

"The Culture of Prison Violence"

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No subculture can be totally different from or totally in conflict with the society of which it derives

- Thesis of a subculture of violence point #1 Marvin Wolfgang
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Since its inception, prison has been wrought with violence whether it be prisoner on prisoner, staff on prisoner or prisoner on staff. But why is this so and can we find a resolution or at least an ability to reduce the level of violence without the threat of more violence?

I've been incarcerated for 16 years in maximum security prisons in the state of Va. And I've seen violence and experienced violence first hand throughout my incarceration. I was involved in an altercation, which I did not provoke which required 4 stitches in the back of my head. However, the question of violence is a cultural one which extends beyond the concrete and steel of prison, in fact it is as homemade as "Apple Pie" as Malcolm X once declared.

Violence has been a cultural anchor in society since ancient civilizations, therefore people of all ethnic groups have learned that violence tends to be the hammer that resolves conflicts or it is seen as the alternative if matters cannot be resolved more peacefully. Pragmatically speaking, violence has always been a motivating force in compelling people to make decisions favorable to those who may be adversarial to them.

Because prison is a microcosm of society, the same thought process exists here, the only differences are 1. Prison is concentrated to a few hundred square feet with anywhere from 500 to 2000 prisoners confined in the space 2. People come from all socioeconomic backgrounds but more likely from impoverished environments where violence is a mainstay in terms of survival and protecting oneself and interest 3. Psychologically some prisoners have a natural inclination towards violence as a result of mental health issues and the prisons failure to properly treat and/or diagnose impulsive behaviors and mental illness.

4. Staff uses violence as a means of controlling the masses, as long as violence is a glaring alternative to manage prisoners we tend to borrow a page from their playbook.

Let's review these four indicators:

1. Prison is concentrated to a few hundred square feet with anywhere from 500 to 2000 prisoners confined in the space.

Imagine having this amount of people confined to a general area 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week with limited outlets for creativity and education, then having 2 people confined to a cell with different habits, personalities, agendas and worldviews. Now we understand that as adults no matter where we are, maturity demands that we learn to improvise, adapt and overcome.

However, all people don't function in that way with minimal to no training as to how to cope and handle these matters without giving in to violent tendencies. Still there is a responsibility on both sides to eliminate or minimize conditions conducive to aggressive behavior.

2. People come from all socio-economic backgrounds but more likely from impoverished environments where violence is a mainstay in terms of survival and protecting oneself and interest.

Many prisoners come out of conditions ^{where} violence was a part of survival and life is a fleeting thing without longevity or promise. Prison only validates this notion for many and coupled with a lengthy sentence the attitude then becomes ~~of~~ one of aggression and frustration which is the perfect storm for violence. It is extremely difficult to respect the life, wealth and person of another when there are little to no prospects for yourself.

3. Psychologically sane prisoners have a natural inclination towards violence as a result of mental health issues and the prison's failure to properly treat and/or diagnose impulsive behaviors and mental illness.

Many prisoners suffer from varying types of mania, depression and bi-polar behavior and are either misdiagnosed and move about freely without supervision or never actually diagnosed at all and receive no care for their condition. Often when we think of prison

prison violence we seldom look at violence perpetrated on self as a result of poor mental health care and treatment

4. Staff uses violence as a means of controlling the masses. As long as violence is a glaring alternative to manage prisoners, we tend to borrow a page from their playbook.

Corrections is designed around the threat of force, it is ever present whether it's dogs or officers approaching a single prisoner in bunches, every decision we make tends to be influenced by the threat of violence. An environment such as this does not curb violence but what it does is keep such angst and aggression in the air that eventually it starts to play itself out either in thought or action. Now when you have officers or prisoners with a bully complex then some become predator while others become prey, again this happens on both sides whether it be officers or prisoners

How do we begin to resolve the issue

1. Dialogue (open + honest) typically violence occurs because of angst towards another and the views we may hold towards an individual that justify the belief.
2. Takena Programming for Officers + Prisoners that require officers to understand professional behavior and decorum but also requires prisoners to understand that there are better ways to resolve problems and understanding the humanity within themselves and others. Usually when prisoners aspire towards higher achievements that typically supersedes everything else and becomes the core for our decision making.