

INSTITUTIONAL AGGRESSION

There are many different kinds of institution and many different forms of institutional aggression. Institutions include *schools, universities, hospitals, the armed forces, the police, commercial organisations, and prisons*. Forms of aggression include *physical violence and sabotage*.

Most research has been conducted into aggression seen in prisons, and there are two main explanations of prison aggression. The first explanation says that aggression is a result of factors within the prison itself (such as **deprivation**). These are called **situational models**. The second explanation says that aggression is a result of the individual characteristics that prisoners bring to a prison. This is called the **importation model**.



Situational models of institutional aggression

Situational models explain aggression in terms of the characteristics of the institution itself. These include its **physical characteristics**, **organisational characteristics**, and **psychological characteristics**. The role of these is illustrated in **Sykes' (1958) deprivation model**. This proposes that aggression is a result of different kinds of deprivation that occur in institutions such as prisons.

The 5 main ways in which prisoners are deprived are **liberty, autonomy, goods and services, sexual relationships, and security**. Sykes' model says that these kinds of deprivation lead to the formation of a **prison sub-culture**. This sub-culture behaves aggressively because deprivation produces stress and frustration. Aggression is seen as a way of reducing this frustration rather than occurring to obtain resources.



Prison overcrowding

The deprivation model is supported by the finding that *overcrowding* and a *lack of privacy and meaningful activity* are correlated with the likelihood of violence (**Light, 1990**). The model is also supported by the finding that some US inmate policies lead to increased aggression whereas others lead to decreased aggression, suggesting that organisational characteristics are important. In British prisons, **Wilson (2005)** found that reduced levels of crowding, heat and noise at *HMP Woodhill* led to a dramatic reduction in aggressive behaviour among inmates. Frequent staff changes, which can also change the characteristics of the prison, have also been shown to be correlated with levels of violence.

However, other research is less supportive of the deprivation model. For example, **Matthews et al (1979)** found that overcrowding does increase aggression, but only up to a point. After that point aggression levels drop. This is because when prisons are overcrowded, steps are taken to reduce the amount of contact between prisoners (by having many high density cells). It has also been shown that isolation rather than overcrowding produces more aggression. This is because aggression relieves the boredom of being isolated.



A high density prison cell

One criticism of Sykes' model is that it is somewhat dated (1958). As a result of prison reform, modern prisons do not deprive prisoners in all of the ways identified by Sykes. For example, there are opportunities in prison for inmates to train, gain qualifications, and engage in other meaningful activities. However, according to the **Howard League for Penal Reform (2009)**, the incident of prison violence has actually *risen* over the last few years. This suggests that factors other than deprivation are involved.

It is also true that levels of deprivation are fairly *constant* in prisons, yet group violence can erupt suddenly without any change in environmental or situational factors. Research also shows that 25% of violence towards officers is by 'The Unexplained', that is, prisoners whose motives are not linked to deprivation.

The importation model of institutional aggression

The **importation model** was proposed by **Irwin & Cressey (1962)**. It says that aggression is linked to the *social history* and *personality traits* a person brings with them to a prison. Rather than prisons leading to the formation of a prison sub-culture, the importation model says that prisoners bring elements of their own sub-culture outside of prison into it. So, a violent person outside of a prison **imports** his violence into the prison. Thus, the way a person behaves in society is simply applied in a new setting.

The importation model is supported by the finding that a number of societal factors *are* correlated with increased aggression in prison. These include alcohol dependency, previous employment record, level of education, and extent of criminal activity prior to imprisonment.



Violent sub-cultures 'import' their violence into prisons

The two factors that are most strongly correlated with prison aggression are *race* and *age*, with young and non-white male prisoners being the most likely to behave aggressively. These are the people who are most likely to be 'disenfranchised' (separated from society's norms and values) and/or who live in sub-cultures where violence is valued. The importation model explains their aggressive behaviour by saying that they are simply importing their sub-cultural behaviour into the institution.

Further support for the importation model comes from the finding that aggression is more likely to be committed by young men with a history of violence. Indeed, research shows that pre-institutional violence is actually the *best predictor* of inmate aggression at least in juvenile delinquents. It has also been claimed that prison aggression is strongly correlated with street gang membership. However, some research findings have contradicted this claim. For example, **DeLisi et al's (2004)** study of 800 inmates found no correlation between gang membership and the likelihood of prison violence.

The model is also supported by the finding that different *types* of prisoner are more likely to be aggressive. 'Convict' type prisoners are more likely to be aggressive than 'Conventional' type prisoners. The former are those who have been 'raised' by the prison system, whereas the latter are those who were not part of a criminal sub-culture prior to going to prison.

Related to this is the finding that there are *ethnic differences* in prison violence. For example, **Gaes et al (2002)** studied 82,000 inmates of American prisons who came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The researchers found that prisoners with Hispanic origins were more violent than non-Hispanic prisoners. By contrast, prisoners with Asian origins were less likely than non-Asians to behave violently. This suggests that ethnicity is also an important correlate of prison violence.



Hispanic convicts

There is also evidence to suggest that *mental impairment* is correlated with prison violence. **Baskin et al (1991)** found that depression was correlated with self-directed violence, whilst confusion was correlated with other-directed violence. Depression and confusion was correlated with increased violence towards property. Not unexpectedly, prison violence (in the form of attacks on staff and other prisoners) is more likely to occur in maximum-security prisons.

Despite the importation model's apparent success in explaining aggression in prisons, it says nothing about how it can be reduced, so it is purely a 'causes' explanation of aggression. It also concentrates on explaining aggression by prisoners towards officers and other inmates, and says nothing about aggression by officers towards prisoners. A final criticism is that, as with situational models, all of the research has looked at *male* prisoners. It may not be relevant to why women behave aggressively in prisons.



Models of institutional aggression focus on prisoner aggression and ignore aggression by guards towards prisoners

It seems likely that neither the importation model nor the situational models on their own can explain *all* of the aggression that occurs in prisons. That form of institutional aggression is probably best seen as a result of an *interaction* between the aggressor, the victim, and the situation in which the behaviour occurs.