : Statistique Canada. *Profil de la victimisation au Canada*, Documents de la Division des statistiques sociales (Ottawa : Statistique Canada, 1990).

** Y compris les menaces

Sykes and Messinger suggested that the major theme of the inmate code is group cohesion, or prisoner solidarity. The opposite of the group cohesion theme is a 'war of all against all.' For Sykes and Messinger, the inmate code operates in one direction: the greater the percentage of prisoners who adopt the major tenets of the inmate code, the greater the stability of the prison population and the less prison violence. Ideally, the inmate code would produce a unified, cohesive prisoner population bound together by the ties of loyalty and trust.

In the Prison Victimization Project, inmates had an opportunity to voice their thoughts on the existence of an inmate code. They were asked questions about the specific rules they ought to know to live in prison. Responses were then grouped according to specific themes. The goal was to find out whether the sociological concept of the inmate code had any real basis in the prisoners' lived experiences.

According to the results, an inmate code, as it has been traditionally defined, does not exist in the prisons where the interviews were conducted. What does exist, however, is a set of informal rules of social control. Although some of the traditional themes of the inmate code are included in these informal rules, new themes are also present.

More significantly (and contrary to Sykes), adherence to these informal rules does not necessarily lead to cohesion (and less violence) among inmates. Each element of the informal rules of social control brings the prison population toward social cohesion and, at the same time, separates or atomizes them. The

tension between these opposing tendencies creates an environment that is best described as "partially unstable."

The Informal Rules of Social Control

The four most frequently mentioned categories of the informal rules of social control,⁽⁸⁾ and their conflicting effects, are described below.

1. Do your own time.

This set of rules defines the public and private realms of prison life, recognizing that mobility and anonymity in prison are restricted. It includes such rules as "don't rat," "keep your nose out of others' business" and "don't look in somebody's house."

These rules encourage cohesion among inmates by defining proper prison behaviour, which promotes order and minimizes friction. However, they can also alienate prisoners by closing off lines of communication. For example, prisoners may sever ties with others to avoid putting themselves into a position where their safety may be jeopardized. These rules also discourage prisoners from seeking the assistance of others.

2. Avoid the prison economy.

This category of rules warns prisoners of the consequences of doing business in the informal prison economy. Cigarettes or drugs "taken on the cuff" carry high interest rates. Negotiation may be the first recourse for unpaid debts, but physical assault or getting "rolled off the range" are common methods of sending the message that unpaid debts are not tolerated.

These rules promote social cohesion by forewarning prisoners of the consequences of not paying debts, thereby increasing the efficiency of the informal economy. But they also reflect the fact that many prisoners have been exploited by the prison economy and are reluctant to put themselves in that position again. If inmates are not willing to lend goods, others may resort to illegitimate methods - such as cell thieving - to obtain them, especially if the goods are addictive substances. Furthermore, the severe sanctions attached to these rules contribute to atomization.

3. Don't trust anyone.

This group of rules, which cautions prisoners to be wary of those with whom they associate, is a consequence of the existing rat system. The fewer people to whom a prisoner divulges personal information, the better.

The most obvious effect of these rules is to push the population toward atomization: if you can't trust them, stay away from them. But there is a flip side. In an environment dominated by a lack of trust, there is the possibility of developing strong "partner" relationships or intense friendships: if you find someone

you can trust, stick with him.

4. Show respect.

This set of rules prescribes how prisoners should interact during their daily activities ("don't interrupt," "keep the noise down").

These rules contribute to the social cohesion of the prison by defining appropriate and inappropriate conduct between prisoners. They also determine a prisoner's status within the prison hierarchy. Those who follow the rules are accorded respect, those who do not are "goofs" or "waterheads." But because the rules are enforced using physical violence -which tends to destabilize and atomize prisoners - when the rules are violated, inmate cohesion may dissolve.

A Partially Unstable Prison Environment

The informal rules of social control in the prison can work to bring the inmate population closer together as a cohesive group, but they can also work to separate, isolate and atomize inmates. This creates an environment best characterized as "partially unstable": the prison is neither in a constant state of turmoil nor in accord.

A key indicator of partial instability of the prison environment is, contrary to the established literature, an overwhelming lack of loyalty and solidarity among the prison population. According to most prisoners, this lack of loyalty and solidarity is a consequence of the "rat system," a system that is actively or passively supported by the prison administration as a potent source for obtaining security-related information.

One of the most significant effects of the rat system is that it drives a wedge through the prison population. In this environment, rules such as "don't trust anyone" and "do your own time" make sense. They are important reminders of the furtive tactics used by "rats." This lack of trust spreads into the prison economy where the rat system is used to avoid debts, hence the "avoid the prison economy" rules.

The rules of respect combine with a prisoner's criminal status to produce a prison status hierarchy. Those who show respect get respect; those who do not are "goofs." Regardless of their behaviour, known sex offenders are at the bottom of the hierarchy and have little chance of moving up. Lifers and serious violent offenders are initially given higher status, but this can be lost depending on their behaviour. In this way, the informal rules of social control are linked in a complex pattern of mutual interdependence. The conflicting (i.e., cohesive and separating) effects of one rule contribute to the creation of other rules.

It is now possible to see how the conflicting effects of these rules contribute to the creation of an environment that is partially unstable. The rules are produced in a social system dominated by distrust that is a result of the social structures of the prison, such as the rat system. Because one of the effects of these rules is to separate or isolate inmates from each other, the rules also help reproduce the conditions that brought them into existence in the first place. While the rat system may provide the administration

with some potentially valuable information, the benefits of this information must be weighed against the practice's destabilizing effects.

Instability in prison results from the conflicting effects of the informal rules of social control: the rules can work to bring inmates together and at the same time to push them apart. This instability is reproduced in the interaction between the rules and the social structures of the prison environment (e.g., the rat system).

The Prison, the Rules and Victimization

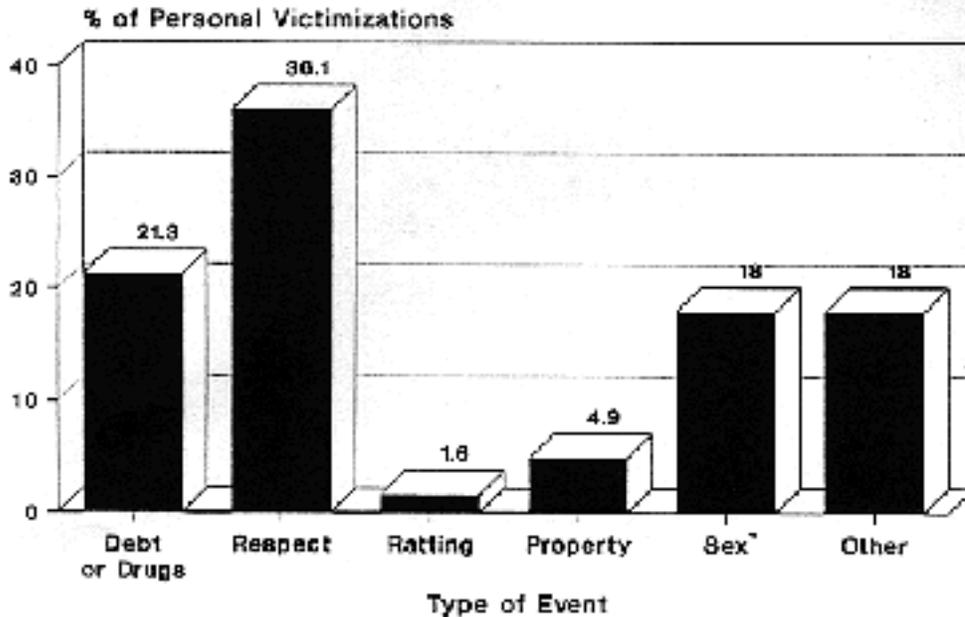
We can now look at how the social structures of the prison environment, the informal rules of social control and victimization are related. This can be done when we move away from the empirical facts of the victimizations such as rates and criminal history variables - and toward an analysis of the social relations of victimization. To show how the informal rules of social control are produced and reproduced in prison and how these rules structure victimizations and responses to victimization, we will examine personal victimizations,⁽⁹⁾ the relationship between the victim and the aggressor, the events that lead to the victimization and the manner in which the victimizations were resolved.

Events Leading to the Victimization

Victimizations were classified according to the circumstances surrounding the incident. In Figure 2, the personal victimizations are broken down in such a manner.

Figure 2

Figure 2
Events Leading to Personal
Victimizations



*Includes sexual victimizations and those related to an inmate being labelled as a sex offender.

It is immediately apparent from the data in Figure 2 that some types of personal victimizations were relatively unlikely to be reported. Of the 61 personal victimizations on which this information was available, only 1 was related to rattling and only 3 were related to property, an indication that such victimizations were reported much less frequently than other types of personal victimizations.

In relation to these types of victimizations, the data are interesting - not for what they show, but for what they do not show. Rattling and cell thefts are perceived to be regularly occurring events. In terms of cell theft, the victimization data substantiate this claim, yet only a small proportion of personal victimizations were a consequence of this type of incident. This may be because respondents were reluctant to admit having been assaulted for rattling or cell thieving, which is plausible given the seriousness of the charge. Another explanation is that respondents were able to engage in these acts with a high degree of assurance that they would not be caught. The facts that no cell thieves were apprehended and that the anonymity of prisoners who "send in a kite" (i.e., rat on a fellow inmate to prison administration) is assured, lend credibility to this hypothesis.

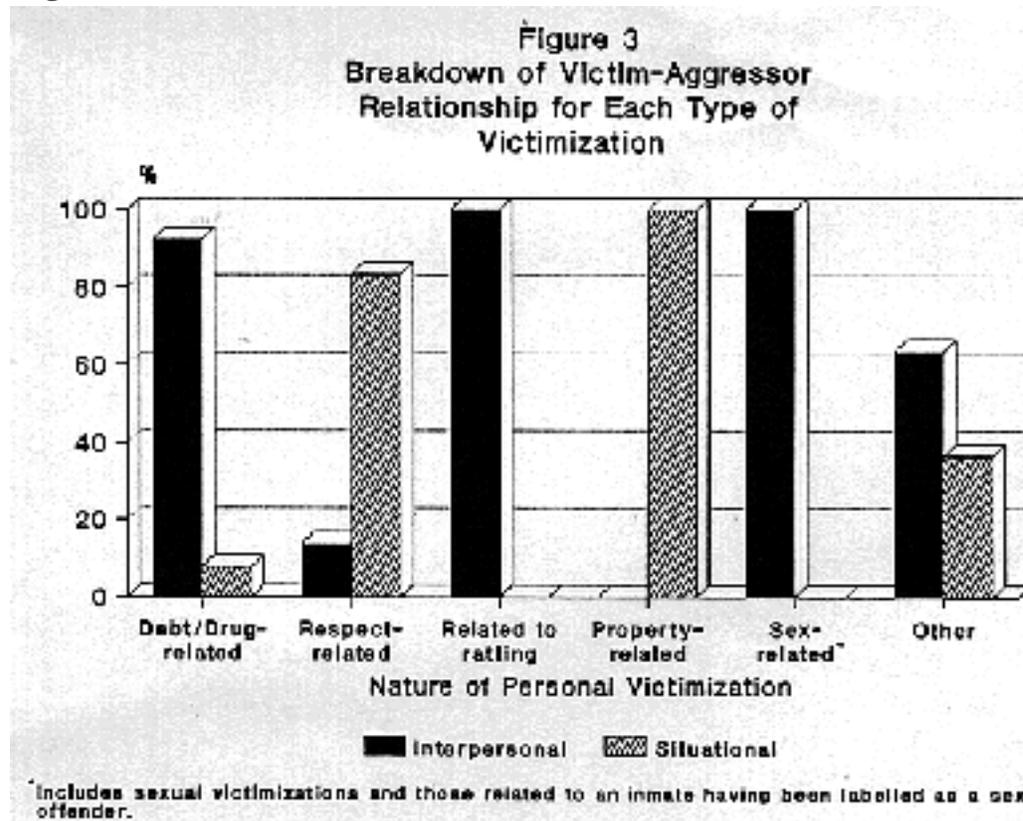
Whatever the explanation for the lack of reporting of rattling- and property-related victimizations, the implications for the prison population are clear. Because informants and cell thieves are able to operate with a relative degree of impunity, prisoners' trust in others decreases and overall prisoner solidarity is threatened. The most effective way of avoiding these types of incidents is to "do your own time" and "don't trust others."

Victim-Aggressor Relationship

The personal victimizations were also categorized according to the relationship between the victim and the aggressor. Incidents were classified as "interpersonal" if they were the consequence of a significant

relationship between victim and aggressor. Incidents that were not interpersonal were classified as "situational." Figure 3 shows the nature of the relationship between the victim and aggressor in each type of personal victimization.

Figure 3



The drug or debt victimizations involved transactions on the informal economy. Of 13 drug- or debt-related personal victimizations, 12 occurred after the transaction had taken place, hence a relationship between the victim and the aggressor was established. The only drug- or debt-related victimization that was classified as "situational" involved a prisoner threatening another with physical assault if the latter did not smuggle drugs into the prison.

No victimizations resulted from immediate economic transactions, such as a dispute over the price of a particular commodity or the sale of faulty or misrepresented goods. This is surprising given the fact that several prisoners acknowledged that a gram of hash weighed substantially less than a one-gram weight. Had these types of incidents occurred, more victimizations would have been classified as "situational."

From a purchaser's point of view, the marketplace operates with reasonable efficiency. Most conflicts that arise result from non-payment after the delivery of goods. This is precisely what the informal rules of social control warn against. Rules such as "don't trust others" and "avoid the prison economy" are less in place to warn prisoners about being exploited at the point of purchase than to warn prisoners of the dangers of fronting consumer items. The principal market ethic is "seller beware."

The tension produced and reproduced by the informal rules of social control and the partially unstable prison environment is also evident in victimizations classified under the heading of "respect." This

includes incidents resulting from loud music, uncleanliness or other disrespectful behaviour. Twenty-two personal victimizations (36.1%) were respect-related.

While the rules of respect contribute to the stability of the prison by defining "right" and "wrong" behaviour, the system of justice that enforces these rules and the manner in which this system of justice interacts with the prison status hierarchy contribute to the division of the prison community. That is, when confronted with disrespectful behaviour, the normative response is to "step out" to maintain respect in the eyes of others. In our study, the 19 respect-related situational victimizations were not spontaneous; aggressors likely calculated the probability that their threats would be taken up. However, these types of victimizations are not likely to be predicted; in an environment that is partially unstable, any given interaction between two prisoners may result in a potentially serious victimization.

For the most part, the victimization data point to the instability of the prison environment. Such is the nature of victimization research which, by definition, focuses on breaches of order. The stability of the prison environment can be seen in the resolution of victimization incidents. The resolution of victimization incidents reflects the cohesive effects of the rules of respect.

Resolution of Incidents

The personal victimizations were grouped according to the type of resolution that occurred. Four categories were used: no resolution, non-aggressive resolution, aggressive resolution and not classifiable. Almost half of all personal victimizations (47.4%, or 27) had no resolution - the victim did not try to get revenge and the aggressor did not try to reconcile. On the other hand, an equal number of personal victimizations (47.4%, or 27) were resolved non-aggressively. In these cases, the victim and the aggressor reached a non-aggressive settlement. Retaliatory attacks or victimizations after the initial incident were rare (5.2%, or 3).

The most frequently reported form of non-aggressive resolution was an apology. The rules of respect determine "right" and "wrong" behaviour in prison. One way of acknowledging to another prisoner that one is "in the wrong" is to apologize. Thus, in almost one third of the personal victimizations, the aggressor apologized to the victim. The apology served to end a victimization incident, stabilize the relationship and reduce the likelihood of retaliatory acts. An apology allows both the victim and the aggressor to maintain respect in the eyes of the general prison community. The rules of respect affect both victimizations and responses to victimization.

Conclusion

The results of the Prison Victimization Project indicate that victimization in prison is substantially higher than that revealed by official data collected on security incidents.

The analysis of the informal rules of social control, which are fundamentally different from the inmate code, suggests that there is an inherent tension in the prison community. The informal rules of social control and the partial instability of the prison are produced by social dynamics of the prison environment and, in turn, act upon the environmental factors to bring about conditions that reinforce their

existence. It is a self-perpetuating cycle.

This process of production and reproduction of the informal rules of social control can be used to develop an understanding not only of prison victimization, but also of responses to it and of the operation of social control in the prison.

(1)*This research was partially funded by the Correctional Service of Canada and the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.*

(2)*See D. Cooley, Victimization Behind the Walls: Social Control in Male Federal Prisons (Ottawa: Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1992).*

(3)*D. Cooley, Prison Violence in the Correctional Service of Canada: An Analysis of Security Incidents and Cross-Jurisdictional Data (Ottawa: Research and Statistics Branch, Correctional Service of Canada, 1990).*

(4)*Specific victimization incidents included: (1) robbery and attempted robbery, (2) sexual assault, (3) assault and attempted assault, (4) theft, (5) vandalism and (6) two types of extortion. Refer to Chapter 4, Victimization Behind the Walls for a formal review of the project's methodology.*

(5)*These criteria produce more conservative estimates of victimization compared with estimates of victimization surveys in the community. Refer to Chapter 4, Victimization Behind the Walls for a discussion of victimization criteria.*

(6)*These numbers are provided for information purposes only. For an extended discussion of the limitations of the data, see chapters 4 and 5, Victimization Behind the Walls.*

(7)*G. Sykes and S. Messinger, "The Inmate Social System," in R. Cloward et al. (eds.), Theoretical Studies in the Social Organization of the Prison (Social Science Research Council, 1960), p.6-9.*

(8)*Due to space limitations, two of the informal rules of social control - "don't talk to guards" and "don't exploit" - will not be discussed. It should be noted that only 11.9% of the sample volunteered the rule "don't talk to guards." This unexpectedly low percentage suggests that the traditional hallmark of the prison code - "keep away from the man" - may be eroding, perhaps because of the increase in different types of conditional release.*

(9)*For a discussion of the relationship between the informal rules of social control and property victimizations, see Victimization Behind the Walls.*