

**Homicides in Prison  
Oklahoma Department of Corrections—August 2009**

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A DOC “White Paper”**

**Abstract**

**Homicides of prison inmates have decreased dramatically in the last three decades and have consistently been lower per 100,000 population than the general population in recent years. Research into factors associated with inmate homicides has focused on the variables to be considered and/or examination of one or more of those variables. The research indicates that inmate homicides tend to be contextual and not the result of consistently identifiable and preventable influences. The recommended perspective on inmate homicide prevention depends on “the ability of prison administrators to exercise official authority effectively.”**

**Historical Statistical Overview**

In the last three decades, state prisons nationally have seen a major reduction in inmate homicides. Below are listed some of the more significant current statistics nationally and in Oklahoma:

- The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported in 2005 that, from 1980 to 2002, inmate homicides dropped from 54 per 100,000 inmates to 4, accounting for only 1.5% of all inmate deaths in state prisons in 2001-2002 (Mumola, 2005; see also De Amicus, 2006). In the same period, the general population’s homicide rate per 100,000 was 6.
- The median time served for state inmate homicide victims was 44 months. 67% of the state inmate homicide victims in 2001-2002 had been in state prison at least 2 years and 37% had served 5 years. The median time served for white, non-Hispanic inmate homicide victims was 46 months; for black, non-Hispanic, 55 months; and for Hispanic, 22 months.
- Violent offenders were the victims in 61% of state inmate homicide cases, and their median time served was 55 months. Kidnappers, arsonists, and probation/parole violators had the highest homicide victim rates. Victims with property offenses had median time served of 45 months and drug offense victims 40 months. No inmate imprisoned for fraud or DWI was killed in the 2001-2002 period. Public-order offense victims had median time served of 23 months.
- 6 a.m.-noon was the most frequent time for state inmate homicide, and midnight-6 a.m. was the least frequent. The victim’s cell or room was the most frequent location for the homicide.
- In 2009 BJS updated a portion of this report through 2006, but changes were minor (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2009). Inmate homicide ranged from 1.4% to 1.8% of all inmate homicides in state prisons from 2001 through 2006 and remained at 4 per 100,000.
- Oklahoma’s statistics concerning state prison inmate homicides were higher than the national average in the periods covered by the reports. Compared to the 4 per 100,000 rate in 2001-2002 nationally which has remained consistent, Oklahoma’s rate was 9 per 100,000 and rose to 11 per 100,000 in 2006. With

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the exception of the 2003 to 2004 period, the BJS report also showed a steady annual rise in overall inmate mortality in Oklahoma from 2001-2006.

### **Factors Associated with Homicides in Custody**

Research investigating factors associated with homicides in custody is limited and spread over the last three decades. Basically, the studies fall into two categories: those that detail the variables to be included in study designs and those that actually analyze one or more of the variables and their impact on inmate homicide rates. Examples of each type of study are found below.

#### ***Variables in Study Designs***

In an early study in the period of more killings, Wolfson (1978) detailed several categories and individual variables that any analysis of inmate homicides should consider. These included:

- Characteristics of the victim and the assailant
- Adjudication of the case
- Victimization rates of inmates and staff
- Comparison of prison homicide and general homicide patterns
- Institutional and cultural context of violence
- Relative danger of confinement
- Effect of deterrence upon homicide in prison

In his own study of prison homicides in calendar year 1973, he concluded:

*A remarkable similarity was observed between the crimes of prison homicide and homicide in general; however, two observations strongly distinguish the two homicide contexts: (1) a substantial proportion of prison homicide tends to be premeditated; and (2) race is an unimportant variable of prison victimization. Multiple-assailant homicide in prison is reported to resemble contract, gangland-style killing. Over one-third of the homicides were considered compatible with this homicide type. Such homicides were prompted by violations of prison subcultural norms or threats to inmate economic activities (hustling).*

*Prison homicide is believed to be strongly rooted in a culture of violence in prison, where the appearance of masculinity and invulnerability has great priority, and aggression and violence are the accepted means of establishing and protecting that image.*

*Some recommendations to reduce prison homicide include removal of weapons from prisoners, occupation of each cell by one prisoner whose key controls a pick-proof lock, reduce [sic] “blind-spots” to increase staff observation, increase*

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*[sic] security for assaulted inmates, increase [sic] security for new inmates, and more efficient hospitalization of the seriously injured.*

Another 1973 study of prisons (Bates College, 1975) emphasized impact on inmate homicides of institutional characteristics as well, recommending the following also be studied: “. . . size and age of institution; density of population; housing facilities; education and racial composition of staff; existence of special facilities—educational, recreational, therapeutic, counseling, etc.; nature of prison discipline and prison privileges.”

Later studies of factors associated with inmate homicides did incorporate many of the variables discussed above. The following examples indicate the findings.

### ***Research on Associated Factors***

An early Federal Bureau of Prisons study of inmate deaths from 1972-1978 concluded that there “were no statistically significant correlations between the Federal inmate population density and death rates for each cause of death” including homicides (Federal Bureau of Prisons, n.d.). Research of male inmate homicides in 1973 in state and federal prisons found

*. . . that killings are most common among maximum security prisoners with histories of violent offenses and that, contrary to expectations, gang conflicts and racial antagonisms were not the predominant factors in prison homicide. With respect to mortality in prison, it was found that the crude death rate was lower than that of the nonincarcerated population, although both the suicide and homicide rates were high. Concerning the prison environment itself—staff, physical facilities, and penal program—there was little evidence that the occurrence of homicide is related to the presence or absence of modern rehabilitative influences.*

*A crucial aspect of prison homicide was the determination of the relationship between the victim and murderer. Two types of homicide were identified: those in which there was a single assailant and those in which there were two or more prisoners involved as murderers.*

*Similarities between patterns of homicide in prison and in society lie in the concentration of homicides within the violence-prone segment of the population (all of the homicides reported occurred in 27 states; 23 states had no prison homicides). Differences lie in the more instrumental or precipitating factors, such as lack of firearms, unavailability of alcohol, and absence of family members as potential victims (Sylvester et al., 1977).*

Similarly, a Canadian study of its correctional institutions from 1967 to 1984 revealed that “. . . prison homicides were more likely to have been carried out by multiple assailants, were more commonly associated with revenge motives or drug and gambling debts, and victims were more likely to have violent backgrounds” (Porporino et al.,

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1987). A British study from 1990-2001 found that “[i]nformation was available about the motives in 18 out of the 26 [homicides]. The most common reason given was arguments, often over drugs and/or debts” (Sattar, 2004). Morgan’s recent analysis of the cause of prison violence reviewed a range of studies and included the growth of gang activity as a contributing factor to inmate violence and homicide in U.S. prisons (2008).

In response to the possibility of the death penalty as a deterrent on prison homicide, Wolfson (1982) determined that such external factors had no greater deterrent effect inside prison walls than outside. Looking at institutional factors from 1976-1980, Coates (1984) concluded that “staff-inmate ratios are not central in determining prison safety and climate. No ideal staffing pattern was revealed. Staffing patterns must be assessed and determined according to the needs of each institution.”

Other studies have examined the impact of “each institution” and its management. One study of state prisons from 1986 decided that “[f]acilities where prison administrators failed to resolve conflicts between administration and frontline staff or had a more visible gang presence also reported higher rates of inmate homicide. These results support the notion that the quality of prison life is attributable to the ability of prison administrators to exercise official authority effectively. These findings strongly suggest that calls to give greater weight to administrative action in prisons should not be dismissed” (Reisig, 2002). However, Wortley (2003) raised the caution that “. . . prison control often deals with institutional pressures that *precipitate* misbehavior. As well as tightening-up to restrict opportunities for misbehavior, prison control can also involve loosening-off to reduce these pressures. These opposing approaches to control need to be carefully balanced to avoid counterproductive intervention” [emphasis in original].

### **Conclusion**

Homicides of prison inmates have decreased dramatically in the last three decades and have consistently been lower per 100,000 population than the general population in recent years. Research into factors associated with inmate homicides has focused on the variables to be considered and/or examination of one or more of those variables. The research indicates that inmate homicides tend to be contextual and not the result of consistently identifiable and preventable influences. The recommended perspective on inmate homicide prevention depends on “the ability of prison administrators to exercise official authority effectively.”

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