

Institutional Violence: How Do Inmates Respond?

Fearful, older and socially isolated inmates use more avoidance techniques to decrease their risk of victimization in prison, while younger offenders with longer histories of institutionalization and more past victimization experiences use more aggressive or proactive techniques to deter attacks. These were some of the findings of a recent study of inmates in a maximum-security prison in the United States.

Although several studies have been done on the levels and distribution of prison victimization, little research has examined how this violence affects inmate behaviours and lifestyles. But we do know that inmates are affected by the violence. For example, victims of sexual assault often resort to self-imposed solitary confinement, trying to stay away from contact with, and potential victimization by, other inmates. On the other hand, some inmates use violence and threats to deter potential attackers.

Methodology

For this study, a random sample of 500 inmates in a maximum-security prison in Tennessee were asked to complete a questionnaire about the precautions they took to avoid being victimized in prison. Of the 500 who were asked to participate, 300 (60%) completed the questionnaire.

In addition to the questionnaire, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with inmates at the prison.

Description of the Sample

Inmates in the study were generally in their mid-30s and unmarried. The racial composition of the sample was similar to that of the inmate population at the institution, about half white and half African-American.

Most respondents had been incarcerated at least once before their present sentence and were currently serving long sentences for primarily violent offences; more than one third were serving time for murder. This again was similar to the general inmate population.

Results

As shown in the figure, more than three quarters of these inmates felt they could substantially reduce their risk of a violent encounter by simply keeping to themselves.

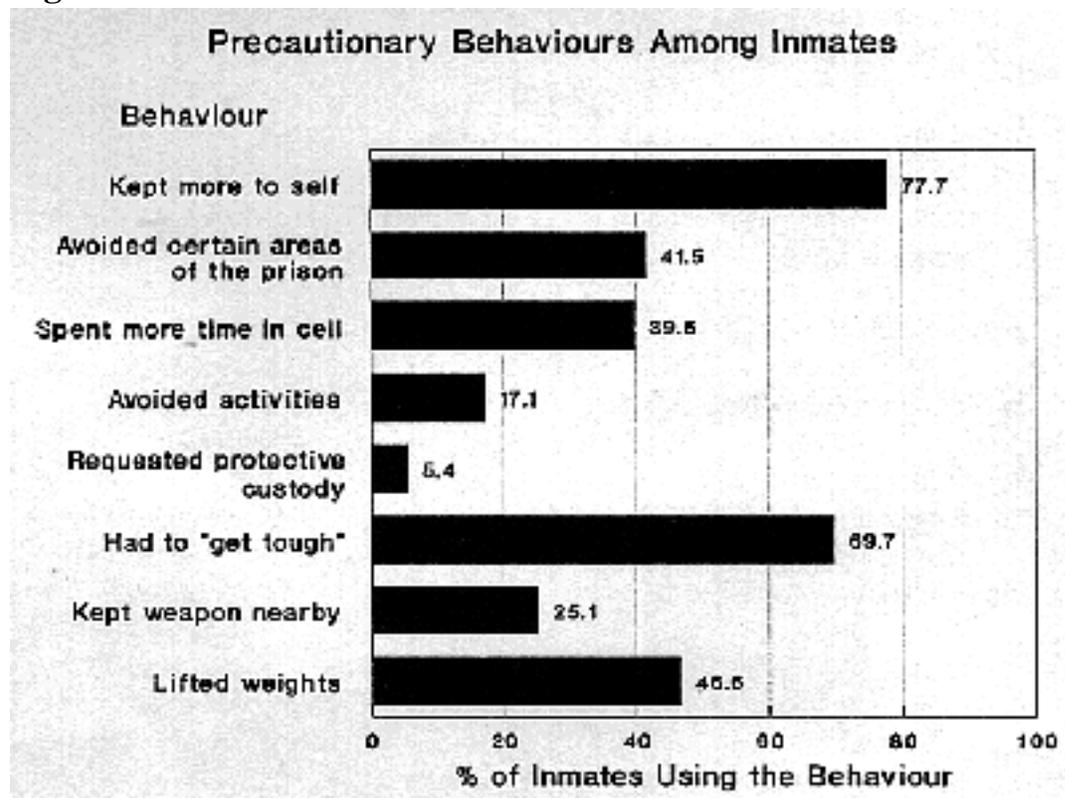
About 40% also said they avoided certain areas of the prison compound to reduce the risk of victimization, particularly the chow hall, housing units, recreational areas and the yard. These are all areas where large numbers of inmates are together at the same time, making close supervision difficult.

About 40% also reported spending more time in their cells to avoid risky situations. Only about 5% had requested placement in protective custody to avoid being victimized.

Although these findings suggest that most inmates employed passive measures to avoid violent encounters, the majority of the sample (69.6%) also said that they had been forced to "get tough" with another inmate to avoid being victimized or exploited.

More than a quarter also reported that they kept a "shank" (a sharp, knife-like instrument) or some other weapon on or near them in case of attack. In addition, almost half of the sample said they lifted weights regularly as a precautionary measure.

Figure 1



Two Types of Precautionary Behaviour

An analysis of the eight types of precautionary measures listed in the figure found that these behaviours could generally be grouped into one of two categories: passive precautions and aggressive precautions.

Passive precautions included keeping more to oneself, avoiding certain areas in the prison, spending more time in one's cell and avoiding activities.

Aggressive precautions included having to get tough, possessing weapons and lifting weights.

Since "requesting protective custody" did not fall into either group, it was dropped from the analysis.

Differences Between Passive and Aggressive Precautions

Looking at these behaviours and the characteristics of the inmates involved, we found that passive or avoidance behaviour was associated with older inmates, fear and having been threatened or robbed in the past. It was also associated with longer lengths of time spent in prison during a lifetime. Finally, passive behaviour was associated with inmates who had fewer inmate friends and fewer intimates in prison and who felt they would not be helped by others if they were attacked.

Like passive behaviour, aggressive precautions were also strongly associated with fear and with having been robbed or threatened before. However, unlike passive behaviour, aggressive behaviour was also strongly associated with an inmate having been assaulted in the past. Aggressive precautions were also more common among younger and smaller inmates who had been at that particular prison longer but who had been incarcerated less often.

Further statistical analysis was done to determine which of the above factors were most significantly associated with each type of precaution. For passive precautions, the most strongly associated factors, in descending order, were: fear, age (older), having been robbed in the prison previously, having fewer inmate friends and expecting little aid from others if attacked.

For aggressive precautionary behaviour, the most strongly associated factors were: having been threatened, age (younger), having been assaulted, total years imprisoned and fear.

For inmates who used passive measures, such as isolating themselves, to avoid the risk of being victimized, it is interesting to note that perceived support by others (friends and help if attacked) appeared twice among the top five most strongly associated factors. On the other hand, for inmates who employed aggressive measures as a precaution to violence, two factors related to past prison victimization experiences (having been threatened or assaulted) were among the top five most strongly associated factors.

Conclusion

In summary, older inmates and those who were socially isolated generally reported using the more passive avoidance techniques to decrease their chances of being victimized. Those who took a more aggressive approach were generally younger offenders with longer histories of incarceration who had been the target of weapons-related violence during their current sentence.

Despite these differences in the findings, though, it is likely that individuals use both methods to some degree to deal with the threat of violence.