

Managing Aggressive



Inmates

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One of the most commonly asked questions in the world of corrections is, “How can we produce a noticeable reduction in aggressive behavior among the inmates in our facilities?”

The answer to this question begins with the correctional staff. The modern correctional professional is considerably different from the media stereotype of the brute whose primary responsibility is controlling inmates and preventing escapes. From that antiquated perspective, a “prison guard” has no skills of note and even less compassion.

The current and future correctional environment requires officers with a strong educational background and vigorous training. Therefore, psychological approaches offer particular advantages in accomplishing training goals focused on managing aggressive inmates. This management can best be accomplished by expanding the definition of aggression, understanding the impact of staff attitudes, and determining how to acquire staff buy-in.

In the past, aggression was defined as behavior that results in personal injury and destruction of property. It may take the form of psychological devaluation and degradation as well as physical harm (Bandura & Ribes-Inesta, 1976). However, according to psychological research, physically aggressive behavior is also rooted in an individual's background, attitudes, and beliefs (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; McLeod, 2009). For example, in 2013, county jails in California reported a significant increase in violence (Lofstrom, Magnus, & Martin, 2013) marked by a rise in the number of inmate fights and assaults on staff members. Officials attributed this to gang-influenced power struggles inside jails, a higher number of felons being sentenced to county facilities, and housing offenders who previously would have gone to State prisons. By expanding the focus beyond power and control to attitudes, background, and beliefs, the correctional staff in those facilities would acquire invaluable information that would enable them to make better predictions, identify behaviors, and intervene more effectively regardless of inmates' custody status. For example, a history of victimization or trauma is often predictive of engagement in physically aggressive behavior, whereas frail egos, low self-esteem, and seclusion are factors that contribute to self-destructive behaviors (Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, 2002).

Correctional officers who learn about the causes of aggression also gain insight into the strategies required to head off physically aggressive action. The ability to recognize the behavioral motivations and situational cues that lead to aggression is a major aid in making the most effective interventions. Psychology-based training

helps identify a variety of behaviors and characteristics that indicate when an inmate may be close to physical aggression. For example, inmates with personality disorders or inmates who are seriously mentally ill may show subtle signs and then act out violently, thus requiring physical restraint. Conversely, inmates with autism spectrum disorders may exhibit tantrums, self-injury, or aggression. If a correctional officer recognizes the behavior of an autistic individual and makes the appropriate referral, these behaviors can be diminished through medication (McDougle et al., 2005). Therefore, it is advantageous for correctional staff to understand the dynamics, the signs, and the causes of aggressive behavior in order to employ skillful observation.

In addition, it is well documented that correctional officers' attitudes directly affect the behavior of their charges. Correctional officers with high levels of stress are more likely to be less effective and less satisfied with their jobs (Tewksbury & Higgins, 2006). Stressed or angry staff members are therefore an impediment to managing inmate aggression. Understanding how officers' demeanor significantly influences the behavior of those they supervise helps correctional officers discern the importance of knowing their own strengths and weaknesses.

Finally, to implement this new approach effectively, one must have staff buy-in. Correctional officers tend to accept a training approach as worthwhile if they realize that prevention is much better than dealing with consequences. Correctional officers also begin to see prevention as an effective way to avoid sudden attack and possible personal injury.

Better knowledge of the decision-making processes of offenders has had important implications for crime-control policies (Clarke & Cornish, 1985). Similarly, it is important to understand the psychological processes that lead inmates to the decision or impulse to act out violently. By understanding concepts such as inmates' body language, signs of aggression, and decision-making process, correctional officers and other staff members are given the tools to recognize and effectively diffuse potential problems before they occur.

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Conclusion

Because incarcerated populations have undergone such a drastic demographic and behavioral change in the past few decades, previous methods for and perspectives on managing aggression will no longer achieve the desired outcomes. For example, the rate of female incarceration quintupled in a two-decade period and 40 percent of the Nation's juvenile inmates are now housed in private facilities (Kirkham, 2013). Common sense suggests that we try a new approach. Managing aggressive inmates requires staff to be alert, observant, and aware at all times. Staff must preemptively set the tone for behavior and make sure that they are not being manipulated by inmates' deceptions, false statements, or cover-ups (Cornelius, 2009).

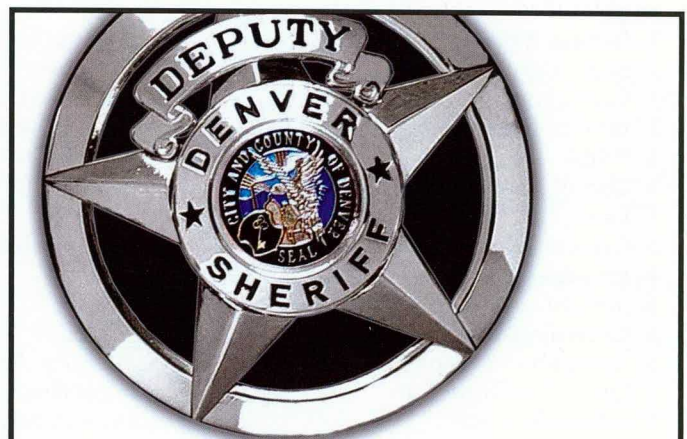
An increase in behaviorally challenged, emotionally disturbed, and physically aggressive inmates, along with the increased use of weapons, has rendered past methods outdated considering advancements in the field. By approaching potentially aggressive situations with preventive rather than responsive action, correctional staff can steadily improve their ability to identify signs of inmate aggression, recognize potentially volatile situations, and employ de-escalation skills. In addition, correctional officers will feel more confident managing potentially violent situations that could and often do lead to violence. Thus, when dealing with aggressive inmates, staff will be equipped with preemptive skills that will decrease the need for physical intervention. ■

Resources

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