

CORRECTIONAL SERVICE CANADA

CHANGING LIVES. PROTECTING CANADIANS.

Characteristics and Predictors of Institutional Incidents of Violence

Incarcerated individuals with violent incidents demonstrated complex risk and needs and prior problematic institutional behaviour, with variations across gender and ethnocultural groups.

Why we did this study

The Correctional Service of Canada is responsible for the safety and security of staff and federally incarcerated individuals in Canada. The purpose of this study was to provide an updated examination of the characteristics of institutional violence, as well as the profile, institutional experiences, and individual-level predictors of incarcerated individuals engaging in institutional violence.

What we did

The sample consisted of federally incarcerated individuals who were identified as instigators in committing a violent incident between April 1, 2018 and March 31, 2024 ($N = 7,735$). A comparison group of those with a non-violent incident during the same period was also included ($N = 13,019$). Incident information, demographic characteristics, criminogenic risk and need, institutional behaviour, and prosocial intervention participation was extracted. Additionally, a subsample of 1,410 incident reports were coded to provide context to the violent incidents.

What we found

Inmate fights and assaults on inmates occurred more often than assaults on staff at men's and women's institutions. Assaults on inmates and assaults on staff occurred more often in maximum security, whereas inmate fights occurred more often in medium security institutions. A greater proportion of violent incidents occurred in the Prairie and Ontario regions. Most violent incidents occurred outside of business hours and in common areas at men's institutions but in private areas at women's institutions, likely due to the housing structure. Most incidents did not involve a weapon beyond the individual's hands and feet, and case management-related discipline and resolution decisions (e.g., incident reports, incompatible listings) were the most common incident outcomes. Use of force by staff was more frequently applied in incidents involving Black individuals.

Instigators of violent incidents were most often White or Indigenous, young, single, and serving a determinate sentence. At men's institutions, most instigators of violent incidents had complex needs such as high static risk, dynamic need, and Criminal Risk Index (CRI) ratings, and low reintegration potential. Individuals from women's

institutions also had high dynamic need and CRI ratings but had more variability in the areas of static risk and reintegration potential. Most incarcerated individuals involved in violent incidents had also been identified as the instigator of multiple previous institutional incidents, including violent incidents. Additionally, most instigators demonstrated medium accountability and motivation, and completed the programming assigned to them at both men's and women's institutions.

Individuals in medium security and especially maximum security were more likely to commit a violent incident than those in minimum security. Age, Security Threat Group affiliation, and previous violence were also significant predictors of violent incidents. Ethnocultural group was a significant predictor of violent incidents, with higher odds observed for Indigenous and Black individuals. Impulsivity and having considerable or higher mental health needs emerged as significant predictors of institutional violence for men only. These findings should be interpreted with caution, as multiple contextual, institutional, and systemic factors may contribute.

What it means

The individual-level predictors of institutional violence found in the current study largely align with findings from the literature. Variations by gender and ethnocultural group highlight the importance of understanding institutional violence within broader systemic and cultural contexts.

While this study used available administrative data, it provides a foundation for future research directions, including examining how institutional and contextual factors interact with individual characteristics.

For more information

Hanby, L., Hildenbrand, A., Hawthorn, D., & Smeth, A. (2025). *Characteristics and Predictors of Institutional Incidents of Violence* (Research Report R-488). Ottawa, Ontario: Correctional Service of Canada.

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