

WARDENS' PERCEPTIONS OF INMATE FEAR OF SEXUAL ASSAULT: A RESEARCH NOTE

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Research on inmate fear of sexual assault is sparse in sociological and correctional journals. Studies that examine wardens' perceptions of inmate fear of sexual assault are nonexistent in the literature. Therefore, using data gathered from 226 wardens of state correctional institutions, this study examines which demographic and institutional factors significantly affect wardens' perceptions of inmate fear of sexual assault within their institutions. Sex of the institution, security level, and number of officially reported inmate sexual assaults within the facilities were the most salient predictors of wardens' beliefs in the prevalence of inmate fear of sexual assault. Policy implications are also addressed.

Keywords: *fear of inmate sexual assault; wardens' attitudes; inmate sexual assault*

FEAR. This one word has the power to invoke one of the strongest emotions that an individual can experience. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines *fear* as "an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger; to be afraid or apprehensive; a reason for alarm" (Mish & Morse, 2001, p. 425). One of the most common fears in society is the fear of sexual assault. Females are more often thought of when investigating fear of sexual assault. However, by advocating and advancing this approach, male inmates in prisons are excluded from research. In fact, it has been 14 years since the first and only study addressing male inmate fear of sexual assault was conducted. Tewksbury (1989) assessed the fear of sex-

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ual assault among 150 male inmates in an Ohio correctional facility. Tewksbury argued that fear of sexual assault among these inmates generated greater psychological reactions that affected not only the inmates but also the daily routines of the correctional institutions as well. He found that shorter and overweight inmates were more fearful of sexual assault in prison.

Unfortunately, studies assessing correctional staff and administrators' perceptions of inmate fear of sexual assault are nonexistent in the literature. Furthermore, it is unknown what demographic- and institutional-related factors may influence wardens' perceptions of the amount of inmate fear of sexual assault in their institutions. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to examine which of these factors significantly affect wardens' perceptions of how prevalent inmate fear of sexual assault is within their respective prisons.

METHOD

Anonymous surveys were distributed to a random sample of 378 wardens of male prisons in the United States in 2001. In addition, because of the low number of female prisons, all wardens of these facilities were surveyed (63 wardens). Wardens supervising federal correctional facilities, privatized correctional facilities, prerelease centers, juvenile detention facilities, and jails were excluded from the study. The information for each correctional facility was gathered from the *American Correctional Association's Juvenile and Adult Correctional Department, Institutions, Agencies, and Paroling Authorities Dictionary* (2000) that lists the addresses and contact persons for each correctional institution.

Each warden received a questionnaire along with a cover letter and 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 form as all data collected concerned the study of public officials. This allowed for enhanced confidentiality. Additional steps were also implemented to increase the response rate. These included a reminder card and a duplicate survey. Of the 441 respondents, 226 agreed to participate in the study, yielding a response rate of 51.2%.

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 are 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 compar-

ison, approximately 73% of all state wardens are White, 21% are African American, and 6% are classified as other.

According to Camp and Camp (1998), approximately 11% of prisons are maximum security, 5% high and/or close security, 28% medium security, 13% minimum security, 35% multilevel security, and 8% either intake or community. Of the sample respondents, 16% oversaw maximum-security prisons, 7% high and/or close security, 25% medium security, 20% minimum security, and 32% multilevel security. Thus, the sample appears to be fairly representative of the population in terms of gender, race, and security level.

MEASURES

Wardens were asked the following question, "How prevalent do you believe fear of sexual assault is among the inmates in your institution?" This question was coded on a 10-point scale, with 1 indicating *no inmate fear* and 10 indicating *extreme inmate fear*. This item served as the dependent variable.

Demographic variables (age, gender, race, and educational level) were recorded for the wardens. Data were also collected on the current number of inmates within their institutions, whether the prison was overcrowded, sex of the institution, security level, the ratio of inmates to staff, and the officially reported number of inmates who were sexually assaulted within their prisons.

RESULTS

A majority of the 226 wardens surveyed believed that the prevalence of inmate fear of sexual assault was relatively low. In fact, almost 65% of the wardens believed that the fear of sexual assault within their prisons was low (as indicated by the high number of one, two, and three responses). Only 10.6% of the wardens believed that inmate fear of sexual assault was high in their institutions (as indicated by the small number of seven, eight, and nine responses). It is interesting to note, no warden believed that the inmates within their facilities were extremely fearful of sexual assault.

Table 1 presents the correlation matrix for the independent and dependent variables. The low intercorrelations indicate multicollinearity is not a problem. In addition, seven significant correlates affected the wardens' perceptions of the prevalence of inmate fear of sexual assault. Male wardens and wardens with lower educational levels were more likely to believe that inmates were fearful of sexual assault in their institutions. Wardens overseeing institutions with a larger number of inmates and wardens running all-male facilities were more likely to assert that inmate fear of sexual assault was higher. Wardens overseeing higher security-level facilities were more

TABLE 1: Zero-Order Correlations Between Independent and Dependent Variables

<i>Prevalence of Inmate Fear of Sexual Assault</i>	
Age	.11
Gender	.16*
Race	-.07
Education	-.16*
Number of inmates	.26*
Overcrowded facility	.01
Sex of institution	-.27*
Security level	
Minimum versus other	.27*
Medium versus other	.03
Maximum versus other	-.16*
Inmate-to-staff ratio	-.05
Number of sexual assaults	.24*

NOTE: Coding: Age; Gender (0 = female, 1 = male); Race (0 = White, 1 = other); Education (0 = less than 4-year degree, 1 = 4-year degree, 2 = graduate work); Current number of inmates (Current number of inmates); Overcrowded facility (is capacity of institution smaller than the current number of inmates 0 = no, 1 = yes); Sex of institution (0 = male, 1 = other); Security level: Minimum versus other (0 = minimum, 1 = other), Medium versus other (0 = medium, 1 = other), Maximum versus other (0 = maximum, 1 = other); Ratio of inmates to staff (number of current inmates divided by the number of security staff in the institution); Number of sexual assaults (number of officially reported sexual assaults in institution).

*Denotes statistical significance at the .05 level.

likely to argue that fear of sexual assault among their inmates was higher. Finally, wardens who reported a higher number of official inmate sexual assaults were more likely to believe that higher levels of inmate fear of sexual assault were present in their institutions.

Table 2 summarizes the results of the multiple regression analysis. The most salient predictors of wardens' beliefs in the prevalence of inmate fear of sexual assault was sex of institution, security level, and number of officially reported inmate sexual assaults in prisons. Wardens administering all-male facilities, wardens supervising higher security levels, and wardens who disclosed a higher number of officially reported inmate sexual assaults were more likely to believe that inmate fear of sexual assault was higher in their prisons. Altogether, the independent variables explained 21% of the total variance in the dependent variable.

DISCUSSION

The results of the current study clearly show that correctional administrators do not believe that fear of sexual assault among the inmates in their insti-

TABLE 2: OLS Regression Summary Explaining Wardens' Perceptions in the Prevalence of Inmate Fear of Sexual Assault (N = 215)

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Age	.00	.02	.09	1.10	.22
Gender	.40	.36	.09	1.24	.27
Race	-.26	.27	-.07	1.11	.33
Education	-.24	.14	-.11	-.97	.09
Number of inmates	.00	.00	.11	-1.71	.18
Overcrowded facility	.00	.23	.03	.43	.67
Sex of institution	-.88	.37	-.18	-2.32	.02
Security level					
Minimum versus other	.78	.34	.19	2.28	.02
Medium versus other	.13	.31	.03	.43	.67
Maximum versus other	-.32	.32	-.08	-1.00	.32
Inmate-to-staff ratio	.00	.01	.03	.39	.70
Number of sexual assaults	.15	.06	.18	2.41	.02
Constant	1.44				
R^2	.26				
Adjusted R^2	.21				

NOTE: Coding: Age; Gender (0 = female, 1 = male); Race (0 = White, 1 = other); Education (0 = less than 4-year degree, 1 = 4-year degree, 2 = graduate work); Current number of inmates (Current number of inmates); Overcrowded facility (is capacity of institution smaller than the current number of inmates 0 = no, 1 = yes); Sex of institution (0 = male, 1 = other); Security level: Minimum versus other (0 = minimum, 1 = other), Medium versus other (0 = medium, 1 = other), Maximum versus other (0 = maximum, 1 = other); Ratio of inmates to staff (number of current inmates divided by the number of security staff in the institution); Number of sexual assaults (number of officially reported sexual assaults in institution).

tutions is a significant factor in the culture, social structure, or administration of their prisons. Only 1 in 10 wardens believed that there was a high level of fear of sexual assault in their prisons. These results plainly call into question the longstanding media-generated perception in American society that rape is a dominant factor in the construction of culture in men's prisons. The prevalence of sexual assaults among inmates has been shown to be lower than common assumptions. This research argues that concerns about the occurrence of sexual assault are also less common than many might assume.

However, there are some interesting results herein that may be useful for administrative purposes. It is interesting to note that wardens of men's institutions, prisons with larger populations, higher security institutions, and prisons with higher numbers of officially reported inmate sexual assaults were more likely to report higher perceived levels of fear of sexual assault among inmates. These are expected results, however. Prisons with more inmates, those of higher security designations, and those where more sexual assaults are known to administrators are those that house inmates more likely

to be predisposed to sexual assaults, those with inmates serving longer sentences (and therefore suffering greater and/or longer deprivations of consensual heterosexual activities), and those who are more likely to know of sexual assaults that have occurred. Fear is expected to be higher when the event is known to be present.

Overall, this research supports the argument that sexual assaults (actual occurrences and concerns about the possibility of such) are, in fact, not a major factor in the day-to-day operations and structure of prisons. This is not to say that sexual assaults are an insignificant or trivial concern for either administrators or inmates, but rather the incidence and concerns regarding possible sexual victimization are not significantly restricting or guiding inmates' daily activities. For administrators, this should come as good news. They are not faced with needing to actively address a concern of inmates that has not been previously central to administrative concerns.

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