Riots In Prison

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**Introduction**

A prison riot can adequately be described as an act of violence, perpetrated primarily by large groups of inmates, aimed to cause a disturbance in the routine operations of the prison. Sometimes, prisoners revolt against the callous treatment of the prison administration. There have also been times when groups of prisoners clashed that initiated prison riots. This paper will focus on the reasons for the prison riots.

**Discussion**

Criminologists have divided the reasons for the prison riots into two categories. These categories are theoretical and practical causes.

**Theoretical Causes**

There are mainly three theories considered by criminologists to be the reason for the riots in prison (Useem & Kimball, 1987). These theories are deprivation theory, breakdown of social control theory, and collective behavior theory.

Deprivation theory finds its root to the idea that all human beings are free to think rationally. Deprivation theorists hold the view that all the prisoners act rationally while perpetrating violence and disturbance in the prison (Useem & Kimball, 1987). The reason behind this view is that the prisoners have taken into account the consequences of rioting against the prison administration (Useem & Kimball, 1987). Another reason tabled by deprivation theorists that high expectations of prisoners often result in disappointment. Resultantly, inmates resort to riots against the administration. Situational stress such as inmate harassment and racial conflict may account for deprivation of hope (Useem & Kimball, 1987). Large groups of inmates unable to cope with situational stress may result in riots.

Next theory is the breakdown of social control. The view of the breakdown theorists is that the people can be made to behave well by exercising social control over them (Useem & Kimball, 1987). The aim of the prisoners rioting against the administration is to re-establish a social control that does not control prisoners' behavior. Some reasons for the breakdown in social control are the harsh administrative rules, a large number of staff turn-over and untrained staff (Useem & Kimball, 1987). Inmates having control of illegitimate objects is a reality. When the prison administration curbs the avenue for illegitimate objects, prisoners agitate and stage protests to take back this control from the prison administration.

Last theory for prison riots is collective behavior theory. Collective behavior theory describes prison riots as a sudden outburst of violent behavior (Useem & Kimball, 1987). By exercising social control over the inmates, sanity can be made to prevail in the prison.

**Practical Causes**

Practical causes are considered to have a direct relation with the behavior of the prisoners (Blackburn-Line, 1993). Over the years, these causes have been seen as the most accurate whenever the reasons behind a prison riot were ascertained. The term "practical" has been associated with these causes because of their close relation to the everyday operation of the prison (Blackburn-Line, 1993). These practical causes have been termed by many criminologists as humiliating nature of the prison (Blackburn-Line, 1993). There are five practical causes considered to exacerbate an already depressed environment.

The first practical cause is the controversy between the idea of rehabilitation of inmates and the notion of keeping them under a lock (Blackburn-Line, 1993). In recent years, many rehabilitation programs have been introduced aimed at improving the inmates’ behavior and education. However, some prison administrations have a primary goal of keeping the inmates under strict watch. The prisoners were of the view that they would get rehabilitative treatment. As a result, frustration in inmates grows.

The condition of the prison is the second practical cause. Substandard or adulterated food, scarce opportunities of receiving education, inadequate segregation of dangerous prisoners account for volatile and distressing environment (Blackburn-Line, 1993).

The third practical cause is the administration of the prison. An already volatile environment is exacerbated by political appointments and high turn-over rate of officials (Blackburn-Line, 1993). Administrative instability leads to operational instability of the prison. This instability provides the inmates with an opportunity to riot.

Correctional staff is considered to be the fourth practical cause. The correctional staff might not be satisfied with the nature of their job (Blackburn-Line, 1993). Additionally, they might think that they are short on manpower that is needed to effectively control the inmates (Blackburn-Line, 1993). Theses dissatisfactions only increase the hostility in the environment of the prison. There were incidents in which harassment at the hands of the correctional staff was reported. This harassment accounts for the prisoners staging protests against the administration.

The inmates themselves are the fifth reason for the riots that occur in prisons. Incidents of rape and harassment by other inmates may result in an increase in dissatisfaction among the inmates (Blackburn-Line, 1993). The dissatisfaction could not be disseminated to the outer world due to lack of contact. Inmates, therefore, resort to violence and riots in order to make their sufferings known to the outside world.

**Famous Prison Riots And Their Reasons**

Over the years, many riots have occurred resulting in hundreds of deaths. The reasons behind them have been more or less the aforementioned reasons. In 1992, Carandiru prison riot broke out in Sao Paulo, Brazil. Two factions of prisoners came to blow after a petty argument over a football match. The administration, in order to gain control of the situation, came down on the prisoners with an iron fist. This resulted in the deaths of 111 prisoners. In the year 1971, Attica prison riots broke out. The prisoners called for improvement in living conditions by taking the staff hostage. As a result, 33 inmates were killed. A more recent prison riot incident in the year 2009 took place at Ciudad Juarez prison in Mexico. 20 inmates were brutally killed when members from rival drug syndicates crossed each other’s path. The practical reasons for the riots to erupt remain more or less the same in each above-mentioned incident.

**Conclusion**

All inmates live in awful conditions in the prisons. Deprivation theory indicates that all prisoners living under dreadful conditions would resort to violence and riot. That is not true. Hence the deprivation theory fails. Breakdown theory suggests that riots are fueled by the irrationality of prisoners. Administration of prison would like to bring peace in the jail environment by exercising control through the use of force. However, inmates stage riots in order to improve living conditions, not to restore the previous social control. Hence, it is not right to describe the prison riots as irrational decisions of inmates. Lastly, Collective theory suggests that riots result in a spontaneous demonstration of violent behavior. This theory seems to suggest that riots can be predicted. However, abrupt acts of violence suggest that riots gain impetus from chaos. Hence, they cannot be predicted. As far as practical causes for the riots are concerned, they can be catered by addressing the concerns of all the stakeholders. For instance, recreational and productive activities must be made available to prisoners. Additionally, professionalizing the staff would help in upholding the writ of the law.

**References**

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