

The Dark Figure of Prison Violence:

A Multi-Strategy Approach to Uncovering
the Prevalence of Prison Violence

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Executive Summary

Prison violence is a persistent problem for institutional corrections and the rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals. Estimates suggest that one in three men and one in four women in prison experience physical violence, while over half of correctional staff express fear of serious injury or death while on the job. However, these statistics are likely underreported due to limited data sources and challenges in data collection and reporting. As a result, the true prevalence of prison violence remains uncertain.

In response to this pressing issue, with support of Arnold Ventures, the Prison Violence Consortium was established to better understand the scale, scope, and consequences of prison violence. The Consortium brought together researchers and practitioners from seven state correctional systems: Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Through a multi-strategy approach, we collected and analyzed data from a variety of sources, including official records, self-reported data, and interviews from incarcerated persons and correctional staff.

A key finding from our work is that, much like the “dark figure of crime” in general society, there is a substantial “dark figure” of prison violence. This discovery underscores that the current practices of documenting and examining prison violence are insufficient, as the majority of prison violence is not reported. Without a national comprehensive strategy to improve the accuracy of how we measure prison violence, efforts to reduce it will be inconsistent and likely ineffective.

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Understanding Prison Violence in the United States

The United States incarcerates over 1.2 million people within more than 1,200 federal and state adult prisons (Carson & Kluckow, 2023; Maruschak & Buehler, 2021). The majority of these individuals will eventually return to their communities, hoping to rebuild their lives. However, they face many challenges to successful reentry, both during incarceration and after release. Inside prisons, one of the most significant and persistent problems is violence. It is estimated that 35% of men and 24% of women behind bars experience physical violence (Widra 2020). However, many believe these statistics are considerably underreported.

Challenges

Estimating the prevalence of prison violence and understanding its etiology is challenging given the nature of prisons, their internal social environments, and organizational routines.

First, it requires access to the inner workings of correctional facilities, often referred to as the “black box” of corrections (Mears, 2008). This includes access to records of incidents of violence and people impacted by such violence. Prisons operate largely out of public view, making it difficult for researchers and policymakers to fully understand and evaluate what occurs inside, including incidents of violence.

Second, even when access is granted, official or administrative records do not capture all incidents of prison violence. Underreporting of violence and victimization, referred to more generally as the “dark figure of crime” (Biderman & Reiss, 1967), may be even more pronounced in prisons. Incarcerated individuals often live in close proximity to their aggressors, creating an environment that can discourage reporting due to fear of retaliation or being labeled a “snitch” (Butler et al., 2023).

Third, even when violence is officially reported, it may not result in a guilty finding for a violent rule violation by a prison disciplinary committee. For instance, an alleged assault may be reduced to a less serious rule violation, or dropped entirely, due to lack of evidence or investigative missteps.

Fourth, definitions of prison violence vary considerably across states. What one state defines as an “assault,” for example, might be recorded as a “fight” in another state. This makes it difficult to compare rates of violence across states.

Together, these factors represent just a few of the many challenges that researchers face when studying prison violence. Overcoming these challenges requires a multipronged research strategy with state correctional systems willing to work together to improve correctional outcomes.

The Prison Violence Consortium

The Prison Violence Consortium is a multi-state examination of prison violence. Researchers and representatives from seven state correctional systems (Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Texas), representing nearly one-third of the U.S. prison population, collaborated to uncover the sources and consequences of prison violence. Our goal was to establish an evidence-based framework for reducing and preventing violence in correctional facilities nationwide.

In this Policy Brief, we present our findings on how state correctional systems define and measure violence. We draw upon various data sources to illustrate a significant gap in the measurement of prison violence and, consequently, in our understanding of violence. In a separate policy brief entitled, *Sources and Consequences of Prison Violence: Key Findings and Recommendations from the Prison Violence Consortium*, we present key findings from this project and recommendations for policymakers and correctional administrators.

The Dark Figure of Prison Violence

Through the Prison Violence Consortium, we identified the strengths and weaknesses of assessing the sources and consequences of prison violence using different types of data. Crucially, we learned that our understanding of prison violence is shaped by (and limited to) the type of data we collect. A key finding of the prison violence project is that: **Just as there is a dark figure of crime, there is a dark figure of prison violence.** This means that some amount of prison violence remains unknown and likely unknowable. Moreover, due to the power dynamics and other features of the prison social environment, the dark figure of prison violence is likely more substantial than the dark figure of crime in the general population.

Figure 1: Illustration of the Dark Figure of Prison Violence



We illustrate the dark figure of prison violence in Figure 1. To measure this form of violence, we used a mixed methods approach, which targeted one or more spheres of Figure 1. Our strategies included:

1. A systematic review of policies and procedures defining violent rule infractions
2. An assessment of official administrative records of guilty violent rule infractions
3. A review of official incident reports involving violence written by correctional staff
4. Interviews with incarcerated persons involved in a violent incident, and
5. Interviews with correctional employees involved in a violent incident

The following sections provide an overview of each strategy's methodology, along with its strengths and weaknesses in understanding the dark figure of prison violence.

Policies and Procedures on Violent Infractions

Departmental policies and procedures serve as a foundation for training staff, formalizing expectations and behaviors, and providing instruction on everything from day-to-day operations to crisis responses. They offer guidance to correctional staff and incarcerated persons about the behaviors that constitute violations of prison rules.

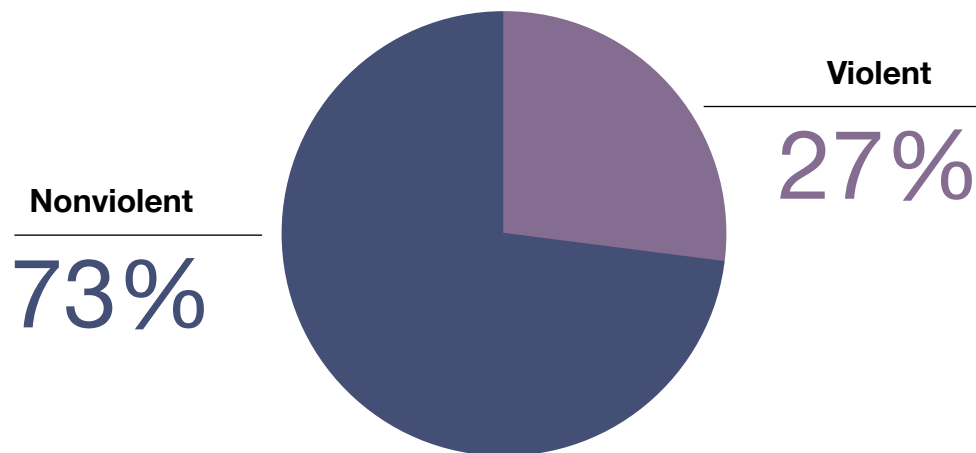
After reviewing policies and procedures from the seven participating state correctional departments, we found that 129 out of a total of 472 identified rule infractions were related to violent behaviors, accounting for 27% of all rule infractions (see Figure 2). Notably, the number of defined rule violations differed widely, ranging from 15 to 22 across states.

This variation in the number and specificity of violent rule infractions across states has important implications for our understanding of prison violence. For instance, a term as seemingly straightforward as "fighting" can have varied meanings across states. Some departments focus on mutual combat as the distinguishing characteristic of a fight, while others may classify similar incidents as "assaults," which are typically considered unilateral actions. These definitional differences affect how violence is recognized, recorded, and reported in different prison systems, potentially leading to inconsistent tracking of violent incidents across states. Such discrepancies result in different thresholds for what constitutes a violent infraction, potentially mischaracterizing the distribution of different types of violence. This variability also complicates efforts to make meaningful comparisons of violence rates between states and can influence how correctional staff and administrators respond to and manage violent behavior.

Further, a significant limitation of departmental policies and procedures is that they only provide insight to how things “should be” within an agency and not how things “actually are” in practice. Policies and procedures provide a surface-level understanding of the prevalence of prison violence by allowing researchers to understand if a given behavior is even deemed violent and how that definition varies across states. This leaves out the crucial step of categorization—how prison staff determine which infraction type applies to an actual incident of violence in practice.

Differences in how states define and categorize violence combined with a gap between written policy and actual practice result in numerous inconsistencies in what violence statistics represent across correctional systems. Recognizing these limitations is crucial for putting existing reports of prison violence into perspective and highlighting the gaps in data infrastructure.

Figure 2: Percentage of Nonviolent and Violent Rule Violation Definitions



Administrative Data: Guilty Violent Infractions

Administrative data on guilty infractions, commonly known as misconduct data, serve as a foundational source for understanding prison violence. This type of data is most commonly used in the study of in-prison behaviors, with approximately two-thirds of published multivariable studies relying on departmental administrative data (Butler, 2017).

Guilty infraction data offer several advantages to understanding prison violence. First, it offers an affordable and timely method to studying prison violence, especially given the difficulties in gaining direct access to prisons. Second, it allows researchers to examine trends in specific violent behaviors, such as assaults and fights, over time, or in response to changes in prison populations, policies, and practices. Additionally, more serious instances of violence, particularly those involving severe injuries, have a higher likelihood of being detected and reported in this type of data.

It is also important to recognize the limitations of guilty violent infractions when studying prison violence. This type of data is comparable to using criminal conviction records to study offending outside of prisons, and thus it shares similar shortcomings. For one, guilty rule violations may not accurately reflect the actual behaviors of the incarcerated population due to biases in disciplinary processes or variations in enforcement practices across departments. Moreover, the data only capture incidents that result in a guilty finding, potentially missing cases where charges were reduced from violent to non-violent during an investigation, or cases where charges were dismissed entirely. Another significant limitation is that incidents of violence that are undetected by or unreported to prison authorities are not captured in these records. Importantly, incarcerated individuals may choose not to report or cooperate with investigations due to fear of retaliation or stigmatization, further contributing to the underrepresentation of violence in the data.

Despite these limitations, our analysis of administrative data on guilty violent infractions from five of the seven state correctional systems in the Prison Violence Consortium provides valuable insights. We examined almost a decade worth of administrative data (2012-2020), comprising almost 3.5 million guilty rule violations, of which 13% consisted of violence. Notably, as seen in Table 1, the proportion of violent rule infractions varied considerably, ranging from 7% to 29% of all guilty infractions across the states. These stark differences could be indicative of important differences in violence and safety across prison systems, but they could also be due to differences in reporting, detection, or enforcement strategies across departments.

Understanding these nuances is crucial for researchers, policymakers, and correctional administrators. It calls for a comprehensive and standardized approach to studying and addressing violence within correctional facilities, one that goes beyond reliance on guilty violent infraction data alone and considers the broader context of how violence is defined, reported, and managed across different systems.

Table 1. Overview of Total Nonviolent and Violent Guilty Infractions (2012-2020)

State	Nonviolent	Violent	Total
Arizona	347,256 (93%)	26,622 (7%)	373,878
Colorado	115,639 (77%)	35,491 (23%)	151,130
Ohio	304,140 (71%)	122,518 (29%)	426,658
Oregon	110,561 (72%)	43,542 (28%)	154,103
Texas	2,152,900 (90%)	240,680 (10%)	2,393,580
Total	3,030,496 (87%)	468,853 (13%)	3,499,349

Note: Violent rule violations include homicides, assaults, fights, threats, biohazard incidents, sexual offenses, and other behaviors (e.g. collective violence). Massachusetts and Pennsylvania were unable to be included in this table due to differences in how violent infractions were recorded in the data.

Administrative Data: Incident Reports

Incident reports are administrative data that often contain more detailed information. Incident reports are written by staff at the time of an incident and have a narrative component that provides a more holistic understanding of the incident. They have the potential to provide situational details not found in administrative misconduct data, including information on the precursors to violence, the severity of any injuries sustained, and descriptions of system responses to violence. The coverage of these data differ from administrative records on guilty violent infractions because not all incidents of violence recorded by staff will necessarily result in guilty charges.

There are several benefits to using incident report data, including: (1) gathering information about all of those involved in an incident, (2) understanding the heterogeneity of violent incidents within prison, (3) examining the nature and extent of reported physical injuries, (4) identifying the variety of ways in which violence is stopped within prisons (e.g., physical force and chemical agents), and (5) assessing the administrative and disciplinary consequences for those involved in violence. In practice, however, these strengths are contingent on the quality and detail of the incident reports.

Our sample of incident reports came from the population of fights and assaults between incarcerated persons and assaults against staff in 2019. In most instances, states provided incident reports for all acts of violence, other than self-harm and sexual assault, regardless of injury or severity and irrespective of any associated misconduct. In Arizona, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, a 25% stratified random sample of narrative incident reports were coded. Ohio did not have an incident-level reporting system in 2019, so the data coded were narratives associated with misconduct reports. In Oregon, all assaults and fight incidents were coded (instead of a sample). Texas data included a 25% sample of Emergency Action Center (EAC) reports that captured only the most serious incidents of violence resulting in an injury to at least one party.

In total, 3,162 incident reports were coded across the seven states. Table 2 provides an overview of these incident reports.

Table 2. Prison Violence Incident Reports

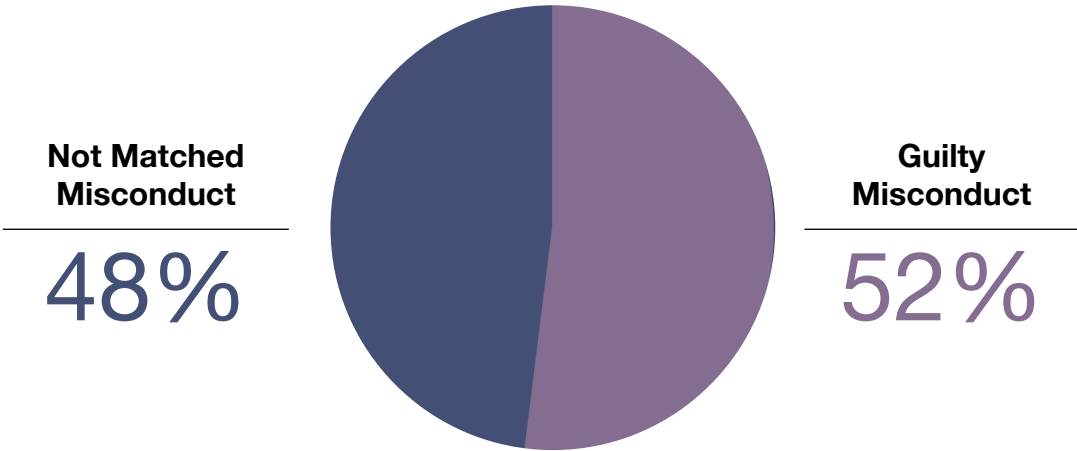
State	Assaults/Fights	Staff Assaults	Total
Arizona	544 (74%)	188 (26%)	732
Colorado	183 (64%)	101 (36%)	284
Massachusetts	211 (73%)	77 (27%)	288
Ohio	522 (88%)	71 (12%)	593
Oregon	266 (80%)	68 (20%)	334
Pennsylvania	366 (65%)	197 (35%)	563
Texas	343 (93%)	25 (7%)	368
Total	2,435 (77%)	727 (23%)	3,162

Although we expected to find rich contextual data within the incident reports, the narrative reports were quite formulaic and frequently lacked detail in their description of what happened during the incident. The location within the prison where the violence occurred was only identifiable for 73% of incidents coded. Moreover, very few incident reports noted what happened before the incident. The contextual detail we hoped to be able to capture was often not included in the narrative – and it was not clear why this information was absent. For example, physical injuries were only mentioned in 41% of all incidents and disciplinary actions were mentioned in just 45% of all incidents. The use of makeshift weapons and the presence of contraband were noted in only 24% and 2% of the incidents respectively. We do not know if the absence of reported injuries, weapons, and contraband means these elements were not present in incidents or whether they were present but not recorded in the incident reports.

In an effort to further explore the dark figure of prison violence, we matched our administrative data on guilty infractions with our incident report data. Specifically, in one state, we were able to determine whether an incident involving a fight or assault resulted in a formal guilty rule violation for any of the individuals involved. We were surprised to find that many incident reports did not result in a finding of guilt during investigative proceedings (see Figure 3).

Our analysis suggests that **administrative data on guilty violent infractions may be missing as many as half of all violent incidents** that are detected by correctional authorities. Our finding in the state where this matching was possible aligns with our finding that the narratives only mention discipline about half of the time. This significant discrepancy has important implications for how researchers approach the study of violence when relying solely on administrative data on guilty rule violations. It underscores the potential extent of the dark figure of prison violence and highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to data collection and analysis.

Figure 3. Prison Violence Incidents Resulting in Guilty Infractions in One State



Self-Report Data from Incarcerated Persons and Correctional Staff

Policies and procedures, administrative data of guilty rule violations, and incident reports are all representative of correctional departments’ response to and handling of prison violence. However, these sources of data cannot provide estimates of violence that go unreported or undetected. To address this gap and better understand the prevalence of violence, our study included in-depth interviews with incarcerated individuals and correctional staff. Despite potential biases such as social desirability, recall, or non-response, these interviews provide insight into prison violence both captured and not captured in administrative data.

Interviews with Incarcerated Persons

Incarcerated persons are at the highest risk of experiencing violence, being injured, and being murdered in prison. Given the seriousness of prison violence and its impacts on the lives of the incarcerated, we must also understand violence that is not brought to the attention of staff. These interviews provide critical details not available in administrative data, such as the number of incidents not detected by staff, extent of injuries, and the precipitating events leading to violence.

We conducted structured interviews with a random sample of incarcerated men from the seven states. These individuals were previously involved in a documented incident of physical violence with peers in 2021. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, through web-based services, or by telephone, and lasted 60-90 minutes. In total, we completed 289 interviews.

The interviews with incarcerated persons provide critical information about prison violence that is not always possible to capture in administrative data sources. As an example, our interviews captured whether someone initiated the “first move” against another person in the official focal incident, or whether the “first move” was made against them, the location of the attack, whether efforts were made to avoid detection (e.g., avoiding CCTV), and whether or how staff responded to the incident (e.g., use of force). The interviews also provide insight as to how individuals were affected in the days and months after the official focal incident occurred.

Beyond involvement in the focal incident, interviewees were also asked about their experiences and involvement in other incidents of violence during their incarceration. Table 3 provides an illustration of the average number of violent incidents with peers that were unknown or unreported to staff over the course of their incarceration term, and also those known to staff but not written up for six states. The findings indicate that **almost all peer incidents involving violence go unreported or are unknown to staff (83%)**. Additionally, almost half of all incidents brought to the attention of staff were not written up (47%). These findings indicate that the dark figure of violence is considerable in prisons, with a significant portion of violent incidents going unrecorded in official data sources.

Table 3. Overview of Peer Incidents Undetected or Staff Knew and Not Written Up

State	Not Reported	Staff Knew but Not Written Up
Arizona	85%	47%
Colorado	87%	70%
Massachusetts	83%	47%
Ohio	86%	44%
Oregon	72%	33%
Pennsylvania	82%	39%
Average	83%	47%

Note: Texas is not included at the time of publication due to ongoing data analysis.

Interviews with Correctional Staff

Correctional staff have the difficult job of maintaining institutional order and security while also using discretion to determine the infractions that warrant a write-up. This delicate balance often results in some behaviors not being documented. Assaults against staff are generally more likely to be detected, reported, and convicted. However, there are instances where this may not hold true. This raises the question of how violence against staff can be considered part of the dark figure of prison violence, given that it represents one of the most serious rule violations.

Interviews with correctional staff who have been assaulted offer valuable insights into the factors leading to violence against staff and how they respond to such incidents. Drawing from a random sample of incident reports in six participating states, we conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with staff who were assaulted in 2021. The interviews were conducted via web-based services and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. Questions covered staff experiences with both reported and unreported violence, including the underlying drivers of the violence, and their reasons for reporting or not reporting such incidents.

Approximately 46% of the interviewed staff described being injured in the incidents, and 82% reported that they had been previously assaulted. Among the staff who had been previously assaulted, half (51%) had been assaulted more than four times. Nearly every staff member who was interviewed (98%) had witnessed a fellow officer being assaulted. These findings highlight the extent to which staff not only experience violence but also the degree to which it may be concealed or downplayed, and contribute to the dark figure of prison violence.

Summary of Key Findings

How pervasive is prison violence? Our findings indicate that violence is vastly unreported and undetected:

- The interviewed men reported that on average four out of five violent incidents among incarcerated persons are not brought to the attention of correctional authorities
- The interviewed men reported that approximately half of incidents known to staff are not documented in incident reports
- Based on the administrative data linkage in one state, about half of the incident reports do not result in guilty violent infractions

Limitations

Despite our comprehensive approach to examining prison violence through multiple methods and data sources, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of our study.

1. We did not examine sexual violence, primarily because it falls under the purview of the Prison Rape Elimination Act (PREA) of 2003. One reason is that PREA (2003) provides directives for states to document, report, and respond to allegations and incidents of sexual violence in correctional facilities. Yet despite PREA's efforts, sexual violence in prison may still be underreported (see Butler et al., 2023). There remains a critical need to understand the potential prevalence of sexual violence in prisons, even in the presence of PREA-mandated reporting systems. A multi-phased approach similar to the one used in our study could provide valuable insights into this understudied aspect of prison violence.
2. Our data collection efforts partially overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic. This timing is significant because the varied efforts of states to reduce infection spread, particularly through lockdowns, may have influenced violence rates in correctional facilities.
3. Some of the most serious instances of violence, like homicide, do not always appear in disciplinary infraction data or incident reports, and instead are processed and recorded in other data processing systems. This limitation means that the data we analyzed may not consistently contain information on the most extreme forms of violence that occur in prison.

Implications and Recommendations

Our work reveals significant gaps in understanding the scale, scope, sources, and consequences of prison violence. Relying solely on guilty disciplinary infractions as a measure of violence is problematic, akin to using court convictions as the sole measure of crime in society. This practice, while inadequate in any other context, remains the standard in prison violence research. We encourage researchers to enhance data collection efforts and methodologies to better understand the various metrics of violence and the institutional mechanisms that hinder reliable metrics of violence. To address these shortcomings, we propose the following recommendations:

1. **Standardize definitions of violence:** Our review of policies and procedures highlights the variability in how violence is defined across states. Without consistent definitions of prison violence, or uniform procedures in place for recording violent incidents, we may never be able to provide reliable, direct comparisons of prison violence across different prison systems when using administrative data. We urge the development of standardized definitions and reporting protocols.
2. **Enhance incident reporting:** Incident reports should capture more comprehensive details for each violent event including the consistent reporting of the individuals involved, the specific location of the incident, the presence of and types of weapons, details on the nature and severity of violence, and staff responses. These details will aid in investigations and adjudications, potentially reducing the discrepancies between reported incidents and guilty infractions.
3. **Implement an "injury tool":** Many states keep information about injuries and medical attention separate from operations staff. To capture prison violence more uniformly in administrative records, we recommend adopting an "injury tool" for each incident of violence that integrates information about who was involved, the location of the incident, the degree of harm suffered, and subsequent staff and medical responses. Correctional systems could benefit from enhancing communication and collaboration between operations and medical staff in assessing the extent of injuries sustained. This strategy could improve institutional responses by ensuring that records of injury severity are maintained, which are details often omitted from current definitions of violence.
4. **Engage correctional leadership:** Our work demonstrates that correctional leaders can play a pivotal role in preventing and reducing incidents of violence. Additionally, participating state correctional departments have identified key elements that could contribute to a standardized definition of violence. We recommend the scaling of these efforts by urging correctional professional associations, such as the Correctional Leaders Association and American Correctional Association, to spearhead a coordinated effort to standardize a measure of prison violence.

Next, we will work with the participating correctional departments to design state-specific solutions. By implementing these recommendations and building on the work of the Prison Violence Consortium, state correctional systems can work toward:

- Developing more comprehensive and reliable metrics of violence
- Understanding and addressing institutional mechanisms that hinder accurate violence reporting
- Significantly reducing the harm experienced by both incarcerated persons and prison staff

These efforts will provide a more accurate understanding of prison violence, informing more effective strategies for its prevention and management, and ultimately enhancing safety within correctional facilities.

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