

VRI- DOES IT REALLY WORK?

More and more, especially within the last five or so years, Correctional Institutions across the nation are using what's called Violence Reduction Initiatives (VRI). While they differ from state to state, and even institution to institution, they all stem from the same desire and goal; to reduce violence used by prisoners. Here within Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, VRI involves locking down an entire unit when incidents of violence occur. The idea is that "peers" are encouraged to help de-escalate any situation that could possibly lead to violence, so when we fail to do so, we are held accountable. Locking an entire unit is supposed to encourage us to help reduce future violence.

The ideas that promoted the VRI in the first place are faulty on multiple accounts. First of all, officials assume that we are a community and that we all interact with each other on an everyday, regular basis. This is just not reality. There are different cliques of sorts that stick together, whether religious, racial, and even sexual preference and gender identity. Then there are differing crimes, that cause bias and prejudices. So how can officials assume we all have a connection with each other?

Secondly, the use of VRI contributes to violence. Resentment, hostility and anger occurs when everybody is locked down and punished for the actions of one, two, or maybe three individuals. These lockdowns can be as little as 36 hours to as much as 168 hours,

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depending on the severity of the violence. For a fight between two or three people, and without weapons, lockdown is typically 36 hours. A staff assault is 72 hours, and ~~violence~~ ^{violence} that involves a weapon is 96 hours. When one is severely and critically ~~wounded~~ ^{wounded} and requires emergency, outside medical treatment, then a full seven days of 168 hours is implemented. Lockdowns of this nature ensure that programming, law library, religious services, visits and any communication with family is stripped for the entirety of the lockdown. Outgoing mail is hindered, as staff typically refuse to take mail from prisoners during a lockdown. Since there is absolutely zero leaving of one's cell, personal placement of mail into outgoing USPS mailbox on each housing unit is impossible. In effect, this causes major frustration, anger and resentment, which heighten the possibility of violence.

Thirdly and lastly, it is utterly unjust and inhumane to punish a whole unit for the actions of a tiny group of prisoners or even one. Cells are small, roughly 5' X 7', and not intended for continuous prolonged confinement. The law places limits on solitary confinement, and makes it unlawful to confine a person in a cell for an extended period of time without opportunity for shower and exercise. Yet the officials are doing just that!

Measures employed are strictly about power and control and have little to nothing to do with reducing violence. The Prison Industrial Complex has a long standing history of oppressive means of exerting power and control over those convicted of crimes, and even prior to conviction when housed and confined in County, Pretrial Detention Centers. So, this is nothing new!

In fact, VRI does little to nothing as a means of reducing violence. Despite what the experts reports say, violence has not been reduced in the least. What has been effective is the possibility of long term segregation, or even placement on PA DOC's Restricted Release List (RRL). Being placed on RRL means long term, unlimited confinement in solitary confinement units. This and lengthy Disciplinary Custody measures contributes to any sort of down shift in violence that may occur. The COVID-19 pandemic definitely created conditions which increased violence, due to the restrictive measures implemented to curb the spread of infection.

Given all the information I've described, there is zero doubt of the overall ineffectiveness of VRI. Somehow, someday, the VRI needs to be reevaluated by experts and officials. VRI does not work, and I am happy to speak for all incarcerated persons.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to share all that I've written in this essay. Together, we can make a difference.