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Cell Assignment among Violent and Non-Violent Offenders and its Effect on Recidivism

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ABSTRACT

Often, the prison system places non-violent offenders in cells with offenders that are more violent. Some believe this has lead to a rise in violent encounters among inmates (Kirkman, 2002). According to observational learning, seeing violence leads to doing violence. The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of cell assignments for non-violent and violent inmates. Individuals celled with more violent offenders tended to commit more violent subsequent crimes. These results have implications for the importance of cell assignment among inmates.

INTRODUCTION

In America today, over two million men, women, and adolescents are incarcerated in jails or prisons (Anderson & George, 2004). The public seems fascinated with anything related to "doing time" as a surge in television dramas, documentaries, music videos and news programs has blanketed our choices of television viewing. As of 2004, America has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with the number of women in prison rising even more drastically than that of men (Anderson & George, 2004).

Some nations have begun to adopt a more reconstructive or restorative atmosphere in which prisoners may serve out their sentences. Victim/offender programs, prisoner education programs, and public service agendas have seen varying success throughout the civilized world. America's prison system, however, holds strongly to its one, dominant theme: punishment (Anderson & George, 2004).

Prison life in America consists mainly of inmates spending most hours of the day confined to small cells. In some instances, an inmate will spend up to 23 hours in his or her prison cell. With the number of Americans in prison on a steady rise, overcrowding has become an issue. The conditions of confinement in prisons throughout the nation are sometimes horrendous. In some instances, inmates sleep three to a one person cell, with overflow prisoners actually sleeping in hallways or in prison classrooms and/or cafeterias filled with bunk beds and converted into makeshift dormitories in order to make room (Richards & Ross, 2003).

The Federal Bureau of Prisons functions in such a way that classification of prisoners depends on many factors, principle among them being the severity of the crime and length of the sentence being served. Ideally, the most violent convicts who are serving the longest sentences are assigned to maximum-security institutions where they will serve out their sentences. Less violent prisoners serving medium-length sentences are assigned to medium security prisons, and the less violent and less serious criminal "lightweights" are confined in minimum-security camps, farms, or community facilities. With the issue of overcrowding on the rise and less space available, more often than not these ideals of classification are skirted and prisoners are sent to whichever facility has free beds (Richards & Ross, 2003). What follows is a nation-wide mixing of less-than-violent and often first time offenders with seasoned, violent hardened criminals serving out life sentences. Such confined and crowded living conditions, coupled with the fact that 15% to 25% of these more hardened criminals exhibit psychopathic behaviors, have lead to a rise in violent encounters among inmates (Kirkman, 2002). Less violent inmates often find themselves defending against predatory, aggressive acts by more hardened prisoners. Indeed, prisoners often may stake their very lives on how they are classified and to which institution they are assigned (Richards & Ross, 2003).

Prisons offer no formal coping skills to inmates in dealing with such a horrendous lifestyle. In prison, there are always power struggles and vicious fights among prisoners for control of the prison environment and dominance over the other inmates (Hari, 2002). The less violent, less street-smart prisoners placed into maximum security environments due to crowding issues find themselves at the bottom of these vicious and deadly confrontations. Due principally to such a drastic change in environment, instances of self-mutilation have been on the rise in prisons as well, with reported cases of some inmates even biting through the skin of their own wrists in order to attempt suicide (Hari, 2002).

What, then, is the effect of housing these non-violent men and women in such close quarters for such long periods of time with more violent individuals? Griffin, Sheier, Botuin, Diaz and Miller (1999) stated that aggression, violence, and other problem behaviors are normative and adaptive in terms of being tools of survival in certain environments. This fact may provide an incentive to increase risk taking, expression of anger, and other violent behaviors in order to gain acceptance from others in the community that value those behaviors. Geen and Donnerstein (2003) agreed that once someone begins to perceive the world as hostile, to acquire scripts and schemas that emphasize aggression, and to believe that aggression is socially acceptable, that person enters a vicious cycle that is difficult to stop.

The question now becomes, "Are we creating monsters?" Are we punishing criminals who will never see the outside of a prison wall again while creating violent, aggressive, hardened criminals out of men and women who entered the prison system as non-violent, first-time and often passive offenders, and then releasing these people into society? All logic would say "yes." Aggression is learned from observation. If a person learns aggressive behaviors then that person will undoubtedly exhibit aggressive behaviors (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1963). Witnessing repeated violence, especially in the context that it is necessary for survival, will promote violent behavior. According to observational learning, seeing violence leads to doing violence. In addition, performing violent behavior increases the likelihood that an individual will repeat such behavior (Bandura et al., 1963).

An initially non-violent human is confined to a small cell with more violent offenders due to issues of overcrowding, whereupon he or she spends several years in this environment serving out their sentence. Each moment of this person's day is filled with fears of assault and instances of violent, deadly behavior on the part of other inmates. Violence is the only means of gaining respect from other inmates. Therefore, violence becomes the only means of survival. The typical prisoner enters a vicious cycle of observing, learning, and performing violent acts. This is a situation which occurs everyday, millions of times a day for millions of male and female prisoners. It stands to reason that these prisoners, upon their release, re-enter society as more aggressive people who are much more prone to act out in a violent, criminal manner.

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of cell assignments of non-violent and violent inmates. If being housed with more violent offenders leads to a habit of violent, aggressive behavior, then these cell assignments may increase the likelihood of previously non-violent persons committing violent offenses after release. The increase of violent behavior due to housing experiences may adversely affect recidivism rates.

For the study, researchers created a scale allowing assignment of a violence rating to each crime committed initially and post-release. A similar scale exists and has been used in studies carried out by Kinlock, O'Grady, and Hanlon (2003) and Kinlock, Battjes, and Gordon (2004). This scale assigns crimes a number on a 1 to 3 point scale. The least severe crimes, assigned as 1, are victimless crimes. The scale assigns a 2 to crimes against property. The most severe crimes are assigned a 3. This includes crimes against persons or life threatening aggressive behavior involving the use of a weapon. This study utilized a 7-point Likert scale in order to allow for more variability among participants. The classification of severity of crimes remained the same.

In this study, researchers examined a list of inmates housed in the Calcasieu Correctional Center in Lake Charles, LA, on January 1, 1995. The list contained approximately 500 inmates, their cell assignments and cellmates, and the crime for which they were currently incarcerated. In addition, we determined through the Lake Charles, Louisiana Clerk of Courts office what, if any, was the subsequent crime for which these inmates were arrested after their release (some inmates had not yet been released at the time of this study due to long prison sentences). One goal of our study was to determine if

placement of an individual with violent cellmates would lead to a more violent post-release crime in re-offenders.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the study were 340 (306 male and 34 female) adult inmates housed in the Calcasieu Correctional Center in Lake Charles, LA, on January 1, 1995. The participants ranged in age from 17 to 63 (M = 29.5, SD = 9.04), with the vast majority being under the age of 30 (58.5%). Thirty-three percent were classified as White, while 67 percent were classified as Black. We obtained inmate information concerning cell assignment and initial crime from the Calcasieu Parish Sheriff's office, which runs the Calcasieu Correctional Center. The information came in the form of a prison roster from the records division of the prison. This roster consisted initially of over 500 inmates. Some of these inmates were listed as being in prison "on detainment only", and no information was available concerning them. Other inmates were housed either in solitary confinement or in large "dorms" with eight or more cellmates. This large number of cellmates in such a large living space does not provided the close, intimate surroundings found in a 2 to 4 man or woman cell. Therefore, we did not use these inmates in the study. Men were only celled with men and women only with women. We obtained the information on subsequent arrests of the inmates after their release from prison by an extensive search through the Lake Charles, LA Clerk of Courts office internet based database. The site allows for search by use of an offender's name. Names of inmates obtained from the prison roster were entered into the search base and a list of any subsequent arrests was displayed along with the date of arrest. This information is considered public record and is available to anyone.

Materials

Along with the inmate roster and the Clerk of Courts database, a violence rating scale was created and used for the experiment. No existing scale was located which ranked crimes according to their level of violence. Crimes committed by these inmates ranged from non-violent offenses such as forgery and failure to return a moveable object (rented equipment, video tapes, etc.) to the most serious and violent crimes such as first degree murder and aggravated rape (aggravated signifies the use of a weapon or other special circumstances such as the committing of a crime on an elderly person). The more physical harm that was done (or potentially done) to a person gave a crime a higher violence rating. We divided and ranked crimes among:

1. crimes against people: crimes which cause or potentially cause bodily harm to humans
2. crimes against property: crimes which cause or potentially cause harm to property or structures
3. crimes against social structure: crimes which cause or potentially cause disruption to the rules of social order

In addition to this classification, we considered crimes involving weapons more violent than crimes which did not, and we ranked crimes which were attempted (attempted armed robbery) as high as crimes that were carried out (armed robbery). If a person survives being shot, it does not lessen the violent intent with which his or her offender fired the weapon.

The final scale ranged from 1 to 7, with 7 being made up of the most violent crimes such as first and second degree murder, 6 consisting of attacks on a person with a weapon such as aggravated battery and aggravated rape as well as crimes with a high probability of the loss of human life such as aggravated arson, 5 made up of attacks on a person without the use of a weapon such as simple assault and forcible rape and serious crimes against property carried out with a weapon such as aggravated robbery, 4 made up of serious crimes of property carried out without the use of a weapon such as simple burglary or theft, 3 consisting of slightly less serious crimes such as purse snatching or simple criminal damage to property (no weapon), 2 made up of predominantly drug charges such as possession of marijuana or distribution of cocaine, and 1 consisting of the least violent crimes such as forgery and prostitution. This scale was used to rate all crimes committed initially and for all subsequent offenses. Researchers evaluated the reliability and validity of this instrument.

To test the reliability of this instrument, the researchers ran a correlation of ratings given by two individuals using the outline above. The inter-rater reliability of this instrument was very strong, $r = .963$, $p = .001$. In addition, to examine the convergent validity of this instrument, researchers rated the crimes of the individuals' first offense using the scale in Kinlock, O'Grady, and Hanlon's (2003) and Kinlock, Battjes, and Gordon's (2004) studies. This 3-point scale was highly correlated with our 7-point instrument, $r = .954$, $p = .001$.

Procedure

We obtained cell assignments from the prison roster. Each cell then received a violence rating which we decided by assigning the violence rating of the most violent inmate in a given cell to all inmates assigned to that cell. For example, if, in a three man cell, one inmate was classified as a 4 (for theft) one inmate as a 1 (for a second DWI offense) and one inmate as a 7 (for attempted second-degree murder), then we classified that cell as a 7.

We then compared the initial crime of each inmate to his or her subsequent arrest following release from incarceration. From this comparison, we computed a difference score. For example, if participant # 203 was incarcerated for a crime with a violence rating of 2, was released and arrested next for a crime with a violence rating of 5, this participant would have a change score of +3 (the post-release crime was more violent than the initial crime).

These two figures, the cell violence rating and the crime change score, were then analyzed with the intention of determining whether or not a positive correlation existed between the two. We performed a Pearson-Product Correlation analysis of the data to reveal the association between cell assignment and violence level of future crimes.

RESULTS

Correlations to Change in Violence

To initially test the hypothesis, researchers ran a correlation to see if a cellmate's violence level (from more to less violent) was related to a quantitative change in violence level of a subsequent offense. A moderate inverse correlation between these variables (r = -.34, p = .001) indicated those with more violent cellmates may commit a less violent crime in the future; however, we will evaluate this further.

We also conducted a correlation matrix to examine possible relationships between the other variables and a quantitative change in violence from their first offense to their subsequent offense. A weak correlation between age and change in violence (r = .19, p = .006) suggests those with a higher change in violence may be somewhat older. Change in violence was moderately related to both highest (r = -.38, p = .001) and lowest (r = -.44, p = .001) violence level in a cell; both of these indicate an inverse relationship exists between the level of violence in the cell and the change in violence. In addition, a moderate correlation between change in violence and the difference of the violence level in the cell suggests a greater difference in violence within the cell (towards higher violence) was related to a higher change in violence (r = .35, p = .001).

Comparing Means of Re-offenders

To study possible differences between individuals that re-offend and those that do not, we conducted a number of independent t-tests. The only factor in which there was a difference in the means of the groups (re-offend, did not re-offend) was age. The mean age of those that re-offended (M = 28.03, SD = 7.81) was significantly lower than those that did not re-offend (M = 31.51, SD = 10.17), t(258.17) = -3.438, p = .001 (equal variances not assumed). These groups did not differ on any other measured variables.

Analysis of Variance for Change in Violence

Many individuals committed another crime after we collected the original cell data. We grouped these subsequent crimes (re-offenses) as being no different, less violent, or more violent compared to the individual's first offense. We performed several ANOVAs were to identify any areas where these individuals differed. The initial variable of interest was the violence level of the first offense. The one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences in the violence level of their first offense across the three groups of re-offenses, F(2, 195) = 58.78, p = 001. There was a higher-level first offense (meaning a more violent crime) for the group that later committed less violent crimes (M = 4.86, SD = 1.66), followed by a lower level of violence for the first offense in both the "no change" (M = 2.64, SD = 1.44) and "more violent" (M = 2.38, SD = 1.30) groups. A Bonferroni post hoc analysis revealed the main difference was between those who committed a later crime that was less violent and the other two groups (no difference and more violent later crimes). The mean difference between those with no change in violence and those with a less violent offense was 2.21 (p = .001), and the mean difference between those with a more violent offense and those with a less violent offense was 2.48 (p = .001).

The highest violence levels in cells were examined to see if this would be related to any differences in the violence level of subsequent offenses. The one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences in the highest violence level in cells across the three groups of re-offenses, $F(2, 195) = 18.18$, $p = 001$. The highest violence in cells were greater in the group that later committed less violent crimes ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.35$), followed by a lower highest violence level in cells in both the "no change" (M = 4.13, SD = 1.78) and "more violent" ($M = 4.22$, $SD = 1.72$) groups. A Bonferroni post hoc analysis found the main difference to be between those who later committed a less violent offense and the "no change" and "more violent" groups; the mean difference between these groups and those who committed a less violent crime later were 1.47 ($p = .001$) and 1.37 ($p = .001$) respectively.

Another variable measured was the difference in the violence level of an individual and the highest level of violence in their cell. This was also examined to see if any differences exist in the violence level of subsequent offenses. The one-way ANOVA indicated significant differences across the groups, $F(2, 195) = 8.37$, $p = .001$. The smallest difference in violence levels was found in the group that later committed less violent crimes ($M = .74$, $SD = 1.27$), followed by greater difference in violence levels in both the "no change" ($M = 1.48$, $SD = 1.80$) and "more violent" ($M = 1.84$, $SD = 1.86$) groups. A Bonferroni post hoc analysis found a significant difference to exist between those who later committed a less violent offense and the other two groups. The mean difference between those with a less violent offense and those with no change in violence was -.75 ($p = .031$), and the mean difference between those with a less violent offense and those with a more violent offense was -1.11 ($p = .001$).

We grouped participants according to the violence level of their cellmate: less violent, equally violent, or more violent than they are (according to crimes committed). A one-way ANOVA examined the effect of cellmate's violence level on an individual's "change in violence." The change in violence was measured by the level of violence from the first offense (1 to 7) and the second offense (1 to 7). For example, if a person initially committed a crime that was rated a 2 in violence level and then committed a crime that was rated a 4 in violence level, they would get a score of 2 for "change in violence." There was a significant effect across the groups ($F(2, 193) = 12.89$, $p = .001$). Those in the group celled with a more violent person had a positive change towards committing more violent crimes ($M = .60$, $SD = 2.09$), those celled with a person of equal violence had a negative change towards committing a less violent crime ($M = -.21$, $SD = 2.65$) and those in the group celled with a less violent person also had a negative change in violence towards committing less violent crime ($M = -1.23$, $SD = 2.31$). A Bonferroni post-hoc analysis revealed that participants celled with offenders that are more violent tended to commit more violent subsequent crimes than participants celled with offenders that are less violent. The mean difference between those celled with more violent offenders and those celled with less violent offenders was 1.83, $p = .001$. There were no significant differences between those celled with offenders of the same violence level and the other groups.

Predicting Change in Violence

We performed a multiple linear regression to determine predictors of change in violence level. Predictors in the best model included cell mates violence, age, lowest violence level in cell, highest violence in cell, and difference in violence levels (of the individual and cellmates). These predictors accounted for almost half of the variation (R^2 = .456), which was highly significant, $F(195) = 31.82$, $p = .001$. Both the violence level of the first offense (ß = -.664, $p = .001$) and the difference in violence levels in the cell (ß = .75, $p = .001$) had the most significant effect on the change in violence level.

DISCUSSION

Due to a lack of research into this area, we were not sure what effects would be found. This study yielded mixed results, some of which may be due to limitations that we will describe further.

In support of the hypothesis, there was a trend for individuals with a greater difference in the violence level of their offense and the highest violence level in their cell to have a greater quantitative change in their violence level of a subsequent offense. Therefore, these individuals sometimes committed crimes that were more violent after being celled with a person whose violence level was much higher than their own. An analysis of variance indicated a similar trend. Individuals who were celled with a more violent offender (regardless of how much more violent) tended to later commit a more violent crime. Although these are moderate findings, they do suggest an importance in cell assignment in the prison system. If exposure to more violent criminals negatively affects individuals, there should be some procedure put in place to minimize this exposure and possibly decrease the chances of having more violent crimes committed (once individuals are released from the prison system).

Although there were results in support of the hypothesis, some results gave conflicting information. For example, those who had higher violence levels in their cell were found to have a lower level of violence in a subsequent offense. A possible explanation for these finding is individuals with a higher level of violence could not commit crimes of more violence (since they were already at the highest level), and some could possibly still be incarcerated. This is one limitation of the study. In the future, one might exclude those with the highest possible violence rating from analyses and focus only on those who violence level was below the highest violence level in the cell.

In addition, at the time that we collected the data, 42 % of the individuals had not committed a subsequent offense. A follow-up study might be useful in examining these individuals to see if cell assignment had a long-term effect on the nature of future crimes. Furthermore, because we only looked at individuals in the Calcasieu Parish and Lake Charles system, it is unknown if any individuals committed crimes in other cities, parishes, or states.

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