INSIDE THIS BRIEF

- Overcrowding and inadequate supervision can create opportunities for violence in jails.

- The research team worked with three jails to design interventions to create a safer environment.

- Inmate perceptions of safety increased in two of the jails following the interventions.

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

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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.

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 (JSAP) 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.

> 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.

Project Sites

The three jails, all of which rank within the nation's top 30 largest systems, worked closely with the research team to choose different avenues to improve safety. Selected interventions were guided by analyses of site observations; staff and inmate interviews and surveys; and reported incidents of violence, weapons and contraband, and staff use of force. Site A adopted an electronic system to track officers' rounds, Site B installed cameras to reduce blind spots and record evidence for investigations, and Site C trained officers in crisis intervention to help improve their interactions with inmates and their ability to identify and prevent violent acts before they occur.

Site A: Improving Supervision

At Site A, inconsistent supervision by corrections officers was creating opportunities for inmates to engage in violence and other prohibited acts. The jail design inhibited officers from interacting with inmates, and mechanisms were not in place to ensure that officers were conducting their rounds as often as prescribed. In response, jail administrators installed sensor buttons around the facility that tracked officers' rounds with a device officers carried. Sergeants reviewed the data for each shift to hold the officers accountable. The thinking was that the tracking system would prompt more consistent supervision, which in turn would make inmates reconsider assaulting another inmate because the risk of getting caught by officers conducting their rounds would be greater.

Staff opinions about the system mostly varied by rank—line officers tended to dislike it, while supervisors had more positive opinions about the system's role in jail management. Some thought the greater adherence to conducting rounds contributed little and that the rounds weren't carefully conducted. Inmate perceptions were mixed, but many inmates surveyed after the officer tracking system was installed felt that there was less violence in the recreation area, less contraband, and greater overall safety. The picture from incident reports, however, was inconclusive due to

conflicting results, limitations in the data, and changes at the jail unrelated to the officer tracking system. However, analyses did find fewer incidents in which officers used force, suggesting that more routine contact with inmates may have affected how officers responded to threats or altercations.

The tracking system cost $25,365 for equipment, infrastructure, and installation. Because the site incorporated new staff responsibilities into existing schedules, they incurred no additional labor costs. However, staff time spent on the intervention amounted to about $191,999 across the intervention period—a cost that other jails should include in their planning estimates if they choose to install an officer tracking system.

In the first 12 months of using the system, 175 fewer instances of use of force were reported, although it is unclear to what extent these changes were related to the new tracking system. It is possible, for example, that actual violent incidents went down at the same time that detection went up, masking the true effect of deterrence. Overall, the officer tour system's effect on safety is uncertain.

Site B: Installing Surveillance Cameras

Site B also aimed for greater surveillance and accountability to deter violence. Surveillance cameras were installed to reduce blind spots in housing units, particularly in areas identified as high risk for violence and suicide attempts. The cameras had an added benefit of recording evidence for incident investigations and monitoring staff conduct. Video footage was viewed for every incident, and randomly selected footage was reviewed every month.

In terms of perceptions of the cameras' effectiveness, staff opinions varied by rank. Jail leadership and management were mostly in favor of the cameras, while line officers had more negative opinions and perceived that the cameras were used to monitor their own behavior as opposed to that of the inmates. Both staff and inmates, however, felt the cameras provided useful impartial evidence for investigation purposes.

When surveyed after the new cameras were installed, fewer inmates believed that consensual and forced sexual activity were likely to occur compared 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 $54,740, while labor costs for planning the system and reviewing footage were estimated to be another $30,260. 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 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 interviews, it is unclear whether the training reduced violence in Site C's 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 defuse 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 in prisons and jails, and others offer insights on how to identify the underlying causes of violence and develop ways to address them within the larger context of the jail culture:

- When considering new safety interventions, rely on a four-step process: (1) analyze the dates, times, locations, and contexts surrounding previous incidents to identify what factors are related to violence; (2) use evidence-based strategies to address the jail's particular needs and vulnerabilities; (3) fit those strategies into an overall system of best practices for classifying, supervising, and managing inmates and designing jails; and (4) continually evaluate the intervention and make changes as needed.

- 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 interconnected, 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 mask 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 professionally 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, practitioners, and policymakers about creating safer jails and suggest that situational crime prevention may be a useful tool in correctional settings. ▪

The full report "Evaluation of a Situational Crime Prevention Approach in Three Jails: The Jail Sexual Assault Prevention Project" is available at http://www.urban.org/url.cfm?ID=412394.

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