

Measuring security in corrections: The issues and challenges

Fraser McVie¹

Security Branch, Correctional Service of Canada

Good security is a fundamental underpinning of a safe and secure correctional environment. The correctional environment must be safe for staff, offenders and the public in order to be conducive to effective correctional planning and interventions, which promote rehabilitation and eventual reintegration of offenders into the community. How corrections agencies collect and manage information relating to the security function is an important and complex undertaking. Performance measurement in this field is challenging because, by its nature, security is a function that tends to record negative results such as incidents and disturbances. While obviously these measures are extremely important, they do not necessarily give adequate attention or weight to the many situations where daily interventions by security staff have prevented security incidents. As well, there is a need to find ways to capture some of the intuitive risk assessment that correctional staff and managers practice daily. Over time we should strive to develop new research-based measures that reflect the effective prediction and prevention of incidents before they occur.

There is a saying that "safety and security is everybody's business". Nowhere is this more applicable than in a correctional environment, whether it is a maximum security institution, a community correctional center, or a parole office. One of the foremost responsibilities of any corrections agency is to ensure a safe and secure environment where staff and offenders can interact without fear and where the protection of the public is paramount. This goal cannot be fully achieved without the participation and cooperation of all staff and the general offender population. Security, while a major responsibility, in particular, for correctional officers, is not the exclusive domain of this group of staff. All persons working with offenders must know how to effectively interact with offenders and monitor, report and respond to inappropriate behaviour when it is observed. Security intelligence information must be collected and analyzed based on the input from many staff and often, offenders. When effectively managed, good intelligence can allow corrections managers and staff to act proactively to prevent serious security incidents. Good security is achieved when all the people affected understand the importance and recognize that they can each contribute to achieving this goal.

Conversely, poor attention to this aspect, when different groups operate in isolation and do not communicate or share relevant information, can contribute to an environment of uncertainty and unanticipated security incidents.

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), similar to other correctional jurisdictions and law enforcement agencies, has become very proficient at recording and reporting security incidents after they occur. A great deal of focus is directed towards investigating serious incidents in an effort to determine if policy was properly applied and to learn what might be done differently to prevent a similar incident in future. One drawback to this process is the length of time lapse between the incident and when feedback from investigation takes place, sometimes weeks or months after the event. However, the lessons learned through a review of investigation findings are one part of a very useful and important process that the organization has to improve future performance. A question often posed in the investigation of incidents is; "What did we know beforehand? Did we have any pre-indications that this type of event would occur?" Sometimes it is possible in hind sight to find some pre-indicators that were either not apparent at the time or there was an inadequate system of communication and response to this information.

There is no doubt that serious security incidents such as assaults, murders or escapes are an important indicator of how well the Service is at protecting society including the offenders and staff for whom we are responsible. Our objective always is, and should be, to attempt to reduce such incidents to zero through effective preventative action. This is why spending time on investigations can be beneficial if the results include best practices that can be shared and followed to prevent future incidents. Effective communication of findings of investigations is extremely important and can be easily overlooked without good organizational focus on this aspect.

Equally important is to have a process to systematically review security incident data and to keep an eye on trends and, more importantly, significant deviations in trends. In CSC we now produce monthly statistics concerning major security incidents which are shared with all managers and

staff through the network. We are making a concerted effort to analyze this data and encourage Wardens and District Directors to use the information at the institutional and district level to monitor security climate and to act where possible in a proactive manner to address any indications of increasing risk.

There are some significant limitations to using incident measures as the sole or primary means to measuring security performance. Although we do calculate flow-through rates of incidents per 100 offender population, we are not in a position to fully address what security measures are effective in preventing more incidents from occurring. Also, the incident data represents a negative outcome by its very nature and negative feedback is generally less effective than positive feedback in organizational learning. In this sense no matter how well we do to improve the statistics, any incidents remain a negative outcome. This can result in less focus on the positive results of risk management and effective daily interventions that result in many potential security incidents being avoided.

There is a distinct need for a partnership between the security operations and the Research Branch in order to begin to collect and evaluate new types of data about security operations that can be used to develop predictive measures based on risk analysis and proactive interventions. The incident data will continue to be an essential component. However, if we can begin to link incident data with other key variables such as security level custody ratings, gang affiliations, criminal and institutional history, disciplinary record, intelligence information and so forth, then there is tremendous potential to vastly improve our understanding of offender behaviour on the security dimension. This could lead to better measures of prevention through effective population management and timely interventions prior to incidents materializing.

Equally important, is to start to collect more information about factors that are currently

managed intuitively such as assessment of institutional climate and risk. While all correctional practitioners learn to assess risk within their environment based on observation, much of what is observed and assessed is not currently captured in any collection system that would allow analysis and development of predictive models. CSC Security is currently working with the Research Branch to develop a Climate Indicators and Profile System (CIPS) that should begin to address this need. The system is being developed initially in consultation with the maximum security institutions across Canada. In addition to including a wide variety of incident and offender profile information, this initiative will include a component designed to capture information on a daily basis about the assessed security climate within the facility. Over the next few months an evaluation of the instrument will be completed and modifications made prior to consideration for expansion to other security levels. This tool will also have a community release component so that it will be eventually of interest to community operations.

Through this type of research-based initiatives, CSC hopes to advance our collective understanding of offender behaviour and effective risk prediction, as well as early prevention of security incidents. Ultimately this will place greater focus on the positive interventions and intelligence gathering by line staff and allow us to begin to measure how frequently we are successful in preventing incidents from occurring rather than just learning from them after the fact. The end goal does not change. We need to ensure a safe and secure environment for staff and offenders that also provides the maximum measure of public safety. The prevention of security incidents is the best way we can achieve this objective. With assistance from our research partners, we can accomplish this. ■

¹ 340 Laurier Avenue West, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P9

Coming up in *FORUM on Corrections Research*

The June 2004 issue of FORUM will focus on "Women Offenders".