The Effect of Prison Security Level on Inmate Violence

Maximiliano Gutierrez

Graduate Student, Department of Social Work
Mentor: Dr. Erica Lizano

The current study explored the influence of prison security level (i.e., maximum/high security, medium security, minimum/low security) and special program availability (i.e., psychological counseling, drug dependency awareness, alcohol dependency awareness, etc.) on inmate violence (i.e., inmate-to-inmate violence, inmate-to-staff violence) across correctional facilities ($N=1,114$) in the US. Previous literature has found that maximum security level prisons elicit higher rates of inmate violence when compared to minimum security level prisons. For example, inmates who are placed in more restrictive environments are more likely to engage in violence. Special programs, such as anger management, could influence someone's interpersonal skills. However, there have been inconsistent results on the influence of special programs provided on inmate’s behaviors. Hypotheses were as follows: (1) maximum/high security level prisons will display greater inmate-to-inmate violence; (2) maximum/high security level prisons will display greater inmate-to-staff violence; (3) prisons with higher special program availability are likely to have lower rates of inmate-to-inmate violence regardless of security-level; (4) prisons with higher special program availability are likely to have lower rates of inmate-to-staff violence regardless of security-level. H1 was supported; maximum/high security level prisons elicited higher rates of inmate-to-inmate violence. H2 was supported; maximum/high security level prisons elicited higher rates of inmate-to-staff violence. H3 was not supported; facilities with high special program availability did not have lower rates of inmate-to-inmate violence. H4 was not supported; facilities with high special program availability did not have lower rates of inmate-to-staff violence. Results suggest that harsh prison conditions, or tough on crime measures, can negatively impact the rehabilitation process. These results can inform the development of policies that facilitate a more rehabilitative environment and reduce inmate violence.