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Position Paper

Offending and victimization in prisons: New theoretical and empirical approaches[☆]Esther F.J.C. van Ginneken^{a,*}, John Wooldredge^b^a Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, Leiden University, the Netherlands^b School of Criminal Justice, University of Cincinnati, USA

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ABSTRACT

In-prison offending and victimization threaten the safety of incarcerated individuals and staff, which makes it an important topic for correctional research. Prior research has generated substantial knowledge about individual and environmental characteristics that heighten the risk of in-prison offending and victimization. The victim-offender overlap and the situational dynamics of incidents, however, are still under-researched. This essay proposes that the study of in-prison offending and victimization would benefit from adoption of an incident-level approach. This recognizes that incidents can escalate and de-escalate depending on persons involved and their (re)actions, and that victimization and offending are often linked. It is discussed how criminological theories and methods on crime and victimization outside prisons can be adapted for this purpose.

An intended function of incarceration is incapacitation, meaning that people are unable to commit offenses outside prison for the duration of their sentence. This, however, discounts offending in prisons, which is a well-established problem in prisons worldwide (Modvig, 2014). It is important to understand the causes of in-prison offending and victimization, for at least three reasons. First and foremost, in-prison violence directly threatens the safety of staff and incarcerated individuals. State authorities have committed to international agreements to protect incarcerated persons: ‘The safety and security of prisoners, staff, service providers and visitors shall be ensured at all times’ (rule 1, United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners). Second, violence and other offenses (e.g., thefts and drug offenses) also threaten safety indirectly by contributing to a hostile climate, increasing the likelihood of retaliation, and undermining staff authority (Skarbek, 2014). This makes incarcerated populations more difficult to manage. Third, the consequences of in-prison offending and victimization may extend beyond imprisonment, and interfere with successful reentry (Cochran and Mears, 2017; Cochran et al., 2014; Trulson et al., 2011). While a good amount of research has been conducted on the predictors of offending in prison, there are far fewer studies of victimization (for a review, see Caravaca-Sánchez et al., 2023), and important limitations to both groups of studies.

Thus far, studies of offending and victimization in prison have not been integrated well, and researchers have generally treated and conceptualized them as separate phenomena (cf. Steiner and Wooldredge, 2020; Wooldredge, 2020). These separate treatments, however, have still generated important insights related to the conceptualization, prevalence, and measurement of misconduct and victimization. This essay reviews knowledge on in-prison offending and victimization, highlights important limitations of current ideas

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on and approaches to studying the subject, and introduces promising directions for theoretical development and research. In particular, we make the argument that the study of offending and victimization in prisons would benefit from a situational perspective that considers information on the offense(s), all persons involved, incident location, and possible motivations by the offenders including victim provocations from past incidents. In other words, a situational perspective considers the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘where’, and ‘why’ of in-prison incidents; this has important methodological implications, because it requires a different level of analysis than what is typical in current prison research. In contrast to individual-level approaches that focus on one offender or victim using individual-level data, an incident-level approach considers how an incident plays out between the persons involved and allows more direct analysis of how seemingly unrelated incidents are potentially related to each other, how victimization may increase the risk of offending (e.g., through retaliation), and vice versa (e.g., through involvement in the illicit economy). This requires methodological advancement in the sense that more data is needed at the incident level.

At the outset, we must first establish what is meant by in-prison “offending” and “victimization.”¹ In-prison offending encompasses any type of behavior that is considered a violation of prison rules (often also termed misconduct), including crimes (homicide, sexual assault, other physical assault, theft, vandalism, arson, etc.) as well as other behaviors not considered unlawful outside prison (disrespect to peers, not following staff directives, being “out of place,” etc.). Considering the variety of prison rules, it is useful to consider how these rules might be grouped to provide the most unique information across groups. Research has not always distinguished between different types of offenses and victimizations, such as “violent” versus “property,” but there is evidence that risk factors differ based on the type of offense and victimization examined (Camp et al., 2003; Steiner and Wooldredge, 2013).

1. Time for theoretical and empirical innovations

The explanations of in-prison offending and victimization have hitherto been limited primarily to individual and environmental characteristics that predict risk for in-prison offending and/or victimization. These factors are often referred to as indicators of “importation” and/or “deprivation,” with the latter including both individual and facility factors whereas the former has been limited to individual factors (although environmental factors prior to incarceration can shape individual factors during incarceration, such as gang membership). The concomitant theoretical perspectives offer explanations about adaptation to imprisonment more generally, of which offending and victimization are manifestations. The origins of these theories go back to key works published in the second half of the twentieth century that are still highly influential today, regardless of developments in the scale and conditions of incarceration since the late 1950s. While importation and deprivation theories were initially regarded as contrasting perspectives, both have been integrated to provide a broader theory of adaptation to incarceration (see Steiner, 2018; for a review).

1.1. Deprivation theory

Deprivation theory focuses on the characteristics of confinement as the most salient determinants of incarcerated persons’ adaptation. This perspective is often linked to the ‘pains of imprisonment’ described by Sykes (1958), who stated that incarcerated persons adapted and responded to the deprivations of incarceration (loss of liberty, autonomy, privacy, material goods, and heterosexual relations), including the use of violence and other forms of subversion. In later studies, the perspective as applied to in-prison offending evolved to include other prison and regime characteristics (e.g., security level, limited opportunities for programming and recreation, crowding), and individual experiences (e.g., subjective severity of living conditions, procedural justice, participation in programming and recreation) (e.g., Bosma et al., 2020; Jiang and Fisher-Giorlando, 2002; Lahm, 2016; Rocheleau, 2013; Steiner et al., 2017; Steiner and Wooldredge, 2008). The risk of in-prison offending and victimization may increase as the environment becomes more hostile, feeds resistance to legal authority, or fails to offer meaningful activities to keep incarcerated persons occupied as well as physically and mentally stimulated.

Many studies have produced evidence favoring the applicability of deprivation theory to offending and/or victimization. For example, in-prison offending and victimization are – generally speaking – more likely when incarcerated individuals are less satisfied with staff-prisoner relationships (Beijersbergen et al., 2015; Bosma et al., 2020; Reisig and Mesko, 2009; Wolff et al., 2009), in prisons with a higher security level (Camp and Gaes, 2005; Camp et al., 2003; Cooley, 1993; Craddock, 1996; Howard et al., 2020; Jiang and Fisher-Giorlando, 2002; Pérez et al., 2010; Toman, 2019), and in larger prisons (Caravaca-Sánchez et al., 2019; Farrington and Nuttall, 1980; Ruback and Carr, 1993). On the other hand, evidence in relation to activities such as work assignments and education are mixed (Howard et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2018; Teasdale et al., 2016). Regarding visits, there is some evidence that receiving visits is associated with a lower risk of victimization (Toman, 2019) and offending (Cochran, 2012), although most studies have found that receiving visits is associated with a higher risk of offending (Bosma et al., 2020; Casey-Acevedo et al., 2004; Siennick et al., 2012) or that it has no significant effect (Howard et al., 2020; Jiang and Winfree Jr, 2006; Lahm, 2008; Woo et al., 2016). Possibly, this is related to the quality and/or timing of visits, and the type of visitor (conventional versus criminal peers, family members, attorneys, etc.)

¹ With our reference to ‘prisons’ we include pre-trial populations and convicted populations confined for any offense, because many countries do not house pre-trial detainees and less serious convicted offenders (e.g., misdemeanants) in facilities separate from more serious convicted offenders, such as in jails versus prisons in the US. While victimization and offending may take different forms depending on length of stay and turnover of the population, our main argument about the need for an incident-level approach holds for both populations and in different types of detention and correctional facilities. Furthermore, research by Martens et al. (2021) established a victim-offender overlap with data including individuals with pre-trial and convicted status, although it would be worthwhile for further research to examine whether the mechanisms behind the overlap differ.

(Berghuis et al., 2022, 2023; Siennick et al., 2012).

1.2. Importation theory

Relatively soon after Sykes published *Society of Captives*, Irwin and Cressey (1962) questioned the degree to which the deprivations of incarceration impact individuals' behaviors while in prison. Although they did not actually use the term "importation" in their original article, they discussed the relevance of the "criminal subculture" as opposed to a "prison subculture" for shaping behavior during incarceration, and offenders are a part of the criminal subculture prior to entering prison.²

Importation theory holds that incarcerated individuals' behaviors are largely a product of the pre-existing values, traits, experiences, and criminal/cultural ideologies of individuals before entering prison. In the original manifestation of this idea, Irwin and Cressey (1962) focused on imported criminal subcultures. Their ideas were later adopted as a broader perspective that subsumes all factors that are pre-existing and relate to the individual rather than the incarceration experience. This includes demographic characteristics, personality traits, pre-prison values, and criminal history. In relation to offending and victimization, an importation perspective suggests that incarcerated persons are *predisposed* to behave in certain ways during incarceration, including shaping their risk as either an offender or victim (the latter in terms of shaping their vulnerability to victimization).

There is consistent and widespread evidence that incarcerated persons differ in their propensity to become involved in prison incidents based on pre-prison factors, whether as perpetrators or victims (Steiner et al., 2014, 2017; Steiner and Wooldredge, 2020; Wolff et al., 2009). Regarding offending, younger incarcerated persons (Bosma et al., 2020; Steiner et al., 2014), persons from ethnic minority groups (Berg and DeLisi, 2006; Steiner et al., 2014), those with previous incarcerations (Bosma et al., 2020; Cunningham Dallas and Sorensen, 2007; Jiang and Winfree Jr, 2006), and with violent criminal histories (Berg and DeLisi, 2006; DeLisi, 2003) tend to have higher rates of in-prison offending. Results with respect to gender are inconsistent, possibly varying by the type of rule violation (Bosma et al., 2020; Craddock, 1996; Gover et al., 2008; Harer and Langan, 2001; Isenhardt, 2016; Wolff et al., 2007). Regarding victimization, there is evidence that younger incarcerated persons (Howard et al., 2020; Steiner et al., 2017) and those suffering from mental health problems (Blitz et al., 2008; Leddy and O'Connell, 2002; Pare and Logan, 2011; Wolff and Shi, 2009; Wolff et al., 2009) are more at risk of victimization. Prior victimization is also a risk factor (Gama-Araujo et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2020; Kuo, 2019; Steiner et al., 2017; Wolff et al., 2009). These older importation and deprivation frameworks have not kept pace with changes to prison confinement in most industrial nations, nor with advancements in criminological theories since the 1960s. In particular, the models do not account for changes in incarcerated individuals' privileges, civil rights, and facility environments over the past several decades; and perhaps most important is failure to consider and explain the victim-offender overlap.

2. Consideration of the victim-offender overlap

The separation of misconduct and victimization in most prison studies to date may be contributing to a false dichotomy between perpetrators and victims: it ignores a probable relationship between the two, and indeed the victim-offender overlap in prison (cf. Daquin and Daigle, 2021; Kuo et al., 2022; Martens et al., 2021; Toman, 2019). Only recently, prison researchers started paying attention to the victim-offender overlap. This is an important advancement in research because it can lead to a better understanding of both victimization and in-prison offending, the degree to which offenders and victims share similar characteristics, and ultimately how to reduce the odds of both. We should be careful to classify individuals as *either* offenders or victims in prison because they may be both. The two may be closely related in at least four ways: (1) individuals may be both victim and offender in the same incident (e.g., someone who starts a fight does not necessarily "finish" the fight); (2) the experience or threat of victimization may be the motive for later offending (McCorkle, 1992); (3) an act of offending may also be followed by retaliation and, thus, victimization (Edgar et al., 2003; Jacobs and Wright, 2006; Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967); and (4) certain individual factors might be correlated to the higher odds of both (e.g., prison gang membership). The theoretical implications are obvious in that situational dynamics need to be considered to investigate the victim-offender overlap.

While such a theory may certainly be informed by general criminological theories about crime and victimization (e.g., self-control and social-control theories), the specific nature of the prison context should also be considered. That is, the victim-offender overlap in prison may differ from the overlap outside prison in important ways. First, the pallet of response options available to individuals who are victimized (or threatened with victimization) in prison is different, in the sense that they cannot escape the situation as easily given that they are incarcerated, and that they cannot report crimes to legal authorities in the same way and with confidentiality. Second, norms of the prisoner society regarding informal responses to specific types of victimization are clearly unique to the prison context. Third, in-prison offending differs from offending outside prison in terms of punishable behaviors (i.e., a person may be considered an offender in prison but not outside prison for the same behavior, such as verbal aggression or disrespect to another inmate). Fourth, prison populations include proportionately more persons with serious and extensive criminal histories than in the general population and, therefore, much higher densities of motivated offenders relative to non-prison communities (criminal history is a risk factor for in-prison offending, see Steiner et al. (2014)); similarly, we can assume that larger portions of prison populations include offenders who were also victims prior to incarceration. There are a few prison studies on the prevalence and predictors of the victim-offender overlap, to which we now turn.

² As a matter of fact, the word "imported" appears only once in the article, two pages before the end and in a quote from Stanton Wheeler (1962) regarding incarcerated individuals in Norway.

Using nationally representative survey data collected in federal and state prisons in the US ($N = 15,410$), [Daquin and Daigle \(2021\)](#) identified 7% of respondents as both victims and offenders of violence from admission to the point of the survey, versus 6% as victims only, and 10% as offenders only. Using the same data but restricted to individuals incarcerated in state correctional facilities ($N = 13,981$), [Toman \(2019\)](#) found that 51% of all respondents had engaged in a rule violation during incarceration, and 13% of this group (7% of the total sample) had also been a victim of violence. Consistent with [Daquin and Daigle \(2021\)](#), she also found that importation and deprivation factors accounted for a portion of the victim-offender overlap, but more so for non-violent offenders than for violent offenders. This highlights the benefit of also considering type of offense (e.g., violent versus property) when examining the victim-offender overlap. In their study of individuals incarcerated in Taiwan ($N = 2065$), [Kuo et al. \(2022\)](#) confirmed that the victim-offender overlap applies to different types of in-prison offending and victimization. The overlap persists even when considering a shorter measurement period. Research from the Netherlands with a sample of 3485 incarcerated individuals ([Martens et al., 2021](#)) showed an overlap within a two-month reporting period: 6% of respondents were both victims and offenders of either violence or property offenses, while 19% were victim-only, 3% were offender-only and the remaining 72% were neither victim nor offender.

It is difficult to compare prevalence rates across studies, given differences in reporting periods, geography, and the types of offenses examined. Longer study windows increase the odds of both offending and victimization for any one incarcerated person, and it becomes increasingly difficult to assess any meaningful temporal link between offending and victimization. In short, the longer the study period, the further apart victimization and offending may be in time. The US-based studies, using the Survey of Inmates in State and Federal Correctional Facilities, captured in-prison offending and victimization during an entire prison stay; this would produce higher prevalence rates in contrast to limiting the study period to half a year or even shorter. For example, an individual could have been victimized within a few weeks of admission versus committing a crime two years later. Prison sentences in the US are also typically longer than in many other countries with an average of nearly four years in the US sample ([Daquin and Daigle, 2021](#); [Toman, 2019](#)) versus just over one year on average in the Netherlands, as reported by [Martens et al. \(2021\)](#). Regarding geographical context, there are between-country and even between-prison differences in prison management and rule enforcement policies and practices, as well as in how prisons define violations (i.e., more rules yield more violations). The Taiwanese study by [Kuo et al. \(2022\)](#) illustrates the importance of cultural context for shaping the conceptualization and measurement of misconduct and victimization. Some types of behavior may be more prevalent and/or considered more serious in some prison environments but not others, and these differences might also extend internationally. The degree to which offenders and victims overlap may vary extensively across prison cultures as well as across offense types within the same culture. It is also important to note that research has yet to (explicitly) consider offending by and victimization of staff. Yet, the predictors and dynamics of incidents in which staff are involved may be different from incidents involving incarcerated individuals only.

In light of how easily offending in prison can increase one's vulnerability to future victimization, and how certain forms of victimization can lead to retaliation, a better understanding of the victim-offender overlap is needed in order to identify the common precipitators to each. Toward this end it will be critical to have data on the temporal proximity of offending and victimization so that the odds of each can be linked meaningfully. Offending and victimization separated by a couple of years is probably due to chance and is not meaningful given that the odds of both are much higher in prison to begin with and increase with more time in prison. Similarly, offending in one prison and victimization in another are probably unrelated. Future research should explore this overlap and how it varies by type of offense, especially in terms of how certain types of rule violations contribute to an offender's vulnerability to victimization. We would expect, for example, that an individual's odds of engaging in verbal threats or theft of another's property would correspond with their odds of violent victimization. Overall, the victim-offender overlap highlights the need to consider incidents from a situational perspective.

3. Contextual and situational perspectives

Aside from the victim-offender overlap, current theoretical perspectives on in-prison offending and victimization have largely ignored potentially important social-contextual factors such as the interactions between incarcerated persons as well as between incarcerated persons and staff, provocation and motivation, and group norms, all of which can vary across different prison environments. Contextual risk factors are still also mostly absent from empirical research, as noted in a systematic review on victimization in prisons ([Goossens et al., 2023](#)). A promising development is that recent scholarship is recognizing the importance of advancing these ideas, for example by incorporating spatial and incident-level factors in related studies ([McNeeley, 2021](#); [Rodriguez and Waggoner, 2023](#)), and assessing the validity of general theories of deviance in explaining misconduct ([Cook and Kim, 2023](#)). Below, we contribute to this discussion by considering the value of cultural perspectives and social control and opportunity theories for an updated framework of in-prison offending and victimization.

3.1. Cultural perspectives

Cultural perspectives propose that individuals from disadvantaged communities may be more prone to violence as a method of problem solving if they are less likely to perceive the police as legitimate and reliable. Living within these communities prior to incarceration could generate greater reliance on violence during confinement, if individuals bring their ecologically structured beliefs regarding legal authority, crime and deviance into the prison environment. This is not to say that these culturally shaped values are internalized norms, but rather latent beliefs that may influence the likelihood of deviance in environments that are similar to those in which the beliefs were originally shaped ([Sampson and Bean, 2006](#); [Wacquant, 2001](#)). Prisons might constitute such environments (see also [Harer and Steffensmeier, 1996](#); [Wacquant, 2001](#)). [Mitchell et al. \(2020\)](#) showed a substantial convergence between the code of the

street and the convict code, particularly in relation to beliefs about masculinity. Importantly, cultural norms and values may also operate on a group level. For example, an importation of pre-prison culture – including structures of extralegal governance – may be more common when formal governance structures in prison are weak or not perceived as legitimate (Skarbek, 2016; Symkovych, 2017). The local prison circumstances may thus play a role in shaping extralegal governance structures. What is more, group norms may affect behavior beyond individual beliefs and attitudes through perceptions about a group's norms and the perceived consequences when deviating from these norms.

According to the subculture of violence thesis (Wolfgang and Ferracuti, 1967), group norms that either tolerate or encourage violence can lead to violent behavior by individuals in these groups because they are more willing to use violence when confronted with ambiguous situations demanding immediate responses (such as disagreements between individuals and an unwillingness to compromise on a solution). There is evidence that internalized values and group values (net of individual values) contribute to aggressive behavior (Bernburg and Thorlindsson, 2005; Felson et al., 1994). Aside from a greater willingness to resort to violence by some individuals, a widespread commitment to group values may result in pressure on individuals to act violently even if they are less prone to do so relative to the rest of the group. Such processes may well be at work in prisons, where people are confined in groups for extended periods of time each day.

Indeed, prison research has also shown that the values and attitudes that make up the 'inmate code' (or 'convict code') influence behavior by incarcerated persons (Clemmer, 1940; Crewe, 2009; Gooch and Treadwell, 2020; Ricciardelli, 2014; Sykes, 1958; Trammell, 2012; Trammell et al., 2020). Although a universal convict code no longer exists across individuals incarcerated within the same facility (Skarbek, 2014), due to the proliferation of gangs as well as groups with different political and religious ideologies, there are some similarities in values surrounding the use of violence (Mitchell et al., 2017; Pyrooz et al., 2021). In short, violence is used to maintain order within the population of incarcerated individuals that was once upheld by a universal code. US research also recognizes that the existence of gangs and gang affiliation is related to violence, but the relative individual and group-level effects of gangs are unclear. On the one hand, gang affiliation has been identified as a risk factor for misconduct (Delisi et al., 2004; Gaes et al., 2002; Griffin and Hepburn, 2006), but on the other hand gangs may contribute to order and protect against victimization *within* a gang (Skarbek, 2014; Trammell, 2009b). However, the sanctioning of violence in particular circumstances and to varying degrees depending on the circumstance suggests that the mere existence of such a code in prison can only contribute to violence, even if certain individuals are "protected" by it along the way. This is more a phenomenon of prisons for men relative to women, however, by nature of gender-specific pathways to criminal lifestyles (Trammell, 2009a, 2012; Wulf-Ludden, 2013). While prison gangs are less prevalent in European prisons, there are social systems in prisons akin to "street gangs" in which similar hierarchical relationships and group loyalties drive violence and other criminal activities (Gooch and Treadwell, 2020, 2022).

3.2. Social control and opportunity theories

Also (potentially) relevant are broader, more *general* criminological theories which are compatible with the above perspectives and share similar assumptions about the dominant behavioral inclinations within the population of interest. Social control theories assume that it is conformity that must be explained given human inclinations toward self-gratification, and both lifestyle and routine activities theories treat the existence of motivated offenders as a constant. Routine activities theory assumes that offending is pervasive and victimization can only be prevented or displaced, which is applicable to prison environments that house both motivated offenders and vulnerable targets in close physical proximity to one another. Therefore, both are suitable for framing studies of offending and victimization in prison because the question of why someone *becomes* a criminal is irrelevant at the point of prison intake. These theories are compatible with each other and can integrate deprivation and importation variables while also incorporating incident-level elements, including time and place, as well as management practices at both the micro and macro levels (Steiner and Wooldredge, 2020; Wooldredge, 2020). The social control component holds that offending can be inhibited by the exercise of self-control, and externally through mechanisms of informal and formal controls, such as guardianship and stakes in conformity (Steiner and Wooldredge, 2020). The concept of low self-control was introduced by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) in their general theory of crime, and Schreck (1999) subsequently applied the concept to an understanding of victimization and the victim-offender overlap. Self-control is an individual factor that can explain people's tendencies to place themselves in risky situations (e.g., socializing with criminal peers) and behave in ways that could provoke confrontations with others (e.g., being verbally aggressive). More interactions with criminal peers increases their odds of both offending and victimization through exposure to criminal opportunities and more volatile interactions within those groups, which could explain the victim-offender overlap (Schreck et al., 2021). Similarly, Berg and Felson (2020) noted that people's behavioral tendencies in dispute resolutions influence the likelihood of conflict escalation or de-escalation. Some individuals may be inclined to use violence or threats as method of "problem solving," in turn fueling the potential for escalation of conflict. Others may prefer de-escalation strategies, such as compromising, walking away, or even apologizing. The social-interactionist approach described by Berg and Felson (2020) also accounts for incident-level factors, such as third party mediation or encouragement, that may contribute to escalation and de-escalation of conflicts. Arguably, this aligns well with the cultural perspective described above (which accounts for the influence of individual and group norms) while also reflecting a social control perspective. For example, if third parties (are perceived to) disapprove of offending behavior, then higher levels of informal controls exerted by that group should increase the costs of offending. It is valuable to take both individual and group attitudes and inclinations into account to explain differences in offending and victimization at both the individual and aggregate levels in prison.

Lifestyle and routine activities theories hold that certain lifestyles and daily routines can increase the risk of victimization due to the convergence in time and place of a motivated offender, a suitable target and the absence of a capable guardian. In other words, opportunities for offending vary based on incident and individual characteristics. Risk of victimization is increased with greater "target"

vulnerability or antagonism (Finkelhor and Asdigian, 1996), which applies to different types of offenses. This can be linked to pre-prison and incarceration factors at both the individual and facility levels, although there is little empirical research on antagonism and the sequence of actions despite the victim-offender overlap (but see Edgar et al., 2003; O'Donnell and Edgar, 1998). Antagonism may take various forms: violent assaults may be self-defense, retaliation for perceived wrongs, a way to enforce debts, or an escalation of play-fighting (O'Donnell and Edgar, 1998). Recent evidence supports that in-prison offending related to a risky lifestyle (e.g., gambling, substance use, and participation in the prison economy) increases the odds of in-prison victimization (Choi and Wentling, 2021; McNeeley, 2022).

Our proposed framework highlights factors that put individuals at heightened risk of offending and victimization in particular prison environments, which incorporates a social-ecological perspective on the interactions between individuals and their environments. Of central focus here are individual roles and relationships, the social context, environmental suppressors on motivations to offend, and action sequences (i.e., which actions are likely to follow other actions, such as victimization after offending and/or offending after victimization). To this end, broader cultural explanations of individual behaviors and a social-interactional perspective are important elements within this framework. While the relevance of such theoretical explanations is most clearly relevant in violent encounters where people directly interact, incident-level factors (who/what/why/when/where) play a role in any type of offense, including property offenses as well as victimless offenses. Regarding property offenses, victim characteristics are important for shedding light on possible motivations of the offender (e.g., a victim with recent interactions with an offender might be consistent with payback for a prior incident). Regarding victimless offenses, some of these (e.g., drug use) are crucial to understanding the dynamics of violence in prison – an issue to which we return at the end of this article.

4. Methodological challenges and approaches

Advancements have been made in empirical studies of in-prison crimes/rule violations over the past two decades, including the development of operational concepts that better reflect theoretical concepts, tighter study windows to better establish the convergence of independent and dependent variables, more properly specified models in terms of the inclusion of both individual and facility effects, and more reliable methods for estimating such models (with multilevel modeling or robust standard errors).

The primary challenges yet to be overcome in this line of research, especially for recognizing and examining the victim-offender overlap, include the addition of incident-based data and an expansion of outcome measures, and adopting longitudinal research designs. Along these lines, possible next steps to improving the rigor of related studies consistent with the theories noted above include (a) an expansion of operational concepts to enable assessments of both misconduct and victimization in the same samples while also including theoretically relevant individual and facility level predictors, (b) the addition of incident-based measures to more reliably separate “offenders” from “victims,” (c) separating samples of offenders only, victims only, and offenders-victims to evaluate similarities and differences in the prediction models of all three, (d) capturing both the incidence and prevalence of offending and victimization in the same study to identify differences between the odds of falling into each group versus how these groups can be further separated based on the frequency of each (e.g., frequent offenders, frequent victims, and separation in the victim-offender group based on the frequency of each experience during a sentence), and (e) pursuit of repeated measures of offending and victimization from the point of prison admission to establish any causal linkages between them and whether one path (offender to victim) is stronger than the other (victim to offender), examined with latent growth curves and multilevel models of individual change (with repeated observations nested within persons nested within units/facilities).

Central to the above is the issue regarding definitions of “misconduct” and “victimization,” and the most useful groupings of rule violations to examine in a single study. That is, what are the types or groups of offenses that should be examined in order to provide the most comprehensive evaluation of misconduct and victimization but without redundancies across models (for data reduction)? A related consideration, perhaps secondary to the above, is additional comparisons of self-report versus official data on rule violations. Self-report data typically identify higher levels of offending compared to official records although this is contingent on the specific violations (Bosma et al., 2020; Steiner and Wooldredge, 2014). Regarding victimization, most studies of in-prison victimization have involved analyses of self-report data because most state DOCs do not provide victim identifiers in rule violation databases. An exception is the study by Lahm (2016), who analyzed official incident reports to examine characteristics of offenders compared to victims. This study included incidents with a single offender and single victim (both incarcerated individuals); incidents that involved staff members, or multiple offenders or victims, were excluded. The author reported incident characteristics such as time and location of the incident, type of physical contact/attack, and injuries, which are relevant from a routine activities and lifestyles perspective. Future research should adopt such an incident-level methodological approach to account for situational dynamics, and amend it to include all actors where feasible (victims, offenders, witnesses, and staff), changing roles (from offender to victim and vice versa), and sequence of events (to understand multiple crimes/charges within a single event).

Compiling incident level data for violent offenses that can *reliably* distinguish each person's role (victim, offender, or both) will be challenging although prison systems already generate this type of information through incident reports and security camera footage, and a growing number of systems are in the process of adopting or have already adopted body-worn cameras for correctional officers in some or all prisons in their state (Florida, Georgia, New York, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin). The challenge is not so much in gathering the information, but rather in the amount of time it would take to review camera footage and make sense of the information to generate meaningful data for evaluation (although assessments of footage from body-worn cameras must explore how those cameras might impact incident dynamics, as noted by Sydes et al., 2020). For example, we are aware of Ohio's efforts to facilitate the practical use of camera footage toward developing and implementing more effective safety measures. Active research partnerships between corrections departments and academic institutions will provide the opportunities for generating related studies. At a minimum, security

camera footage might supplement information from official incident reports.

5. From an individual-level perspective toward an incident-level perspective

Studies to date have measured in-prison offending and/or victimization *primarily* as individual-level phenomena (cf., [Edgar et al., 2003](#)). This strategy has important limitations. First, it ignores the number of people involved in a single incident. This means that the count of offenses might not be reliable, because the same offense is recorded for each offender in the same incident. The number of victims in a single incident is even more ambiguous given that record keeping on rule infractions is offender-focused. It would be helpful if offenders and victims in the same incident could be identified with unique offenses counted per incident rather than per offender. Second, an individual-level focus does not allow disentangling victimization and offending, and identifying mechanisms that might produce the victim-offender overlap (e.g., a verbal dispute between two people may escalate into a physical fight where one or both are offenders and victims; motivation for an attack might be based on a prior attack by the victim). Thus far, the “offender” and “victim” in a specific incident have not been properly identified. Third, research has not linked incidents in time to assess causality between instances of offending and victimization, and vice versa. Finally, we do not yet understand factors that contribute to the likelihood of an incident escalating or de-escalating, and answers to these questions would be central to crime control in prison. For this reason, related empirical studies could benefit by including an incident-level focus in conjunction with compiling individual-level data.

Criminological research has demonstrated the benefits of an incident-level perspective, as in studies on robberies ([Lindegaard and Bernasco, 2017](#); [Lindegaard et al., 2015](#)), lethal and non-lethal assaults ([Felson and Steadman, 1983](#)), and different severity levels of aggression ([Felson, 1982](#)). The robbery studies by Lindegaard and colleagues drew on interview data with 104 persons who committed robberies, who described specific instances of robberies that were committed as well as robberies that were planned but aborted. Analysis of these instances and the behavioral sequences revealed predictors of the use of physical force ([Lindegaard et al., 2015](#)) and the likelihood of abortion of a robbery ([Lindegaard and Bernasco, 2017](#)). [Felson and Steadman \(1983\)](#) drew on 159 detailed case reports on lethal and non-lethal (but serious) incidents of violence, which also allowed for the coding of action sequences. Their study exemplifies the importance of situational dynamics with the finding that the victim’s behavior was a better predictor of subsequent actions by the offender compared to the offender’s own previous actions. In other words, there was inconsistency in behavior, and ‘each participant’s actions were a function of the other person’s behavior’ ([Felson and Steadman, 1983](#), p. 72). [Felson \(1982\)](#) also analyzed 1365 violent incidents described by 534 respondents, and found that the mere presence of an audience (in conflicts with same-sex participants) and instigation of a conflict by a third party resulted in more severe aggression.

The bullying literature and broader criminological literature also demonstrate the relevance of considering the influences of peers and bystanders on the actions of offenders as well as the decisions of authority figures to apprehend and sanction those involved (which could potentially act as deterrents to subsequent offending) ([Fischer et al., 2011](#); [Salmivalli et al., 1996](#)). Bystanders can take on many different roles: they can defend the victim, antagonize the situation, assist or reinforce the perpetrator, or abstain from involvement ([Levine et al., 2012](#); [Phillips and Cooney, 2005](#); [Philpot et al., 2020](#)). Abstention could make bystanders more credible witnesses although gaining their cooperation is generally difficult in prison because snitching on others is much more likely to prompt retaliation compared to outside prison. The development of situations and outcomes depend on the complex interaction between individuals and their environment ([Salmivalli, 2010](#)), which highlights the utility of an incident-based approach for shedding light on the social and ecological processes surrounding misconduct and victimization in prisons.

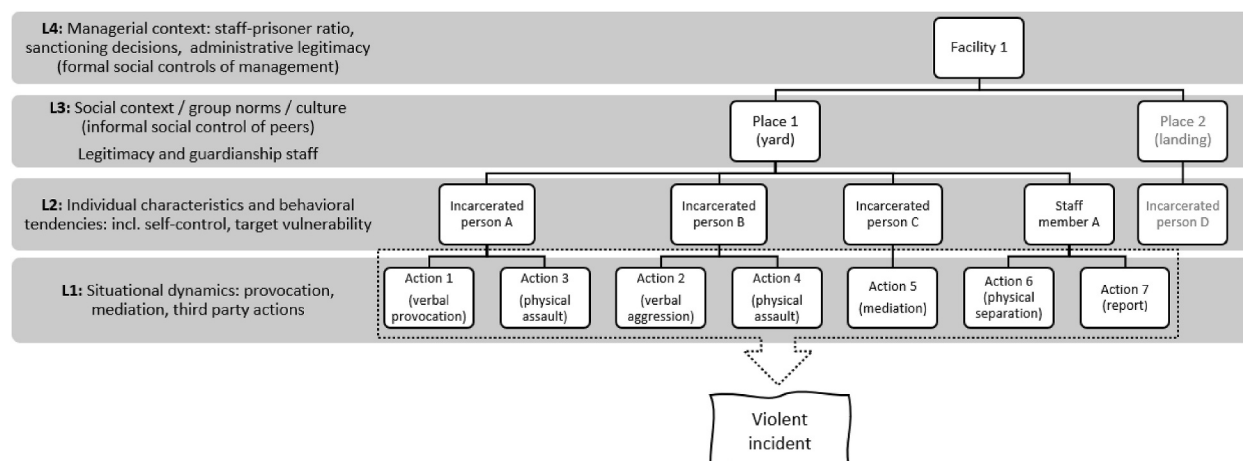


Fig. 1. This figure represents an example of a single incident within a broader model.

6. A realistic blueprint for next steps in research

This article has pointed out three main avenues of innovation in the literature on offending and victimization in prisons. First, it is necessary to move away from the false dichotomy between victimization and offending, and recognize that the two overlap in important ways. Second, to study this, it will be helpful to take an incident-level perspective as opposed to an individual-level perspective. This means that roles and event sequences can be identified, in addition to information on who was victimized and who offended. Finally, contextual and situational explanations should be applied, developed and tested to understand why incidents happen in specific times and places, and why some incidents escalate.

Fig. 1 can be treated as a heuristic device for understanding the different types of information that can be brought to bear on a study of offenders and victims in prisons. This model proposes four levels of information: the incident level (L1) with incident characteristics (catalysts, officer responses, other third party actions, etc.), the person level (L2) with individual characteristics that contribute to offending and/or victimization (low self-control, target vulnerability, etc.), the place level (L3) with spatial characteristics of the areas where incidents occur (housing units, cafeteria, rec yards, etc.), and the facility level (L4) with population and management characteristics (e.g., staff-prisoner ratio, rule enforcement and sanctioning policies, etc.). For individuals involved in multiple incidents across different places, cross-classification might be used to assess how place conditions individual effects involving the same persons.

Treating the model in Fig. 1 as a proposed statistical (multilevel) model, which represents a single incident within a broader model, part of the model could be adapted to analyses of offenders, victims, and non-offenders/non-victims by focusing only on levels 2 and 4 in order to understand the individual and facility factors that shape the odds and frequency of a person's offending and/or victimization during incarceration. (This would require measuring offending/victimization at the individual level, perhaps treating multiple offenses and victimizations per person as repeated observations within individuals.) The full model (adding levels 1 and 3) then could be applied to samples of offenders and victims to understand the nuances of offending and victimization at the incident level (e.g., the types of factors that play out at the incident- and place-levels that shape whether it is a violent or property or drug offense, and whether these factors correspond with particular individual and facility characteristics). The abridged model would reveal who is at greater risk of offending, victimization, or both, and in what types of facilities. The full model would provide important details on how specific contexts might shape the type of offense and victimization, including levels of injury in violent offenses. The full model could also be adapted to combine different levels (e.g., place characteristics could be added to level 2, or facility characteristics to level 3).

The ability to study offending and victimization at the incident level will provide insight into offending and victimization of individuals across different situations. By identifying the actions of each person involved in the incident (including bystanders and staff members), it is possible to determine to what extent persons perform escalating and de-escalating actions, and whether they were (also) victimized. Aggregating and combining the nature of actions in relation to multiple incidents would yield a more comprehensive picture of a person's role in these incidents, providing a better understanding of the victim-offender overlap (e.g., a person present across multiple incidents might engage 10% of the time in mediation, 25% in verbal aggression, 25% in physical aggression, and 40% of the time as a victim of physical/verbal aggression). Additionally, information on sequential actions will help determine the effectiveness of de-escalation techniques employed by third parties.

Incident data might be collected using (1) incident-based interviews with individuals who witnessed incidents and/or were involved in them; (2) incident reports in which action sequences are described; (3) reports from rule infraction hearings which include incident details provided by staff and bystanders; and/or (4) video material from CCTV or body-worn cameras. A combination of any of these sources would be the best method to establish action sequences and the roles/perceptions of all persons involved. Research should also pay attention to the possibility that body worn cameras may affect the dynamics of incidents (Sydes et al., 2020). While official data suffers from under-reporting and may thus not be generalizable (although it would be if the distribution of official incidents is similar to unreported incidents), it increasingly benefits from intelligence on, for example, money transfers, criminal networks, and information from phone conversations that can help identify motives and relationships. A random sample of official reports of incidents may therefore be the best starting point: these can then be supplemented with the accounts of persons involved from rule infraction hearings, including officers present, as well as video material, if available. Such a study hinges on the quality of incident reports, which likely varies across facilities (let alone countries). Ideally, staff reports and testimonies of those involved should contain information about who was involved as victim(s), offender(s) and bystander(s), events that transpired during the incident and the harms inflicted, where and when the incident took place, possible motives, and how it was resolved. Data on the prior rule violations of persons involved in these incidents would also be required and should be available in electronic format by the central government office with jurisdiction over these facilities. In the US, for example, official data on prison rule violations are readily available in most state DOCs; researchers and DOCs should collaborate to create a data-sharing infrastructure to also make incident reports available. Data quality may be improved with specific instructions and reporting formats along these lines, possibly with a confidential section for research purposes where the names of the victim(s) and even bystander(s) (when applicable) are provided to link individuals to past and future incidents. Footage from body-worn cameras may be consulted for specific incidents reported by staff. Discharge interviews with persons leaving prison who were involved in these incidents might also be a rich source of information (as the perceived risks of sharing information might be lower than during one's stay). A pilot study would be helpful to further specify reporting instructions and coding schemes.

A final (more complicated) point to consider is the permeability of prisons, and the relationship between what goes on in prisons and the outside world. For example, contraband-related offending (e.g., drug use) exists because outside goods are brought into prison. Recent research suggests that the illicit economy in prisons is becoming more dangerous and more difficult to control, partly due to modern technologies (e.g., illegal mobile phones, drones to bring in drugs) and synthetic drugs (Gooch and Treadwell, 2020, 2022). This has important implications for offending, victimization, and the victim-offender overlap. First, within this illicit economy, forms

of victimization are potentially very harmful (e.g., when the quality of drugs is tested on ‘often unwitting, vulnerable or contemptible inmates’, Gooch and Treadwell (2020, p. 1274)). Second it can lead to offending and victimization of people outside prison (e.g., when prison gang members who have been released are obligated to bring drugs into prison; see Skarbek, 2014). Last, the exact mechanisms of contraband-trading are difficult to identify because people are reluctant to report this for fear of repercussions or because of their own illegal activities. What this illustrates is that ostensibly ‘victimless’ crimes can be part of a chain of offending and victimization; a full picture would require that the roles of different actors as well as actions and consequences are connected. Our proposed situational perspective with an incident-level methodological approach would lend itself to this type of analysis.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Esther F.J.C. van Ginneken: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **John Wooldredge:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

none.

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