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## RESEARCH REPORT

### Major Disturbances: A Review of the Literature

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**Major Disturbances: A Review of the Literature**

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## Executive Summary

**Key words:** *major prison incidents, major prison disturbances, prison riots*

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) (2016) identifies two distinct categories of major incidents: major disruptions and major disturbances. CSC defines a *major disruption* as, “An internal or external event not inmate initiated which causes the disruption of routine for the whole or a significant portion of the inmate population.” In contrast, a *major disturbance* is defined as, “Any incident that causes the disruption of routine for the whole or a significant portion of the inmate population but that is inmate-initiated, such as riots, willful destruction of property, and seizure of units by prisoners.”

In this report, we examine existing literature on inmate-initiated major disturbances in prison, with a focus on prison riots. The purpose of this review is to compare different conceptualizations of major disturbances in the literature, as well as to summarize existing empirical research on this topic. We conducted a search of several academic databases and search engines using keywords to identify literature for review and examined the reference sections of all selected literature to supplement the main computerized database search. The literature was analyzed through an in-depth content analysis to determine themes.

Our analysis suggests that much of the literature focuses exclusively on riots and uses the terms “riot”, “major disturbance”, or “major incident” interchangeably. Additionally, despite being considered to be at the high end of disturbances in prisons (Carrabine, 2005), there is no single agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a riot (Adams, 1994). Rather, there are a number of definitions in the literature and there is disagreement about what qualifies as a prison riot (Boin & Van Duin, 1995), as well as the features of a riot. Despite this, there are some common themes in the literature. These include conceptualizations of riots as: collective action, involving multiple inmate participants; involving loss of control; occurring over a period of time; and having significant consequences, such as physical violence or property damage.

Our review of the literature identified several conceptual models proposed by researchers to explain why major prison disturbances, such as riots, occur. Some causal explanations focus on structural factors, including: environmental factors that may predispose an institution to a riot, a catalytic event, perceptions of deprivation by inmates, breakdowns in formal and/or informal power systems of social control, and a sudden change in mechanisms of control. Some explanations point the importance of individual-level factors, specifically inmate characteristics and the profile of the inmate population as a cause of prison riots.

These frameworks are not mutually exclusive and there is often overlap between them, as the issue of prison riots is multi-faceted and research suggests that several forces combine to disrupt the institution (Carrabine, 2005; Dillingham & Montgomery, 1985). Therefore explanatory frameworks which emphasize different environmental, situational, structural, organizational and social factors, are best used in an integrated fashion (Martin & Zimmerman, 1990; Welch 2013), with explanations of prison riots attending to both the structural circumstances of incarceration, as well as acknowledging the ways in which individual-level factors may contribute to major

disturbances.

While causal frameworks may offer broad utility, it is important to note that the idiosyncratic nature of riots make it difficult to devise explanatory models that retain applicability beyond a single case study. Further, prison riots are embedded within a particular historical context (Useem & Kimball, 1989), yet existing literature focuses significantly on historical prison riots or the history of prison riots. This raises a concern given that prison social conditions are fluid and changing over time (e.g. Kreager & Kruttschnitt, 2018), as well as varied across context (e.g. McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2019). Therefore, we suggest that given the dated and heavily U.S.-based body of literature, there is a need for further empirical analysis of major disturbances within the current Canadian correctional context.

## Introduction

The Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) (2016) identifies two distinct categories of major incidents: major disruptions and major disturbances. CSC defines a *major disruption* as, “An internal or external event not inmate initiated which causes the disruption of routine for the whole or a significant portion of the inmate population.” Examples of major disruptions include fire, flood, or a natural disaster. In contrast, according to CSC, a *major disturbance* is any incident that causes the disruption of routine for the whole or a significant portion of the inmate population but that is inmate-initiated, such as riots, willful destruction of property, and seizure of units by prisoners.<sup>1</sup> CSC defines a *riot* as major disturbances where “twelve or more persons are unlawfully and riotously assembled together” and are determined when a designated individual (e.g., warden, institutional head) is satisfied that a riot is in progress, commands silence and the riot proclamation is made.

In this report, we examine existing literature focusing specifically on inmate-initiated major disturbances in prison. The purpose of this review is to compare different conceptualizations of major disturbances in the literature, as well as to summarize existing empirical research on this topic. To begin, we discuss how major disturbances are defined in the literature, commenting on the tendency for scholars to focus on riots and describing definitional variation. We then synthesize different explanatory frameworks evident in the literature, which relate to structural conditions, such as environmental preconditions and social control, and individual factors, for example inmate characteristics. To conclude, we comment on the limitations of existing literature, noting the lack of current research outside of the United States and need for contemporary research in the Canadian correctional context.

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<sup>1</sup> Major disturbances in CSC institutions are subject to (1) National Tier I Commissioner; and (2) National Tier II DGI investigations.

## Methodology

In order to identify material for this literature review, we conducted a search of several databases and search engines, including Scholars Portal, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Keywords used to identify literature for review included “major disturbance”, “major incident”, “riot”, “collective inmate incident”, “collective prisoner violence” alone and in combination with the terms “prison”, “penitentiary” or “correctional institution”. Following an initial lack of identified studies, we examined the reference sections of all selected literature to supplement the main computerized database search. Any literature in peer-reviewed journals, as well as one book, was reviewed to ensure relevance to the topic of the review. To be considered relevant for inclusion in the literature review, the material had to focus on major inmate-initiated incidents and have been published between 1960 and 2018.<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this study, policy documents, government directives, official inquiries and investigation reports, and news media articles were excluded from the review.<sup>34</sup> We analyzed the literature through an in-depth content analysis to identify themes in the literature.

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<sup>2</sup> We attempted to include literature in our review that was specific to Canadian federal institutions, however we could not locate any research that examined major disturbances or riots in Canadian penitentiaries.

<sup>3</sup> Other studies that met inclusion criteria, but that could not be retrieved in hard copy or electronically during the review period were excluded from our analysis. Where possible, accounts of these studies from other sources were examined and included in our review.

<sup>4</sup> The review was limited to papers written in English. We attempted to include papers written in French in our review, however the search terms “emeute”, “perturbation majeure” and “demonstration de violence collective” in combination with “prison” and “penitencier” yielded no literature for inclusion.



## Major Disturbances and Riots in Prison

### What is a Major Disturbance?

Our analysis suggests that much of the literature focuses exclusively on riots (e.g., Boin & Van Duin, 1995; Colvin, 1982; Coyle, 1991; Fox, 1971; Martin & Zimmerman, 1990; Useem & Kimball, 1989), and uses the terms “riot”, “major disturbance”, or “major incident” interchangeably. In addition, despite being considered to be at the high end of disturbances in prisons (Carrabine, 2005), as riot scholar Adams (1994) notes, there is no single agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a riot. Rather, there are a number of definitions in the literature and disagreement about what qualifies as a prison riot (Boin & Van Duin, 1995), as well as the features of a riot. In what follows, we synthesize various definitions of riots, highlighting both similarities and points of departure.<sup>5</sup>

**Collective action.** Some definitions of disturbances consider the number of participants to be a defining factor. In *The Anatomy of Another Prison Riot*, a study of disorder in the Michigan correctional system, Israel Barak-Galantz (1983) contends that in order to be considered a riot, the incident must involve a number of inmates and the result will be “mass destruction”. Sociologist Mark Colvin’s (1982) examination of the New Mexico prison riot also highlights riots as collective disorder and makes an important contribution to the literature by clearly defining a riot according to how many prisoners are involved. For him, disturbances must involve at least 15 inmates to constitute a riot. Similarly, Dillingham and Montgomery (1985) draw on the 1973 South Carolina Department of Corrections Collective Violence study to define riots as any incident involving 15 or more inmates. Sociologist Nick Larsen (1988) suggests that, depending on the size of an institution, an “average prison riot” will generally involve most of the inmate population, some participating willingly, while others may be coerced by other prisoners. In their comprehensive review of prison riot literature, Martin and Zimmerman (1990) suggest that riots will involve a group of inmates. They highlight this collective action as fundamentally political with a certain degree of organization. The later work of Useem and Reisig (1999:735) offers a synthesis of existing definitions, providing comprehensive definitions of both “disturbances” and “riots”, which they understand to be

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<sup>5</sup> Given that the vast majority of the literature examines riots, we use the term “riot” interchangeably with “major disturbance”.

“collective disorders”. For them, both involve a group action of ten or more inmates.

**Loss of power and control.** Many of the authors stress the qualitative element of loss of control and power; in other words, riots involve a take over in power by inmates (e.g. Fox, Colvin, Wilsnack, etc.). For most of the authors, a riot involves more than the collective action by inmates. To qualify as a riot, scholars suggest that there must be some loss of control or power. For instance, in his examination of various prison riots in the United States between 1940 and 1970, criminologist Vernon Fox (1973), suggests that riots will involve violence and a loss of administrative control. Similarly, Colvin (1982) identifies the defining characteristic of a riot as the taking over of power by inmates of all, or part, of an institution through physical force; excluded from this definition are strikes and assaults that do not result in the administrative loss of power. For Wilsnack (1976), who surveyed the largest prisons in each U.S. state, a riot occurs with the “seizure by inmates of prison territory where they affect more inmates than those actively participating in the disturbance.” Like the definitions put forth by Colvin and others, central to Wilsnack’s definition is the requirement that inmates take over some part of the institution. In the study of U.S. prison riots, Useem (1990) and Useem and Kimball (1989) also understand a prison riot as an event whereby prison staff and administration lose control of a significant number of prisoners. Useem and Kimball’s (1989) study speaks to a loss of administrative control and threats or acts of violence/property damage. However, they suggest that in order to constitute a riot, the seizure of the prison by inmates will be over a significant part of the institution. Martin and Zimmerman (1990:714) synthesize the work of previous researchers, suggesting that riots are “incidents that involve the seizure of control over part of all of the prison, through violence or force.” For Useem and Reisig (1999), who draw a clear distinction between riots as violent and other forms of disorders (e.g. strikes) as non-violent, a riot will prevent authorities from controlling, keeping order in, or traveling freely through, some area of the prison.

**Duration.** In defining riots, authors have also commented on the temporal qualities, although they present competing views of required duration. Useem and Kimball (1989), importantly, attend to the duration of a riot suggesting that riots will unfold over a considerable amount of time. Boin and Van Duin (1995:364) also consider the length of time of riots, noting that in all incidents, “a certain time span evolves between the onset of a riot and its ending.” Unlike Useem and Kimball, however, for them, a riot may be short-lived or may last for days.

Useem and Reisig (1999) also highlight a riot as possibly short-lived, suggesting that a riot takes place when an institution was not brought under control within five minutes. In his study of prison disturbances in Canada and the U.S., Larsen (1988) also conceives of riots as unfolding over a period of time, with various phases that are each marked by distinct events.

**Violence and destruction.** There is considerable agreement among scholars that riots will involve both violence and property destruction in the institution. Martin and Zimmerman (1999) explain that riots will involve violence and the presentation of demands by a collective number of prisoners and will include the intentional destruction of property. For Larsen (1988), riots typically involve the destruction of prison property as well as violence, including hostage-taking and physical attacks. Likewise, Dillingham and Montgomery (1985) suggest that the collective action of prisoners will result in property damage or human injury. Consistent with most other scholars, Useem and Kimball (1989) understand a riot as possibly involving hostage taking, damage, and violence. A riot, as well as a major disturbance, according to Useem and Reisig (1999) will both involve threats or acts of violence that led to injury and some level of damage to property.

**Summary.** In summary, our review reveals a body of literature that focuses significantly, almost exclusively, on one type of major prison disturbance – riots. Despite differences in the way riots are defined, there are various common themes that intersect across the majority of the literature. Specifically, many authors conceptualize riots as:

1. Collective action, involving multiple inmate participants;
2. Involving loss of control;
3. Occurring over a period of time, and;
4. Significant consequences, such as physical violence or property damage.

## **Explanatory Frameworks**

Our review of the literature identified several conceptual models proposed by researchers to explain why major prison disturbances, such as riots, occur. In what follows, we briefly synthesize the main principles of each framework. We draw on (and modify) Martin and Zimmerman's 1990 *Typology of Conceptual Models* to classify the dominant frameworks that explain the cause(s) of riots: environmental preconditions, deprivation and rising expectations, catalyst incident, social control and breakdown, power vacuum, and inmate characteristics. It is

important to note that these frameworks often overlap and are therefore not mutually exclusive and should not be treated as such.

**Environmental Preconditions.** It appears most common for researchers to identify pre-existing environmental factors as predisposing or precipitating conditions that may contribute to riots. Environmental components that may place a prison in a precarious position may include: living conditions, such as overcrowding; inadequate or lack of programs; idleness; poor or insufficient food; and administrative practices. Such precipitating factors may lead to heightened tension in an institution (American Correctional Association, 1981; Barak-Galantz, 1985; Dillingham & Montgomery, 1985). For instance, in the article *Prison Riots as Organizational Failures: A Managerial Perspective*, Boin and Van Duin (1995:362) examine the Attica and New Mexico prison riots and suggest that the relationship between living conditions and the tendency to riot is “well-established”. Wilsnack (1976) found that riots were more likely to occur in maximum security prisons where overcrowding was present and inmates were idle. In his critique of the Woolf Report on prison disturbances, Ryan (1992) suggests that poor conditions and overcrowding contributed to the volatility in the English and Wales prison systems. In a detailed account of order in two prisons in England, Sparks et al. (1996) suggest that the only way to fully comprehend the nature and intensity of the “control problems” that prisons face at various times is to consider the pre-existing conflicts, relationships, and accommodations present within each particular prison (as referenced in Brown, 2007). However, these conditions are present in most prisons and major disturbances do not occur. For instance, Useem and Kimball (1989) argue that in the case of the New Mexico prison riot, crowding played only a small role. Therefore, some scholars argue that bad prison conditions alone cannot explain what provokes a riot (Boin & Rattay, 2004; Fox, 1971), and Fox (1971) suggests that to theorize as such is overly simplistic. Fox purports that predisposing causes and precipitating causes, such as overcrowding, are not a cause in and of themselves. In other words, while these institutional factors are necessary preconditions they are not an adequate cause (Welch, 2013).

**Deprivation and Rising Expectations.** Numerous studies suggest that deprivation and differential opportunity, with a catalytic event, may incite a riot (Boin & Van Duin, 1995; Wilsnack, 1976; Martin & Zimmerman, 1990). Under this framework, prisoners are more likely to riot when they perceive their living conditions to be significantly worse than other comparable

environments (Dinitz, 1981; Flynn, 1980; as referenced in Boin & Van Duin, 1995), or when progress slows following a period of improvement (Welch, 2013), generating prisoner frustration. For instance, Fox's (1971) powder keg theory is closely tied to deprivation, whereby poor living conditions change the prison into a time bomb waiting to explode (Carrabine, 2005). Relative deprivation and rising expectations emphasize the ways in which violent protest is rational and purposive action by inmates (Carrabine, 2005). In his examination of prison riots in the U.S. and the United Kingdom, Mick Ryan (1992) contends that inmates riot as a means of protest against perceived poor conditions. According to Barak-Galantz (1983), the degree of dissatisfaction among individuals is actually determined by the perceived incongruity between their achieved status and a goal, rather than the absolute level of their achievement or deprivation. What unites these analyses is the implication that there is a relationship between a precipitating event and a deep set of grievances (Carrabine, 2005).

**Catalyst Incident.** Carrabine's 2005 study of the Strangeways prison riots – one of the few studies to examine prison riots in the past fifteen years – suggests that we must go beyond background factors, with riots “born of general causes [and] completed, as it were, by accidents” (Aron, 1965: 242 as quoted in Carrabine, 2005). This understanding of riots asserts that they are spontaneous, unplanned events (Welch, 2013), and couples preconditions with a sudden event – the catalyst incident – which acts as a detonator. This interpretation focuses on the identification of precipitating incidents as the cause, and the spontaneous event as the detonator (Brown, 2006; Martin & Zimmerman, 1990). As Martin and Zimmerman (1990:718) summarize, “Riots occur when some incident sets off a chain of events that becomes a collective violent disturbance.” Fox (1971:13) explains, “A bomb is made by constructing a strong perimeter or casing and generating pressure inside. It blows at its weakest point, but it has to be detonated. The detonation is not the ‘cause’ of the explosions, although it ‘triggered’ it.” In other words, this powder keg theory purports that a riot may be spontaneous in regards to its timing (Barak-Galantz, 1983), whereby a specific, relatively trivial and impromptu event and accidental circumstances (Carrabine, 2005), may spark a *seemingly* random and spontaneous disturbance (Boin & Van Duin 1995; Coyle, 1991; Useem & Kimball, 1989).

The focus on the “spark” – the catalyst – however, may obscure the “real” cause of a riot or major disturbance. Additionally, it is important to note that researchers do not unanimously agree on the spontaneous nature of riots. For instance, in his discussion of major disturbances in

Canadian (i.e., the 1971 Kingston Penitentiary riot) and U.S. institutions, Larsen (1988:34) sheds light on inmate grievances as a precipitating cause, but contends that, “There is no evidence to suggest that any was started by a specific incident or as a conscious tactic.” Rather, riots are more like an “eruption”, a boiling over. In the book *Prison Riots in Britain and the USA*, Robert Adams (1994) undertakes a historical analysis of prison riots and provides an overview of competing definitions of riots. Unlike some of his peers, he suggests that riots can be considered as part of the continuum of activities and involve an element of dissent and/or protest, whereby prisoners prepare and organize themselves to resist or protest thus suggesting that riots are planned events. Similarly, Ryan (1992), who uses the term “disturbance” in his critique of the 1990 Woolf Report on prison disturbances, recognizes riots as deliberate, inmate-planned events. Further, even in contexts where aggravating environmental preconditions are present and catalytic events occur, riots do not necessarily (and most often do not) unfold.

**Social Control and Breakdown.** Scholars often draw on the classic work of Gresham Sykes (1958) which posits that riots are a result of social disintegration. These explanations attend to what happens as a result of breakdowns in the normal mechanisms of formal (official) and informal (unofficial) social control (Welch, 2013), against the backdrop of environmental changes. Social control explanations pay particular attention to the breakdown or disorganization in the more informal mechanisms of control (Martin & Zimmerman, 1990; Welch, 2013). More specifically, researchers suggest that daily order in prisons is primarily established not through the use of force, but through “an intricate web of informal and symbiotic social relationships” (Barak-Galantz, 1985:55). For example, order is maintained in prison largely through an informal power sharing between prison staff and the inmate subculture, as opposed to pure force (Carrabine, 2005). In normal times, social structures keep prisoners from mobilizing for conflict, however, when the status quo is threatened or the everyday norms are destabilised (e.g., through administrative interference in the inmate subculture), disturbances are likely to occur (Larsen, 1988). In other words, according to this framework, riots may be incited by the breakdown of social structures and the structural relationships in prison, such as the breakdown of administrative control or a shift in prison management (Barak-Galantz, 1985). As an example, Colvin’s analysis of the 1980 New Mexico Penitentiary riot suggests that organizational changes, cracking down on drug trafficking, and the termination of inmate councils and programming ultimately ended the informal social control mechanisms – the

collusive relationship between prisoners and staff that had served to maintain order inside the prison (Colvin, 1982; Carrabine, 2005).

In contrast, in perhaps the most highly-regarded work on prison disturbances, Useem and Kimball (1989) combine elements from the disorganization and deprivation approaches (Carrabine, 2005). Unlike explanations of a breakdown in the relationship between inmates and staff, Useem and Kimball (1989) argue that their findings revealed a breakdown in administration and the operation of the prison (e.g., such as poor communication, discordant rules, and instability). According to this framework, administrative breakdown (i.e. prison administration and operating procedures) may lead to rioting. In later studies, where both private prisons and public prisons in the United States were analyzed, Useem and colleagues suggested that when power is exercised in a manner that is too extreme and/or when administrative power is weak or precarious, a riot may ensue (Goldstone & Useem, 1999; Useem, 1990; Useem & Reising, 1999). In doing so, the riot scholars offer a new understanding of major disturbances as a consequence of a breakdown of the institution, as opposed to the organization of the prisoners (Carrabine, 2005; Useem, 1990; Useem & Goldstone, 1999; Useem & Kimball, 1989). Similarly, in their study of “riot proneness”, Boin and Van Duin (1995:361) argue that prison management is “an important key to analyzing problems within a prison.” They note that institutions in which both discontent with living conditions and disorganized security – both preconditions – are the most susceptible to a disturbance. Useem (1995) explains why collective prisoner revolt occurs, noting the importance of social disintegration (Sykes, 1958) among inmates themselves, and that institutional immersion serves as a protective factor to riotous and other anti-social behaviours.

Unlike earlier researchers, Boin and Van Duin (1995) make an important contribution to theoretical approaches on prison riots by expanding the analytical lens to examine the riot process itself. Based on their analysis of the New Mexico and Attica prison riots, they argue that the interaction between management practices and prisoner behaviour could have significant implications on both the course and the outcome of a riot. Nearly a decade later, Boin, in collaboration with colleague Rattay, examines the Strangeways prison riot in the U.K. Boin and Rattay (2004) build on the integrative theory of Useem and Kimball (1989) focusing not on contributing factors or catalytic events, but on the processes that foster these factors. Boin and Rattay (2004) point to the importance of two key processes of social breakdown: institutional

breakdown, specifically the structural breakdown of staff-inmate social relations, and administrative breakdown between staff and management.

**Power Vacuum.** The power vacuum framework focuses on the role of sudden changes in mechanisms of formal control and the resultant shifts in power relationships. This model contains elements of conflict and social control approaches to explaining collective uprisings (Martin & Zimmerman, 1990), suggesting that prisoners rely on consistent leadership to establish routines and rules and that when there is frequent turnover, prisoners may perceive a lack of effective or legitimate management (Welch, 2013). For example, in his examination of disorder in the Michigan correctional system, Barak-Galantz (1983) highlights internal changes in prison structure and organization as precipitating factors that can result in a “power vacuum”, which he identifies as the trigger point. For Barak-Galantz (1983:18), the prisoners’ perceptions that a state of power vacuum has been created, in combination with other factors, “provides a predisposing configuration against which prison riots” may occur. As Martin and Zimmerman (1990:722) summarize, “Such a system is characterized as being in a state of powerlessness...it was such a vacuum that the inmates...rushed to fill.” Colvin (1980:40) also engages with the notion of a vacuum of power in his examination of the New Mexico prison riot, identifying precipitating factors which set the stage for a “downward spiral of increasing disorder,” including social instability in both administration and inmates.

**Inmate Characteristics.** Other key factors, which are largely absent in most prison riot research, are inmate characteristics including criminogenic profiles and the composition of the inmate population. Specifically, some researchers suggest that individual characteristics may present risk factors for prison riots, for instance Carrabine (2005) notes that individual personalities, such as charismatic personalities, can play a role in the cause of riots. In their study of official infraction records and prison dossiers of male inmates in the U.S., Graeve and colleagues (2007) found certain traits and characteristics to be common among rioters. Griffin and Hepburn (2012:270) also identify criminogenic characteristics as factors in “episodic group disturbances,” whereby the pre-institutional roles, attitudes, values and experiences of inmates may be the basis of risk factors or internal predispositions for misconduct. Useem and Kimball (1989) examine a number of U.S. prison riots and shed light on differences that existed at each institution, with attention to individual and group characteristics. They argue that the predisposition of inmates in a particular prison and inmates’ identification (i.e. how a prisoner



identifies) may influence how a riot unfolds and contribute to the character of a prison riot (e.g. inmate violence against other inmates, or hostages, formulating demands, non-participation). For example, they purport that in the Joliet riot – an institution in which 60 to 80 percent of the population were affiliated with a gang – gang relations and organization may have limited the level of violence and avoided the extreme inmate versus inmate violence that was present in the New Mexico prison riot. However Useem and Kimball (1989), Graeve and colleagues (2007), and Griffin and Hepburn (2012) acknowledge the limitations of focusing only on individual-level measures, like the dispositions of inmates. For instance, Griffin and Hepburn (2012) suggest that there is evidence that the structural features of an institution may moderate the effects of individual-level variables on prisoner behaviour. Therefore investigations should examine both individual and structural variables (e.g. crowding, inmate organization, administrative breakdown) and incorporate both the structural literature discussed in the preceding pages, as well as literature that examines inmate characteristics.

**Summary.** In summary, a review of the literature suggests that there is disagreement amongst researchers about the cause of prison riots and disturbances (Useem & Reisig, 1999). Additionally, the issue of prison riots is multi-faceted and a number of forces combine to disturb the order of the institution (Carrabine, 2005). Dillingham and Montgomery (1985:35) suggest the combined approaches “provide a valuable matrix of considerations for defining causative factors,” and, given various contributing factors which come together at a particular moment in time (Coyle, 1991), explanatory frameworks, which emphasize different environmental, situational, structural, organizational and social factors, are therefore best used in an integrated fashion (Martin & Zimmerman, 1990; Welch, 2013). Thus, explanations of prison riots must consider both the structural circumstances of incarceration, including material conditions and power relationships, as well as acknowledging the ways in which human characteristics and agency may contribute to unrest (Carrabine, 2005). However, the context of each prison is also a crucial consideration and some riot scholars suggest that disturbances can generally only be understood in terms of the factors that exist in each individual institution (Sparks et al., 1996). Further, Useem and Kimball (1989:115) explain that examinations of prison riots should attend to the particular moment in time stating, “Prison riots are complex events, each one imbedded in its own peculiar historical context.” Therefore, given the dated and heavily U.S.-based body of literature, the applicability of these theoretical models to current Canadian institutional contexts

warrants greater consideration.

## Conclusions

Major prison disturbances occur less frequently than minor incidents (Carrabine, 2005). However, such disturbances pose distinct challenges and cannot be reduced to simplistic explanations (Adams, 2016). Our review of existing literature identified various understandings of situational risk factors that operated prior to a riot. However, our review is based on a small body of research examining major prison disturbances. As Martin and Zimmerman (1990:713) predicted, “Knowledge about prison riots is relatively limited, and probably will continue to grow slowly and intermittently given [the] pervasive problems” that make analysis of such events challenging. Indeed, this has proven true, with an absence of research emerging over the past decade. Furthermore, the research that does exist relies heavily on secondary data such as correctional documentation and reporting of incidents, or survey data most often supplied by prison officials, as well as case study analyses which raise methodological concerns. Specifically, there has been little, if any, qualitative research conducted with those involved in major disturbances, whether as witnesses, victims or instigators.

Compounding this, the existing literature focuses significantly on historical prison riots (e.g. Brown, 2006) or the history of prison riots (e.g. Adams, 1994; Barak-Galantz, 1983), and much of the literature is dated. Additionally, extant literature largely examines riots in the United States (e.g. Barak-Galantz, 1983; Boin & Van Duin, 1995; Colvin, 1992; Fox 1971; Useem & Kimball, 1989) and the United Kingdom (e.g. Boin & Rattay, 2004; Carrabine, 2005; Coyle, 1991; Sparks et al., 1996) and fails to consider major inmate-initiated incidents in Canadian institutions.<sup>6</sup> Given that prison social conditions are fluid, varying over time (e.g. Kreager & Kruttschnitt, 2018), as well as across context (e.g. McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2019), there is a need for more up-to-date research considering prison social conditions and prison incidents, including major disturbances. This is particularly so given key changes in the contemporary prison context, including the rise of security threat groups, the aging older offender population and marked changes in prison culture (e.g. Crewe, 2005a, 2005b; Kreager & Kruttschnitt, 2018; McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2019; Ricciardelli, 2014). Furthermore, given the

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<sup>6</sup> Larsen (1988) undertakes a discussion of major disturbances in Canadian (1971 Kingston Penitentiary riot) and U.S. institutions. While he does highlight inmate grievance as a precipitating cause, his examination focuses primarily on the anatomy and consequences of major disturbances, as well as in the United States. As such, Larsen (1988) offers some insight into how a riot may unfold, but not into possible causes.

interchange of riots and major disturbances in the literature, a focus on major disturbances more broadly may produce important and more nuanced knowledge into these complex and serious incidents. This would in turn allow for more effective incident prevention and management policies and strategies within correctional agencies.

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