

## WARDENS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRISON SEX

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*Using data gathered from anonymous questionnaires of 226 male and female wardens from state-operated institutions, the research assesses whether, and to what degree, individual demographic variables and institutional characteristic variables are related to wardens' perceptions of the prevalence of sexual assault in their institutions, the prevalence of inmates' consensual sexual activities, and wardens' assessment of the proportion of sexual assaults that come to their attention. The results of the study show that wardens generally believe sexual activities, consensual and coercive, are relatively rare in their institutions. Individual and institutional characteristics are not shown to be statistically significantly related to perceptions of the prevalence of coercive sexual incidents or frequency of knowledge of sexual assaults. However, four variables (gender, race, sex of prison, and ratio of inmates to officers) are significantly related to estimates of the proportion of inmates that are involved in consensual sexual activities.*

**Keywords:** *correctional wardens' attitudes; prison sex; inmate sexual assault; inmate consensual sex*

Limited research exists on wardens' attitudes pertaining to the general operations and management of correctional institutions. Work-related attitudes, regardless of occupation, are of interest to researchers because of the significant role that work plays in the experiences and perceptions of individuals and vice versa. However, few researchers have contributed to the academic literature regarding wardens' views and attitudes toward their working environments (Cullen, Latessa, Kopache, Lombardo, & Burton, 1993; Flanagan, Johnson, & Bennett, 1996).

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Cullen et al. (1993) examined the level and determinants of prison wardens' job satisfaction. Results from the study revealed that wardens demonstrated a high level of job satisfaction. In fact, 90% of the wardens reported that they were very or somewhat satisfied with their jobs. Furthermore, most wardens stated that they wanted to keep their job, would take the job again without question, felt the job fit their initial expectations, and would recommend their job to a good friend. Of all the variables examined in the study, the most pronounced relationship was between wardens' level of satisfaction and the work role variable (wardens' influence, courts' influence, emphasis on rehabilitation, etc.). For example, when the central department of corrections' influence over the management and control of the prisons' operations increased, wardens' job satisfaction decreased. "The key issue, it appears, is the close relationship between wardens' autonomy or authority over their work and their level of satisfaction" (Cullen et al., 1993, p. 158).

In a similar, but more recent study, Flanagan et al. (1996) explored the nature and distribution of job satisfaction among wardens of state prisons. Results supported previous findings that stated that wardens indicated a high level of job satisfaction but suggested a slight decline in satisfaction with certain aspects of the job. For example, the proportion of wardens who considered their job as similar to the job they wanted when they began decreased from 68% in the 1989 survey by Cullen et al. (1993) to 54% in the 1995 survey by Flanagan et al. (1996).

The identified determinants of job satisfaction in the Flanagan et al. (1996) study were also similar to those reported earlier. Similar to Cullen and his colleagues (1993), Flanagan et al.'s study indicated that wardens with the highest degree of control reported significantly higher levels of job satisfaction. The association between loss of control and job satisfaction is not surprising given the nature of the occupation and the responsibilities involved in maintaining a correctional institution. Moreover, "trust in the integrity, competence, and professionalism of staff would appear to be the central element in securing the warden's effective control over the institution" (Flanagan et al., 1996, p. 395).

The central theme surrounding wardens' views and attitudes in general seemed to be that of control. Support for this claim was evidenced in research relating to job satisfaction and other areas as well. Kinkade and Leone (1992), for example, evaluated wardens' views on the privatization of prisons. Specifically, the survey examined wardens' views on prison industries, management contracting, and private financing alternatives. More than 90% of the respondents rated a prison-owned industry that sold its goods or services to the state as most acceptable. When the data were examined as a

whole, “the wardens were most willing to allow industries if they were prison-owned and sold to controlled markets and would accept financing alternatives if such financing would result in the facility being turned over to the state” (p. 60). In short, their reactions toward privatization demonstrated their preference of conserving their autonomy. In the pursuit of maintaining control of the institution, wardens were constricted by external influences (laws, policies, etc.) that limited their power. In addition to this issue, there are other instances in which the views of the warden were incongruent with the policies of the institution.

For example, Henderson, Cullen, Carroll, and Feinberg (2000) conducted a national survey to investigate the racial integration of prison cells. Despite opposing legal cases, the racial integration of prison cells remained within the discretionary authority of the warden. When the integration of prison cells became an issue in the 1960s, there was some concern that integration would result in a loss of institutional control. According to the results of this study, on the surface, most wardens strived to achieve racial balance in the living arrangements of prisoners. At least 60% of the respondents reported that the most desirable policy was one in which “inmates are assigned to housing on a race-neutral basis, monitoring of racial balance occurs, and changes are made accordingly” (p. 306). Although wardens appeared to be supportive of achieving racial balance in living arrangements, the results indicated that only a small number of cells were actually integrated by race. This evidence suggested that some degree of opposition existed between the wardens’ official and unofficial influences. In other words, although wardens may have experienced a change in attitudes at the ideological level, the implementation of certain policies may have been difficult in terms of practicality.

In a further examination of wardens’ attitudes, a virtually ignored topic seldom addressed is prison sexuality. It is interesting to note, the topic of prison sex has long been one of the most marginalized and controversial issues in penology. In 1934, Joseph Fishman, a former inspector of federal prisons, wrote, “The subject of sex in prison—so provocative, so vital, so timely . . . is shrouded in dread silence” (p. 5). More than 70 years later, this statement still holds true. Recent prison sex researchers have, however, made valuable advances in the study of inmate culture and life. In addition, they have assessed correctional officers’ attitudes toward and provided estimates of consensual and coerced sex in male and female prisons (Alarid, 2000a, 2000b; Castle, Hensley, & Tewksbury, 2002; Eigenberg, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Greer, 2000; Hensley, 2000, 2001, 2002a, 2002b; Hensley, Tewksbury, & Koscheski, 2001, 2002; Hensley, Tewksbury, & Wright, 2001; Hensley,

Wright, Koscheski, Castle, & Tewksbury, 2002; Koscheski & Hensley, 2001; Koscheski, Hensley, Wright, & Tewksbury, 2002; Kunselman, Tewksbury, Dumond, & Dumond, 2002; McGaughey & Tewksbury, 2002; Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, & Bennett, 1995; Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2000; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, & Donaldson, 1996). Unfortunately, prison sex researchers have neglected to address correctional administrators' attitudes and perceptions of prison sex. These are the same men and women who shape and oversee enforcement of correctional policies regarding prison sex in their respective institutions.

According to Tewksbury and West (2000), prison sex studies are important for three reasons. First, researchers need to understand the experience of inmates and the institutional culture in which they reside. Inmates are often deprived of heterosexual outlets while incarcerated that may lead to "extreme emotional, psychological, and perhaps physical distress" (p. 368). Because of the sexual deprivations placed on inmates, they may engage in either consensual same-sex sexual activity or coerce others into sexual activity.

Second, correctional administrators should be concerned with the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV/AIDS within prisons. The rate of confirmed HIV cases in prisons is 5 times higher than in the free society (Maruschak, 1999) and the rate of confirmed AIDS cases in correctional facilities is 6 times higher than in the U.S. population (Hammett, Harmon, & Maruschak, 1999). Therefore, these health issues that are related to sexual activities among inmates become "both institutional and public health care concerns" (Tewksbury & West, 2000, p. 368).

Third, a link exists between prison sex and violent behavior within the institution (Lockwood, 1980; Sylvester, Reed, & Nelson, 1977; Wooden & Parker, 1982). Sylvester et al. (1977) also argued that violence in prisons has a clear homosexual underpinning. They found that one of the leading causes of inmate homicides was same-sex sexual activity in prisons.

In addition, research on prison sex provides correctional administrators and staff with more complete knowledge of their correctional institutions. All forms of prison sex—including masturbation, consensual sex, and coerced sex—is illegal and forbidden in most institutions. According to Saum et al. (1995), it is forbidden "so that correctional officers can fulfill their objective of a safe and secure environment" (p. 427). Because of the severe deprivations placed on inmates, prison sex becomes a commodity that can then fuel an "underground economy" (Silberman, 1994, n.p.). Therefore, correctional administrators and staff must be aware and concerned about the amount of sexual activity occurring in their institutions so that they may provide additional safety and security to their inmate populations, as well as

society. Tewksbury and West (2000) stated, "It should be of institutional concern to understand sexual expression among inmates who are safe and discreet, and to control unsafe and unwanted sexual expression among inmates who use sex as a weapon" (p. 377).

Correctional administrators, especially those with authority to make policy decisions and to oversee the implementation of policies and procedures, are critical players in the daily lives of prison inmates. In their capacity, such administrators are able to significantly influence the structure, culture, and activities of their institutions. Clearly, these individuals are subject to a great number of influences, including official and unofficial factors. Official influences, such as legislation, case law, and policy decisions made at a higher political level may be only a small part of the constellation of influences on such administrators. What is not fully understood at this time is what the unofficial influences (personal and socially constructed attitudes, perceptions, and values) are that interact with official influences to guide the policy decisions for institutional management.

Understanding the attitudes, values, and beliefs of wardens concerning a particular aspect of institutional operations and management is the focus of the current research. Specifically, we examined the perspectives of prison wardens on sexual activities with a special emphasis on identifying what factors affect wardens' perceptions of the amount of coerced and consensual sex within their institutions. More specifically, we assessed whether, and to what degree, individual demographic variables and institutional characteristic variables are related to wardens' perceptions of the prevalence of sexual assault in their institutions, the prevalence of inmates' consensual sexual activities, and wardens' assessment of the proportion of sexual assaults that come to their attention.

## METHOD

In 2001, anonymous surveys were distributed to a random sample of 378 state prison wardens of male correctional facilities in the United States. Specifically, one half of the male facilities in each state were randomly selected to be included in the sample. Furthermore, because of the low number of female prisons, all wardens of these facilities were surveyed (63 wardens). Wardens located at federal correctional facilities, privatized correctional facilities, prerelease centers, and juvenile detention facilities were excluded from the current study. The information was gathered from the American Correctional Association's *Juvenile and Adult Correctional Departments*,

*Institutions, Agencies, and Paroling Authorities Directory* (2000) which listed the addresses and contact persons for each institution. Five states (Delaware, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania) refused to participate in the current study.

Each warden received a questionnaire along with a cover letter and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The cover letter described the research project and provided important instructions and information to the respondent. The respondent was not required to sign an informed consent as all data collected concerned the study of public officials. This allowed for enhanced confidentiality. Additional steps were implemented to increase the response rate. These included a reminder card and a duplicate survey to each of the respondents. Of the 441 respondents, 226 participated in the current study, yielding a response rate of 52.4%.

According to the American Correctional Association's *Juvenile and Adult Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies, and Paroling Authorities Directory* (2000), approximately 80% of all state adult facilities were managed by male wardens. Approximately 83% of the sample respondents were male. In addition, 76.8% of the sample respondents were White, 17.9% were African American, and 5.3% classified themselves as other. In comparison, approximately 73% of all state wardens were White, 21% were African American, and 6% were classified as other. Therefore, the sample was representative to the population in terms of gender and race.

#### MEASURES

Wardens were asked three questions concerning their knowledge of coerced and consensual sex in their respective institutions. First, respondents were asked, "What percentage of inmate sexual assaults do you believe you personally know about?" They were then asked, "In the past 12 months, what percentage of the inmates in your institution do you believe have engaged in sexual activities with other inmates because of pressure and/or force, that is, against their will?" Finally they were asked, "In the past 12 months, what percentage of the inmates in your institution do you believe have engaged in sexual activities with other inmates consensually?" These items served as dependent variables. The mean for these three items was 34.8, 3.1, and 15.7, respectively.

Demographic characteristics (age, gender, and race) were recorded for the current study group. Data were also collected on education, number of months as warden, overcrowding of facility, sex of prison, security level, current number of inmates, and ratio of inmates to correctional staff.

**TABLE 1: Correlations Between Independent and Dependent Variables**

	<i>% of Known Sexual Assaults</i>	<i>% of Inmate Coerced Sex</i>	<i>% of Inmate Consensual Sex</i>
Age	-.17	.03	-.08
Gender	.00	.04	-.28*
Race	-.07	.09	.20*
Education	.06	.03	.04
Months as warden	.00	-.08	-.13
Overcrowding	.08	-.03	.01
Sex of prison	.11	.05	.45*
Security level			
Minimum versus other	.01	.09	.03
Medium versus other	.04	-.02	-.06
Maximum versus other	.07	-.03	.05
Current number of inmates	-.05	.10	.03
Ratio of inmates to staff	.02	.07	.21*

NOTE: Coding: Age; Gender (0 = female, 1 = male); Race (0 = White, 1 = Non-White); Education (0 = diploma/GED, 1 = some college but no degree, 2 = 2-year degree, 3 = 4-year degree, 4 = Some graduate work but no degree; 5 = masters degree, 6 = doctorate); Months as warden; Overcrowding (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Sex of prison (0 = all male, 1 = other); Minimum security versus other (0 = minimum, 1 = other); Medium versus other (0 = medium, 1 = other); Maximum versus other (0 = maximum, 1 = other); Current number of inmates; Ratio of inmates to staff.

\* Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

## RESULTS

To examine the relationships between the independent and dependent variables, correlational analysis was conducted. Table 1 presents the zero-order relationships between the independent and dependent variables. It is interesting to note, none of the independent variables were correlated with the two dependent variables concerning coerced sex in prison. However, four independent variables (gender, race, sex of prison, and ratio of correctional officers to inmates) were correlated with wardens' perceptions of the amount of consensual sexual activity between inmates. Female and non-White wardens were more likely to report that a higher percentage of inmates had consensual sex in their institutions compared to male and non-White wardens. Wardens over all-female and male/female correctional facilities were more likely to report that a higher percentage of inmates had consensual sex in their institutions compared to wardens over all-male correctional facilities. Finally, prisons with a higher inmate-to-correctional-staff ratio were more likely to report that a higher percentage of inmates had consensual sex compared to prisons with a lower inmate-to-correctional-staff ratio.

**TABLE 2: Summary of Regression Standardized Beta Weights ( $n = 226$  – listwise deletion)**

	<i>% of Known Sexual Assaults</i>	<i>% of Inmate Coerced Sex</i>	<i>% of Inmate Consensual Sex</i>
Age	-.04	.10	.06
Gender	.03	.05	-.18*
Race	-.05	.07	.14*
Education	.08	.02	-.02
Months as warden	.03	-.11	-.04
Overcrowding	.08	-.01	.01
Sex of prison	.08	.04	.37*
Security level			
Minimum versus other	.14	.06	-.00
Medium versus other	.15	.00	-.14
Maximum versus other	.15	-.01	-.03
Current number of inmates	-.08	.07	.03
Ratio of inmates to staff	.03	.06	.18*
Adjusted $R^2$	.05	.04	.28

NOTE: Coding: Age; Gender (0 = female, 1 = male); Race (0 = White, 1 = Non-White); Education (0 = diploma/GED, 1 = some college but no degree, 2 = 2-year degree, 3 = 4-year degree, 4 = Some graduate work but no degree; 5 = masters degree, 6 = doctorate); Months as warden; Overcrowding (0 = No, 1 = Yes); Sex of prison (0 = all male, 1 = other); Minimum security versus other (0 = minimum, 1 = other); Medium versus other (0 = medium, 1 = other); Maximum versus other (0 = maximum, 1 = other); Current number of inmates; Ratio of inmates to staff.

\* Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

Intercorrelations between the independent variables are not presented here to save space. The strongest correlation existed between age and months as warden ( $r = .37$ ). No multicollinearity was found between the independent variables.

Table 2 summarizes the results of three multiple regression analyses. No predictor variables had a statistically significant relationship with the percentage of known sexual assaults by the wardens or the wardens' estimated percentage of sexual coercion among inmates. However, the most salient predictor variables of the wardens' estimated percentage of consensual sex among inmates were gender, race, sex of prison, and ratio of inmates to officers. Female and non-White wardens were more likely to argue that a higher percentage of inmates had consensual sex in their institutions compared to male and non-White wardens. Wardens over all-female and male/female correctional facilities were more likely to argue that a higher percentage of inmates had consensual sex in their institutions compared to wardens over all-male correctional facilities. Finally, prisons with a higher inmate-to-correctional-staff ratio were more likely to argue that a higher percentage of

inmates had consensual sex compared to prisons with a lower inmate-to-correctional-staff ratio.

### CONCLUSION

The results of this research clearly show the need for education and training of correctional administrators. Generally speaking, prison wardens do not believe that there is a significant level of sexual activity (consensual or coercive and/or assaultive) occurring in their institutions. Previous research has established that sexual activities among inmates does occur and is often linked to institutional misconduct and violence. Therefore, it is critical that correctional institution administrators be cognizant of such activities and be well equipped to respond to inmates, staff, and emerging incidents when sexual activities between inmates result in negative behavioral consequences.

While wardens as a whole do not believe a significant portion of the inmates in their institutions are sexually active, especially in coercive and/or assaultive sexual activities, it is interesting to note that none of the individual demographic or institutional characteristic variables are statistically related to wardens' perceptions of the incidence of coercive sexual activities among inmates, or the likelihood of the warden knowing about sexual assaults. This suggests that the job demands, typical preparation and/or training, and culture of being a warden are fairly consistent, at least in regard to perceptions of institutional sexual assaults. This should be seen as a positive fact. Wardens are consistent, and there are not individual or institutional variables that appear related to the likelihood of a warden believing he or she has (or does not have) knowledge about sexual assaults in his or her institution or the incidence of sexual assaults in his or her institutions.

However, two individual demographic variables and two institutional characteristics variables are related to wardens' estimates of the prevalence of consensual activity among inmates in their institutions. Female and non-White wardens estimated a greater prevalence of consensual sexual activities among inmates; this is expected as women and minorities are known in the social science literature to be less homophobic and, therefore, more likely to accept and expect same-sex sexual activities to occur. Similarly, wardens in women's and male/female institutions estimate a greater percentage of their inmates are involved in sexual relationships; again, this is expected as academic and popular literature has for several decades emphasized female inmates' sexuality over that of male inmates. Finally, the fourth variable related to higher estimates of the prevalence of sexual activities among inmates, higher inmate-staff ratio, is also to be expected. Sexual activities

among inmates are prohibited in prisons. When a lower concentration of staff is present, it is logical to expect that misconduct (including sexual activities) will be engaged in by inmates. Wardens, in essence, know that when their staffing level is lower they can and/or should expect greater incidence of misconduct among inmates (although it is likely to go undetected).

Although the current study is informative about wardens' perceptions, and the general lack of relationship between individual and institutional characteristics and perceptions of sexual activities among inmates, it is far from complete. The need for additional research, to further explore the reasons why the general level of self-perceived knowledge is low and why wardens generally do not believe many of their inmates are sexually active, is clearly needed. This further research, together with the current research, should guide the development and delivery of continuing education and training efforts, for current administrators and up-and-coming administrators in training. Understanding and being prepared to respond to real and perceived incidents of sexual assault and their resulting consequences is critically important for efficient and effective correctional institutional management.

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