

# Violence In The Georgia Prison System

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The evolution of the behavior patterns in the Georgia Prison System, i.e. the increase in violence against inmates and staff may be linked to the psychological effects of mandatory minimum sentence. The following hypothesis is not based upon clinical research; I must disclose that I am unlettered. I do not have an advanced degree in some genre of academia as the basis of authority to suggest such a proposition. I do offer over 29 years of empirical knowledge based upon the observation and interaction with criminals in a prison setting on a daily basis. I have been incarcerated for over 29 years in the Georgia Prison System.

The outlining proposition of this working hypothesis was in part influenced by the classic work of Viktor E. Frankl *Man's Search for Meaning*, which describes life in a Nazi death camp. Let me be clear this is not to suggest that the victims of the Nazi atrocities be equated with those duly convicted of crimes. There is a psychological consistency in the emotional psyche of those incarcerated with similar perspective of an uncertain future.

Frankl points out that "the most depressing influence of all was that a prisoner could not know how long his imprisonment would be." With regard to lifers under the 30 year mandatory minimum sentence this is tantamount to life without parole. Although a mandatory minimum sentence of 30 years is a finite number, such a proposition for this generation, who did not expect to live that long, 30 years is a lifetime.

Is there a correlation between the increase in violence and the mandatory minimum sentence? I believe there is. In Dante's *Inferno*, the opening line upon entering the realms of hell was first "abandon all hope". The delusion of reprieve, the illusion of clinging to false hope will never be a controlling mechanism to manipulate behavior for this generation; they have no hope. In attempting to control negative/violent tendencies the traditional B.F. Skinner reward and punishment principle is not working. Why? The incentive for compliance, the hope of parole one day was removed from the equation. Their current mindset is I have nothing to lose, but most paramount: I have nothing to gain. Nietzsche said "He who has a why to live for can bear with almost any how". With this generation there is no why to live for, so they choose the how and this how is very disturbing.

The ramification of noncompliance for something as simple as traditional detail job assignments leads to idle time. They are a generation confined to the housing unit with idle time, with no purpose. According to Frankl "a man who let himself decline because he could not see any future goal found himself occupied with retrospective thoughts...they preferred to close their eyes and to live in the past". With all this idle time confined in the housing units, they psychologically live in the past. These psychological emotions manifest into how they live now; the grandeur which eluded them in the past becomes their reality delusion. The fact that the behavioral modification techniques traditionally used to control mind sets are at best ineffective and has led to the System just locking them down. The prison system has grown exponentially since my incarceration 29 years ago. Even if this generation was willing, and some are, to work traditional detail job assignments, there are not enough job assignments for them. The system is forced to just house a great number of them with idle time and B.F. Skinner's work suggests that people in environments like such tend to react violently.

A fair query, what does all this rhetoric have to do with the increase in violence in the prison system? Please indulge me a little while longer to introduce a few concepts: Prison economics, and stratification. I believe these concepts combined with an apathetic attitude of hopelessness are contributing factors to the increase in violence against inmates and staff.

The prison economic system must be viewed as a microcosmic system. This concept is not referring to the Prison Industry, but the economic system created by inmates within the Prison Industry system. This is an essential system which has always existed, and will be perpetuated. It consists of buying and selling commodities and the bartering system. The system is as simple as trading a John Coltrane CD for one by Yo Yo Ma, to more complex commodities. This system is influenced by the Prison Industry: The more it cuts back and removes the higher prices get—supply and demand. The more attempts to regulate a natural phenomenon in human history, the more tension it creates, especially with a generation who has nothing to lose or to gain.

Stratification is another one of those phenomenons in human endeavors. People tend to stratify within cultural circles: race, religions, and geographical areas, etc.... There is a new kid on the stratification block – **gangs**. An in-depth analysis of the root causes of gang affiliations is beyond the scope of this work. What is paramount is they are here and their members are the ones most affected by the mandatory minimum sentences. Gangs help their members protect their commodities in the prison economic system. Some gang members are predatory, and seek to exploit those considered weak in other stratifications. In some gang stratum there is no respect to outright apathetic feeling toward authority. Now there are some occasions where it is the gang members who are the peace keepers in the housing units. They are the ones others depend upon to safeguard what properties they possess, although, the motive may not be altruistic. The less tension in the housing units, the less likely the administration has a cause to react to such incidence. With this said, by no means am I suggesting that gangs are responsible for all the violence in the prison system. No. There is a substratum of opportunists who create chaos for the sake of chaos. Now it is a given that prisons have always been violent places. This hypothesis deals with the apparent increase and nature of today's violent system.

My observations are general statements, and not meant to infer absolutely for all. As I stated from the onset this hypothesis is based upon my observations. I do not have statistical data, but I believe I am on safe grounds statistically by postulating that the most extreme cases of violence in the prison system are perpetrated by those with mandatory minimum sentences and have *abandoned all hope*.

This is not an indictment or a political statement against the Georgia Prison System. I do recognize the complexities of trying to balance community safety and the justice system; but to suggest that all under mandatory minimum sentence criteria have no redeeming and atonable qualities is not be a truism. I know from experience in the system that there will be many at the end of the mandatory minimum sentence that will deserve to serve more time. If the Governor's second Inaugural Address on **Second Chance** for inmates who have demonstrated potential for success once released, was more than rhetoric, then there will be some who *can* be productive taxpaying citizens, years before their mandatory minimum parole date.

A great deal of my time incarcerated has been in education, and mentoring the younger population to take advantage of the educational opportunities available. The opportunities available to me early in my incarceration when prisons were Correctional Institutions are not available to them. The reason I was able to achieve what I did was because I had *hope* of one day being home with loved ones, and giving back to society more than I took. Though *hope* is fading it was the driving force. I have included some of my achievements as a case study. Beyond general education there are not many programs for them to improve themselves; vocational programs are few, and only at certain prisons beyond their reach. Also, they see no benefit to an education that they will not use. Remember, they see no future.

It is ironic that the science fiction of yesterday is today's reality; the potential reality of the Georgia Prison System to collapse into the science fiction movie of yesterday, *Escape from New York*, is not a far stretch from reality. This is what I see, and understand to be true. Is the problem of Georgia Prison System a Catch—22? I pray not. I do have suggestions proven to work from the traditions of old. I will use my experience as a case study. As I stated the driving force for me was *hope*. There was a sense of confidence that I would one day be paroled. It was this optimism that I take advantage of every opportunity to improve myself morally and

professionally for my return back into society as a law abiding productive taxpaying member. I had a parole eligibility consideration date and something to strive for. Every time I was denied parole I still had another eligibility consideration date. The delusion of reprieve was still psychologically influential in controlling my behavioral patterns.

Did I seriously believe I would spend 29 plus years in prison? No. Would my behavioral patterns been different if I knew I had to serve a minimum of 30 years? Perhaps. The point is I did not have a mandatory minimum of 30 years, but nevertheless to date I have served 29 years and counting. I believe part of the Parole Board's mandate is the safety of society. I do believe prisons are a necessary entity for the safety of society by separating, and punishing those who prey upon the innocent. With this said, regardless of the eligibility consideration date the Parole Board is tasked with the decision of when to grant or deny parole.

I believe longer mandatory minimum sentences are psychologically debilitating and counterproductive. Although I do not wish to make a political statement, longer mandatory minimum sentences are just political statements. They handicap the Parole Board's discretion to grant parole. As I said earlier, some deserve to serve more time than the mandatory minimum sentence and *some deserve* to be granted parole before such time. A strong motivating factor for controlling behavior patterns is seeing others paroled who they believe were paroled because said person(s) labored toward the atonement of the soul and aspired to produce the highest character of virtue and integrity. If this generation does not see their peers, who are striving to make something of themselves paroled, then it farther reinforces hopelessness for them. Seeing others paroled was a big psychological shot of adrenaline *hope* for me. In retrospect, B.F. Skinner would be proud of the techniques used to manipulate past generations with false hope of parole. It worked on me!

I will be remiss if I did not share my observations and opinions concerning recidivism. This is not some scientific pontification, but just simply what I see and understand to be reality. I am good at judging success rates for parolees. This is for non-lifers; lifers tend to have a high success rate once paroled. A common success factor seems to be employment. Those who attain some degree of education are more likely to find better employment opportunities: especially certificate programs. I have heard back from many who say it helped them get or move into a better position. I believe there should be more emphasis placed on certificate program: electricians, carpenter, plumbers, HVAC tech etc. It is a safe bet those with these certificates will seek employment in said field upon release.

Thank you for your consideration.

On bending knee

South Georgia College Associate of Arts:  
Emp. Business Management

Brewton Parker College Associate of Arts:  
General Studies

Ohio University  
Senior Level Status (evaluation)

Central Georgia Technical College:  
Industrial Electromechanical Technician

Central Georgia Technical College:  
Carpentry framing/Cabinetmaking

Radio and Television Repair Course

Middle Georgia Technical College:  
Instructor's Assistant (OJT program)

**CERTIFICATION /LICENSES HELD:**

Associate Level Certified Electronics Technician (ISCET) 1996

Journeyman Level Electronics Communications Technician (ISCET) 2000

EPA Universal (N.C. State Board of Refrigeration Examiners) 2010

Journeyman Level Electronics Industrial Technician (ISCET) 2013

General Radiotelephone Operator License - Federal Communications Commission (FCC) 2013

Ship Radar Endorsement license (FCC) 2013

**2000 Nominee** for the International Society of Certified Electronics Technicians (ISCET),  
Technicians of the year award.

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