

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

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Major Disturbances: A Review of the Literature

Existing literature highlights key characteristics and causal factors of historical prison riots; further research is needed to explore major disturbances in contemporary institutional contexts.

Why we did this study

While relatively rare in number, major prison disturbances are key indicators of correctional performance. CSC defines a major disturbance as inmate-initiated incidents that disrupt the routine for the whole or a significant portion of the inmate population, such as riots and the seizure of units by inmates (Correctional Service of Canada, 2016). To better understand the causes and characteristics of major disturbances, we conducted a review of the literature, with a particular focus on prison riots.

What we did

We conducted a keyword search of academic databases and search engines and examined reference sections to identify literature for review. We analyzed the literature through an in-depth content analysis, focusing in particular on theoretical insights regarding both the causes and characteristics of major disturbances.

What we found

The literature on prison disturbances is marked by definitional and conceptual inconsistencies. The terms 'riot', 'major disturbance', and 'major incident' tend to be used interchangeably, and the literature focuses almost exclusively on riots. Furthermore, there is no single definition of what constitutes a major disturbance (Adams, 1994), and there is disagreement about what qualifies as a prison riot (Boin & van Duin, 1995). Despite this, there are certain characteristics evident across distinct definitions, including: involvement of multiple participants (collective action); a loss of institutional control; occurring over a period of time; and having significant consequences (e.g. violence; property damage).

Causal explanations tend to focus on the role of structural factors in precipitating riots. Such factors include predisposing environmental factors; a catalytic incident; inmate perceptions of deprivation; breakdowns in systems of power/social control and; a sudden change in mechanisms of control. Some explanations also identify individual-level factors (e.g. inmate characteristics, profile of the inmate population) as causal factors.

Research also suggests that prison riots are multi-faceted, with several forces intersecting to disrupt the institution (Carrabine, 2005). Resultantly, explanatory frameworks are best used in an integrated fashion (Martin & Zimmerman, 1990).

The existing literature on prison disturbances is dated, focusing significantly on historical prison riots or the history of prison riots. Additionally, existing research is primarily U.S.-based, with limited if any research considering major inmate-initiated incidents in Canadian institutions.

What it means

Given that institutional social conditions vary over time and across context, there is a need for more up-to-date research that reflects the contemporary Canadian institutional context, including the rise of security threat groups, the aging older offender population and marked changes in prison culture (e.g. McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2019). Further empirical and theoretical work is also needed to discern and understand distinct types of major disturbances to extend current knowledge beyond incidents of prison riots.

References:

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For more information

Stanley, D., McKendy, L., & Biro, S. (2020). *Major Disturbances: A Review of the Literature* (Research Report R-427). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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