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Abstract

Given the detrimental effects of prison violence, understanding why and how incidents occur is necessary. This explorative qualitative research on prison violence investigates potentially violent situations between incarcerated men. Through in-depth interviews with 22 incarcerated men from 3 Dutch prisons and 2 formerly incarcerated men, we offer insight into the situational circumstances of prison violence. The findings reveal three distinct categories of situations where violence can occur: when incarcerated individuals perceive threats to their (1) status, (2) safety and (3) shared interests (or goals). Status pertains to perceived symbolic threats to reputation, safety involves perceived risk of physical and psychological harm, and shared interests relate to perceived threats to collective resources, privileges and values. This study underscores the significance of considering situational circumstances and the interpretation of situations by incarcerated individuals when seeking to understand or explain prison violence.

Keywords

Prisons, safety, situations, status, threats, violence

The manifestation of violence in prisons poses significant problems, both within correctional facilities and for society as a whole. Experiencing violence while being incarcerated can cause substantial physical and emotional harm, leading to long-term negative health consequences (Boxer et al., 2009; Novisky and Peralta, 2020; Piper and Berle, 2019). Moreover, it has been found to hinder rehabilitation efforts and limit successful reintegration

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into society (Boxer et al., 2009; Zweig et al., 2015). In addition, high levels of violence in prisons raise legal and ethical concerns regarding the treatment of incarcerated persons and the obligation of authorities to ensure the safety of the residents in their care.

In the Netherlands, concerns about safety conditions have increased as prisons are facing challenges with staff shortages and limited resources, which strain the capacity to maintain order and security (Dutch Custodial Institutions Agency (DJI), 2023a). However, issues concerning violent incidents between incarcerated persons extend beyond the borders of the Netherlands, as they are recognised to affect correctional facilities worldwide (Caravaca-Sánchez et al., 2023). Given its detrimental effects, understanding why and how prison violence occurs is necessary. By focusing on the perspectives of incarcerated men, this qualitative explorative study aims to understand the situational circumstances that can lead to violent encounters between them.

The prison literature provides a substantial body of quantitative research examining factors linked to heightened risks of violent behaviour during incarceration. These factors can be categorised into two main types: individual and institutional. These two types of factors are closely linked to the importation (Irwin and Cressey, 1962) and deprivation (Sykes, 1958) models. The former views prison violence as a result of the impact of individual factors (e.g. demographics, traits and values) existing before incarceration, whereas the latter highlights institutional factors of the prison environment in shaping behaviour through experiences of deprivation.

Studies on prison violence primarily report findings on individual risk factors (for systematic reviews, see Goossens et al., 2023; Schenk and Fremouw, 2012), attributing violence mainly to incarcerated persons of younger age, violent offence convictions, substance abuse problems and mental health disorders (e.g. Butler et al., 2023; Lahm, 2009; Steiner and Wooldredge, 2019; Wolff et al., 2009). The emphasis on individual factors is also prevalent in correctional systems, as the assessment of individual risk factors for violence becomes increasingly standard practice. While specific methods and procedures can vary, common approaches include an initial custody screening process upon admission and the use of a risk assessment tool which assesses various domains, such as history of violent behaviour, impulsivity, substance abuse and deviant attitudes (e.g. Smeekens et al., 2024). Incarcerated persons are thus assessed to estimate the likelihood of exhibiting future violent behaviour and, therefore, are considered to be more or less dangerous. This can affect placement and conditional release decisions.

Regarding institutional risk factors, studies predominantly report findings relating to organisational and management structures, the physical environment, and the quantity and quality of staff (for systematic reviews, see Gadon et al., 2006; Goossens et al., 2023). For example, research has shown that poor physical conditions, larger population size and maximum-security settings contribute to violence in prisons (e.g. Bieri, 2012; Lahm, 2009; Steiner and Wooldredge, 2019). Furthermore, the Woolf Inquiry (Woolf and Tumim, 1991) into the 1990 prison riots in England identified factors such as overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and strained staff relations, which contributed to the growing sense of frustration of incarcerated persons and ultimately led to the outbreak of violence. Nevertheless, there is a notable lack of research examining the impact of institutional factors on prison violence (Goossens et al., 2023). Moreover, institutional factors that are considered tend to be static and relatively fixed (such as maximum-security settings), and,

therefore, are further removed from the violent incident itself. While institutional factors are important for understanding the broader context in which prison violence occurs, they do not necessarily capture the immediate interactions that lead to violence. By contrast, *situational* factors have rarely been studied. Such factors are dynamic, subject to change or ‘in the moment’ (such as the provocations of violence, the presence of bystanders or whether someone intervened), and therefore capable of shaping the enactment of violence (Bowman et al., 2018; Nassauer, 2022). These aspects are currently underrepresented in prison research and neglected in risk assessment practices.

Using situational approaches to enhance the understanding of prison violence

Before explaining how a situational approach can improve our understanding of prison violence, it is important to clarify what is meant by a ‘situation’. In this study, we refer to a situation as ‘a set of fleeting, dynamic, and momentary circumstances that do not lie within a person (i.e. they are neither one’s own mental processes nor one’s own behaviour) but rather in their surroundings’ (Rauthmann and Sherman, 2020: 473). More specifically, situations can be categorised into different types of information, incorporating both physical and social factors (Rauthmann et al., 2020). Physical factors include objective aspects of situations such as the spatial layout, lighting, temperature and noise level, whereas social factors within situations encompass the presence and behaviour of individuals and groups, as well as the relationships among them (Rauthmann et al., 2020). Furthermore, by adopting a situational approach, our aim is to examine the relevant factors present in situations as *perceived by individuals* (or situation perception). Situation perceptions rely on the presence, interpretation, emotions, and (re)actions of a person; otherwise, situations are meaningless (Rauthmann and Sherman, 2020). Therefore, this study acknowledges the interplay between individual and situational factors.

Most research on prison violence, however, primarily focuses on the attitudes, personality traits and demographic characteristics of incarcerated persons, giving analytical priority to individual factors while overlooking situational circumstances. While such studies provide valuable insights, they obscure the situational processes by which violent incidents develop. In essence, individuals are not solely driven to engage in violent behaviour by their inherent traits or motives, but (also) by the circumstances in which they find themselves, the people they interact with and how those interactions influence their behaviour and emotions (Bowman et al., 2018; Rauthmann et al., 2020; Ross and Nisbett, 1991). This is also acknowledged in Situational Action Theory (Wikström, 2014), which explains violence as a moral action where individuals perceive violent acts as viable alternatives and choose to carry them out based on both their moral values and the situation.

Acknowledging situational circumstances when explaining violence is particularly important within the unique prison setting. Unlike many other settings, prisons are marked by high levels of surveillance, strong formal control and specific deprivations, such as a loss of autonomy, security, freedom of movement and limited access to goods and services (Sykes, 1958). For instance, incarcerated individuals facing potential violence must adapt their responses due to the constraints imposed by incarceration:

escaping threatening and potentially violent situations is more challenging, and reporting crimes to authorities is complicated by issues of confidentiality (Steiner and Wooldredge, 2019; Van Ginneken and Wooldredge, 2024). This creates a unique backdrop where situational factors can play a pivotal role in shaping (violent) behaviour. Therefore, prison researchers have argued that situational or incident-based approaches are required to provide more thorough explanations for acts of violence in prison (e.g. Bottoms, 1999; Tamatea et al., 2023; Van Ginneken and Wooldredge, 2024).

Several notable qualitative studies, although scarce, provide insights into the circumstances surrounding violent incidents in prison. In particular, Edgar et al. (2003) offer an understanding of prison violence as 'conflict'. Their approach illustrates how violence serves multiple purposes and results from various relationships, goals and often misunderstandings. It highlights how violence originates in the interpretations that incarcerated persons make of the intentions of those around them (Edgar et al., 2003). Moreover, the authors explain how violent behaviour relates to the different needs that prisons fail to meet in the lives of those incarcerated. Edgar et al. (2003) argue that the most important factors are material deprivation, fears of victimisation, and struggles for power and status. Regarding the latter, violent behaviour is triggered by a perception of disrespect, driven by status and challenges to the masculine identity of incarcerated persons (Edgar and O'Donnell, 1998; O'Donnell and Edgar, 1998; Toch, 1998). Another relevant aspect is the illicit economy revolving around the trade of prohibited items. This underground economy has been found to be significant, as violence, threats and intimidation are often used as tactics to settle claims and collect debts (Collins, 2008: 168; Gooch and Treadwell, 2020, 2023). Others have confirmed that order in prisons is negotiated in social interactions between staff and incarcerated individuals (Liebling, 2004; Sparks et al., 1996).

The current study builds on this by using a situational approach to explore relevant factors in potentially violent situations in prison. The focus lies on the perceptions and lived experiences of violence among incarcerated men. Through in-depth interviews with 22 incarcerated men from 3 Dutch prisons and 2 formerly incarcerated men, we tried to gain insight into the situational circumstances under which prison violence may emerge. We focused on *potentially* violent situations, examining not only situations where violence has occurred (escalation) but also where it followed a trajectory towards violence but ultimately did not occur (de-escalation). This offers a more comprehensive and balanced understanding of the situational factors and dynamics that contribute to both the occurrence and prevention of violence in prison.

Imprisonment in the Netherlands

The Netherlands has a relatively low imprisonment rate of around 55 per 100,000 inhabitants, with an average stay of over 4 months, and only 10% incarcerated for more than a year (DJI, 2023b). The Dutch prison system includes remand units for those awaiting trial, which have a more restrictive regime, and regular prison units for convicted individuals. It also features specialised wings, such as the extra-care units for those needing additional care or protection due to mental health problems or the nature of their offence, and units for so-called persistent offenders who have received a 2-year custodial measure (DJI, 2023b). The daily routine includes work, education, recreation and visitation. A

reward system, similar to the United Kingdom's Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) scheme, assigns incarcerated individuals to either a 'basic' or 'plus' regime. Based on various criteria, including the absence of misconduct, the plus regime rewards individuals with extra time out-of-cell and access to privileged jobs or activities (Elbers et al., 2022). Although single cells were once the norm, the use of double cells has increased over time (Van Ginneken and Palmen, 2022). Despite the relatively humane conditions, violence remains a concern, with over 1700 incidents reported in 2019 (DJI, 2019). However, underreporting is prevalent, and the available figures, being somewhat outdated, offer limited insight. Self-reported victimisation rates indicate that 9.3% of incarcerated individuals experience physical violence from a fellow incarcerated person (Martens et al., 2021).

Method

Research procedure and participants

This study was designed as a qualitative exploration of incidents of violence among incarcerated men in Dutch prisons.¹ In the autumn of 2023, data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The study included 22 incarcerated men, with 18 interviews conducted: 4 paired interviews and 14 one-on-one interviews. These interviews took place in three public prisons in different regions of the Netherlands. These prisons were selected as research sites because of their variety in locations (West, East and South of the Netherlands), population sizes (normal, large) and types of wings (pre-trial, regular, extra-care and persistent offenders). In addition, two formerly incarcerated men, who had been held in different prisons not visited by the first author, were interviewed separately at the university. Their inclusion was based on the assumption that, no longer under institutional control, they would feel more comfortable speaking candidly, providing more reflective accounts of their past experiences with prison violence. The entire group of twenty-four respondents was quite heterogeneous, allowing for a diverse range of experiences to be represented. Their sentence lengths varied, with the shortest being a few months, the majority around 1 year and the longest exceeding a decade. While some were incarcerated for the first time, most had prior experience across several different prisons. The first author spent multiple days in each of the three included prisons, visiting various wings during which incarcerated men were personally approached or recommended by staff members to be asked to participate in a study about prison violence. Those recommended by staff were selected based on various criteria, including availability and a mix of individuals in the basic and plus regimes. Several wing cleaners were chosen for their strong understanding of the ins and outs of daily prison life, in addition to individuals who had been previously involved in violent incidents. Interviews were conducted in different areas of the wing, including the kitchen, recreation area, and an adjacent meeting room, as long as adequate privacy was ensured. The semi-structured interviews were held in a conversational manner, allowing participants to respond freely and openly as well as introduce new themes and concepts. These were primarily one-on-one interviews, but some incarcerated men felt more comfortable participating with a familiar peer, leading to four interviews with two participants simultaneously. Five interviews were held with two

researchers (D.B.C.H. and E.F.J.C.v.G.); the others were held by the first author. The topics discussed include an impression of the nature and extent of violence in prison, experiences with violent incidents, recent cases and examples. More specifically, during the interviews the five w's were often used – who? where? when? what? why? – to gain a detailed description of potentially violent situations.

As is often the case with prison research, the data gathering was faced with the constraints of prison schedules and protocols which resulted in limitations on the timing, duration and frequency of interactions with participants. Interviews lasted an average of 35 minutes, with the longest lasting 1.5 hours and the shortest 10 minutes. The research purpose was clearly explained, and participation was entirely voluntary, allowing individuals to terminate their involvement at any point during the interview process. The interviews were digitally recorded, with participants assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and those who took part in the interviews signed an informed consent form.

Data analysis

The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, all identifying information was removed, and data was securely stored. The thematic analytic process, drawing from Braun and Clarke (2021) and using Atlas.ti, was both recursive and progressive, encompassing broadly: (1) familiarisation with the data, (2) coding, (3) generating initial themes, (4) developing and reviewing themes and (5) refining, defining and naming themes. In particular, several interesting patterns emerged unexpectedly, revealing how perceived threats to participants' interests (or goals) impact their interactions, interpretation of situations and subsequent (violent) behaviour. Given the study's exploratory nature and relatively small sample, the analysis focused on patterns across the sample (from different prisons), rather than differences between our respondents (e.g. on the basis of detention location). To enhance the credibility of our findings, we also incorporated negative case analysis to identify any possible exceptions or contradictions in our data.

All interviews were conducted in Dutch and the included quotations were carefully translated into English to preserve the participants' original intent and wording. Quotations were edited to eliminate speech fillers (e.g. umm, like, ahh) and enhance grammar to ensure comprehensibility and flow.

Findings

All interviewees shared various direct and indirect experiences with physical and verbal interpersonal violence while being incarcerated. Verbal (or emotional) forms of violence occur more frequently and are often described as less problematic compared to physical violence. Moreover, verbal assaults are not always considered violence, reflecting a unique understanding of what constitutes violence. However, in our respondents' descriptions of violent situations, verbal violence does have the potential to contribute to the escalation towards physical violence. Interviewees generally described violence, particularly physical violence, as infrequent in their experiences, stating that it was not an everyday occurrence. Due to the risk of harm, negative social consequences and disciplinary sanctions for a breach of prison regulations, violence is quite carefully regulated and primarily not randomly displayed. There are many resemblances in respondents' accounts

of violence, highlighting how incarcerated men from various prisons and prison wings can experience similar potentially violent situations.

The interviews suggest that violence between incarcerated men arises in situations where incarcerated persons perceive threats to their (1) status, (2) safety and (3) shared interests (or goals). Status threats concern perceived symbolic threats to reputation, safety threats encompass perceived risk of physical and psychological harm, and shared interests-threats relate to perceived threats to collective resources, privileges and values. In these situations, where incarcerated men believe their status, safety and shared interests are at risk, tensions may increase, potentially contributing to violence. While these categories are distinguishable, it is important to note that they can also converge. In the following sections, we provide a detailed examination of the circumstances relevant to our respondents' perceptions of potentially violent situations.

Threats to status

The first category encompasses situations where perceived threats to the pursuit or protection of status can lead to violence. Status centres around the goal of attaining a high position in the prison's social hierarchy: 'I am not going to say that everything is peaceful between everyone here: there will always be resentment due to a kind of hierarchy' (R5).

Respondents explained that prison status is primarily determined by physical dominance, social connections, money, drugs, and age: 'there is still a hierarchy of elders' (R2). Those at the top are typically convicted of violent or financial crimes, once referred to as 'the alpha males' (R20). In contrast, those at the bottom, such as those convicted of minor or (child) sexual crimes, wield little influence. Despite the hierarchy, respondents also emphasised a sense of equality, noting that shared experiences in prison foster unity: 'we are all fellow sufferers here and in the same boat' (R18) and 'we all treat each other with respect' (R9b). Interviewees ascribed high status in prison to those who display masculine traits such as valuing power, suppressing emotions, tolerating violence, and prioritising honour and reliability, or as one respondent stated: 'we men only have two things: "our word and our balls"' (R6a). Therefore, a status-based masculine reputation is deemed highly valuable by interviewees. Situations where incarcerated individuals perceive threats to their status, such as challenges to their reputation or position within the social hierarchy, may trigger them to use violence.

In particular, interviewees explained how perceived disrespectful, provoking, or insulting comments are likely to trigger violent reactions. Respondents feel and discern it as honourable when a man, either verbally or violently, defends himself when disrespected, and vice versa; it is considered shameful when a man does not defend himself in this situation. To illustrate, one respondent recalled a violent incident in the communal kitchen, he observed:

One was sitting there very quietly [person b] and the other one was standing there shouting: a Polish boy [person a]. [. . .] He [a] was upstairs with quite a large man [b]. He [a] had a bit of a big mouth about him so he [b] said: 'You are only barking [talking]. You are a wimp. You are only barking'. The Polish boy [a] felt a bit slighted and just punched him [b] out of nowhere. But then he [a] got a few blows back, he [a] never thought that would happen. Everyone actually quite liked that. (R19)

This situation puts the status of both parties to the test. The perceived insult ('you are only barking' and 'you are a wimp') triggers a violent reaction of person a to prevent being perceived by bystanders as weak. This, in turn, leads to a violent counter-reaction from person b. Therefore, both persons are protecting their (masculine) status by showing toughness and a willingness to act violently. However, just one person earned the admiration and respect of incarcerated others as 'everyone actually quite liked' how person a was confronted with a more severe violent counter-reaction from person b. This shows how a high social status was acquired or affirmed through physical superiority over another man. So while exhibitions of violence are closely intertwined with status, it is not a given fact that acts of violence always increase status; they can also have the opposite effect if the act of violence is responded to with even more violence. Moreover, this example shows a shift in roles; from offender to victim and vice versa. Initially, person b verbally provokes person a, but the dynamic changes when person a becomes the aggressor by physically attacking b. The roles then reverse as person b retaliates with multiple punches, blurring the distinction between victim and offender. Other aspects also stand out in this narration: person a is described as a 'Polish *boy*' and person b as a 'big *man*'. Therefore, it is conceivable that (stable) individual factors, such as physical attributes and ethnic background, may affect status and influence how the situation is interpreted. This highlights how the interplay between situational and individual factors shapes the perception of incarcerated others and influences corresponding social interactions and potentially violent behaviour.

In addition, participants relayed multiple examples of potentially violent situations related to the (illegal) prison economy: 'The majority of problems revolve around money, debts, and drugs' (R17). Drug-related violence also appeared tied to status threats: 'It's more about the fact that he screwed you over and you need to get back at him. It's about standing your ground, not the five euros worth of hash. That means nothing' (R2). This suggests that conflicts revolving around the (illegal) prison economy are driven not only by monetary gain but also by the assertion and protection of status.

Participants also feel and discern a threat to their status when perceived disrespectful, provoking, or insulting comments are directed at family members and close friends: 'If you start talking about my mother while I'm trying to have a normal conversation, then yes, you're in big trouble. Because then you have no respect for me and no respect for my mother' (R7). The situational trigger of 'insults involving one's mother' was notably strong among our respondents and generally considered unacceptable. It can often prompt forceful, violent reactions aimed at defending one's reputation.

Moreover, interviewees offer insights into the role of violence in the competition between individuals striving for status in prison: 'Sometimes you just have to do it the jungle way, according to the laws of the jungle. It just has to be proved to each other in that way. Sometimes that can be a good thing' (R18). The respondent reflects on how demonstrating strength through violence ('the jungle way') can establish the hierarchy and solidify their position within the social order in prison. This highlights how violence is not merely random or senseless but can serve as a functional mechanism for navigating the competition for status among incarcerated men. This competition has significant implications for prison life. As one person loses social status, another gains influence, respect and certain prison-specific privileges, such as being the first to use specific facilities: 'I basically have my own little kitchen, and it's not that I have to defend it or anything, no one else

is going to be in my kitchen' (R18). Our interviewees noted that these benefits ease the harshness of prison life.

However, some incarcerated persons were considered unable to elevate their status, not even through bravado or violence. Particularly those at the bottom of the prison hierarchy, such as individuals struggling financially, with drug addictions, or mental health issues, or those convicted of minor crimes (e.g. 'robbing elderly people' (R7)) or sexual offences (e.g. labelled as 'paedophile') may be unable to gain status. Moreover, the interviews show how these incarcerated persons are mostly preoccupied with achieving a sense of safety (rather than attaining status), which brings us to the next category.

Threats to safety

The second category is connected to situations where perceived threats of physical or psychological harm to incarcerated men can lead to further escalations of violence. It centres around a person's goal to ensure their safety. This is particularly relevant in prison, where interviewees explained being acutely aware of potential safety risks and primarily concerned with their own security: 'At times, when you're just walking around, you hear someone behind you and then you're completely alert' (R5). When encountering potentially threatening situations, individuals may feel a heightened need to protect themselves, sometimes resorting to violence as a means of self-defence. The interviews show how threats of physical harm (such as hitting, pushing, kicking) and psychological harm (such as humiliation, intimidation, extortion, verbal abuse) risk provoking violent counter-reactions. Therefore, particularly in this category, offending and victimising can overlap in important ways. As one respondent shares: 'I was walking down the corridor, and someone came towards me, just grabbed me by my shirt and pushed me hard against the wall. So I pushed back as hard as I could' (R10). Moreover, due to the limitation in freedom of movement and the confinement with others, respondents find it difficult to avoid these threats. Interviewees emphasise the particularly concerning situation when individuals feel threatened by someone with whom they share a cell. Cells are frequently shared among strangers, leading to a pervasive sense of distrust due to concerns regarding privacy, theft and safety: 'I find double cells very scary' (R2). Furthermore, this small space makes it nearly impossible to withdraw, either physically or emotionally, from a potentially violent situation as a de-escalation technique. As a result, confrontations in the confined space of a cell can escalate more easily: 'I slept on the top bunk bed and he on the bottom. He kept pushing and kicking me under my bed. Insulting me with the scariest diseases you can think of. So it [violence] is something that happens within those two-by-five meters' (R10). Therefore, incarcerated men may resort to violence to attain a sense of security in situations involving threats of physical and psychological harm.

While some situations unequivocally communicate danger, others are more ambiguous to interpret. An interaction can be perceived as unsafe by one person but was not intended as such by the other person. Regardless of whether the feared harm is real or not, when a potential threat is perceived as such it can impact behaviour. To illustrate, one respondent spoke about an incident with his former cellmate:

... and then he [person c] told me to keep my mouth shut. So I [person d] told him to go to the guards and just ask for two aspirins. But because he [had] stabbed someone, he walked to his cell and stood there with his hand behind his back [c]. So I thought he had a knife. And then I put a few cans of coke and a fish in a pillowcase and gave him a few slaps [d]. (R3b)

In this example, the behaviour of person c is somewhat ambiguous ('his hand behind his back') and susceptible to various interpretations. Our respondent's situation description once again highlights an individual factor: the previous knowledge of person c having a violent crime conviction. This is relevant in assessing the situation as dangerous and responding violently. Moreover, the cell plays another important role: this time a symbolic one. The cell holds simultaneous meanings of a safe and unsafe space. For many incarcerated persons, their cell is the only place where they are unsupervised and can experience a sense of privacy, intimacy and protection against others. It was even described as 'home' by our respondents because people spend most of their time in that space (sleeping, eating, relaxing, etc.). Therefore, entering this valued personal space, especially without permission, is considered threatening by respondents. In fact, we noted how the use of the term 'cell' in itself poses a safety threat due to the lack of camera supervision: it offers a space to engage in violence with less risk of repercussion. As a result, in the previous example, person c perceives the behaviour of person d in relation to his cell ('he walked to his cell and stood there with his hand behind his back') as a safety threat.

Furthermore, interviewees explain they can resort to violence to prevent future harm, prevent exploitation and protect against economic crimes: 'You'd better bite back straight away' (R17). In the previous example, our respondent engages in violence due to the anticipation of a threat ('I thought he had a knife'), and the risk of facing harm. This action reflects a method of managing violence to safeguard safety in a potentially dangerous situation. Therefore, incarcerated individuals may resort to violence as a means of self-protection.

Threats to shared interests

The third category includes situations with perceived threats to shared interests. As we will illustrate below, interviewees emphasise a drive to collectively safeguard resources and privileges, but also values. In prison, interaction and cooperation with fellow incarcerated persons are explained to form the basis of social prison life. While these connections are described as more casual: 'It's not necessarily "a group" but just the people you get along with best' (R6b), there is also an enforced sense of mutual dependence between incarcerated persons: 'You are also condemned to each other (R18)'. Therefore, interests are often shared, and individuals strive to achieve them either individually or collectively within the informal social groups that form in prison wings. The potential for violent behaviour emerges when individuals or social groups regard shared interests to be under threat.

Interviewees explained how forming alliances to protect shared interests is particularly important in a prison setting where resources are scarce. For instance, respondents shared experiences of collaborating with others to monopolise the few telephones and

extending their calling time: 'If other people were lining up to make a call, who were there faster, we would say: "come on man, you know, otherwise you have a problem." So then the phone was ours again' (R5). This respondent had used threatening language ('otherwise you have a problem') to deter others from using the telephone, protecting their shared interests. Moreover, it suggests a willingness to use violence when others fail to comply. Therefore, competition among incarcerated men striving for resources and privileges can escalate to violence, as our respondent states: 'what the telephone does: it causes lots of fights' (R5).

Moreover, our interviewees explained how violence can be used as a collective method to correct and punish those threatening shared interests in prison. In particular, making loud noises at night, which disrupts the sleep of others, was often mentioned: '... and the screaming. If you shout at night, they will all come into your cell' (R2) and uncleanliness with shared facilities or utensils: '... people who leave things dirty, have no hygiene, throw rubbish in the shower, on the floor' (R3b). While these annoyances seem small, they can build up frustrations with time and serve as potential circumstances that can contribute to violence. Therefore, people hold each other accountable for non-solidary behaviours, and while this does not necessarily or immediately include violence, taking action to address them is often in the collective's best interest: 'There is always some correction going on between us, and they accept it too. If a youngster comes in and starts stealing on our wing, I just give him a corrective slap as a reminder to not do it again' (R2). This interviewee describes an act of violence as a means of enforcing a particular outcome and conveying a message about solidarity and socially unacceptable behaviour.

In addition, interviewees put emphasis on the high outcome interconnectedness between themselves and incarcerated others and enforced mutual dependence, which raises the stakes when it comes to protecting shared interests. That is, the outcome of a situation for one person can be determined by how other persons behave. To illustrate,

A while ago, a package came over the wall during yard time. [...] Then our programme is simply done for the day and everyone is sitting behind the door. That is a problem that a specific person causes but the entire wing is affected by it so, you will certainly hear about it. If that person is very nonchalant and says: 'it doesn't matter'. Then you're really getting on people's nerves. But if you admit your mistake, then we are willing to first say: 'okay, but don't let it happen again'. (R18)

Disrupting daily programming activities, such as yard time, recreation and sports, can impact others, as seen in the discontinuation of these activities and the return of everyone to their cells. Furthermore, in this example, the respondent suggests that when someone disregards their shared interests ('it doesn't matter'), their response can serve as a situational factor enhancing the likelihood of violence. Conversely, when someone demonstrates understanding and takes responsibility, the situation is less likely to escalate into violence. Therefore, the response and justification provided by the individual responsible for disrupting others' activities appear to influence the choice of countermeasure utilised by those affected. As another interviewee put it: 'If you solve things, just solve them in your cell. Then two people have a problem, but not everyone has to be bothered by it'

(R9a). Here, 'solving things' is defined as 'a few good punches' (R9a), but regulated in such a way as to avoid collective involvement or disturbance.

The interviewees have also expressed how violent behaviour can occur when individuals or social groups are confronted with threats to their values. For instance, the presence of an individual suspected of committing sexual offences on the wing served as a strong situational circumstance contributing to possible violence. The majority of our participants held strong negative attitudes towards these individuals, viewing them as embodying a contradiction to their collective values and morals, which prompted efforts to remove the person from their living space: 'Then the whole wing is in an uproar: we don't want that' (R3b). As echoed by another respondent, this collective aversion can lead to violent action: 'As soon as they come on the wing [. . .] it can become unsafe' (R18). Therefore, when incarcerated individuals perceive that their shared values are being threatened, they can resort to violence to protect them.

Convergence of threats

Potentially violent situations can encompass threats to status, safety or shared interests; however, convergence is possible in two ways. On the one hand, different actors can have different perceptions and interpretations of the same situation. In other words, a situation can be perceived differently when multiple perspectives of individuals involved are taken into account. That is, violence may occur in situations when all parties strive towards attaining status, but in other situations, one individual may prioritise his safety while another focuses on shared interests. Furthermore, situations are dynamic and can evolve, with threats to status potentially transforming into safety concerns, among other possible dynamics. On the other hand, it is also possible that an individual may experience situations in which two or all of these threats are perceived concurrently. That is, incarcerated persons striving to attain status or safety can converge with shared interests, as it may be advantageous for individuals to align their actions with those of the collective. To illustrate the latter, one respondent explained being scammed during a failed drug transaction and was on the verge of seeking violent confrontation:

. . . But then I [person g] noticed that certain guys that I'm good with stopped me and said: hey, think about yourself and think about your own trajectory. [. . .] They came to me like, don't let it get out of hand, because I'm not only hurting myself but also the rest of the group. Then yard time is simply over and everyone has to go behind the door. (R18)

Important in this example is that incarcerated peers try to convince person g, who is confronted with a threat to his status, that a potentially violent counter-reaction can lead to a threat to others' shared interests, as well as his own interests.

Moreover, passive and active peer influences emerged as significant situational factors across all three categories. That is, peers can affect interactions through their mere presence (or absence) as well as through their active involvement as instigators and accomplices. In the example above, person g was actively discouraged by peers to act ('certain guys that I'm good with stopped me'), hereby preventing violent escalation. Another respondent further elaborated on how the ability to intervene is determined by

one's status: 'Some will step in to break it up. It depends, though. They'll show more respect if you're in for a serious crime but won't listen if it's something minor' (R2). However, peers can also encourage violence. To illustrate: 'I've been here for two years and there have been plenty of situations where someone said to me: 'that person did such and such to you, why didn't you hit him?'' (R18). While this person showed restraint from acting violently, others could fear damaging their status and 'losing face' in front of bystanders and may therefore be more inclined to seek violent confrontation. Peers thus play an important role in shaping the behaviour in potentially violent situations.

Discussion

Despite valuable findings on individual risk factors contributing to violent incidents in prisons, there remains a notable lack of research examining the role of situational factors (Goossens et al., 2023; Van Ginneken and Wooldredge, 2024). The confined and controlled nature of the prison setting underscores the importance of situations, which, together with individual and institutional factors, shape the dynamics of interactions that can lead to violence. To begin to fill this empirical gap, this study used a situational approach to explore potentially violent situations. The findings show how threats – related to status, safety and shared interests (or goals) – impact participants' interactions and interpretations of situations and subsequent potentially violent behaviour. These categories reflect momentary motivational states that arise in response to perceived situations unique to the prison setting. To our knowledge, this study is the first to offer a meaningful categorisation of potentially violent situations among incarcerated men in the Netherlands, providing both familiar observations and novel insights that enhance the existing literature on prison violence.

First, individuals may resort to violence in order to achieve, protect and maintain a high position in the social hierarchy in prison, asserting and displaying their status. In particular, perceived disrespectful or insulting comments from fellow incarcerated persons are seen as status threats. An emphasis is placed on 'saving face' (Goffman, 1955), with each individual striving to demonstrate their ability to fend for themselves by exhibiting a readiness for violence and avoiding a reputation of 'weakness'. Overall, we found an interplay between violent behaviour and status, where one can both impact and be impacted by the other: violence can either elevate or diminish an incarcerated person's status, while an individual's status can also influence their motivation for resorting to violence. These findings, therefore, offer a more nuanced understanding of the notion that displaying violence enhances one's status and secures a prominent position within the social hierarchy (O'Donnell and Edgar, 1998). While this may be the case, it is not invariably so. As Jewkes (2005: 52) states, a certain degree of 'controlled aggression' is necessary. This category also highlights the importance of violence in relation to prescribed informal norms of (masculine) behaviour. Specifically, offence type, displays of masculinity and involvement in the informal economy were described as shaping social hierarchies in Dutch prisons, in accordance with existing literature (e.g. Jewkes, 2005; Michalski, 2017; O'Donnell and Edgar, 1998; Toch, 1998). Some notable differences emerge in the Dutch context compared to prison systems in other countries, such as the lack of status associated with gang membership (Skarbek, 2014), which may be

attributed to a smaller prison population and a relatively high staff-prisoner ratio. Consequently, informal and formal social control are quite strong and (social) consequences for norm violations cannot be easily avoided. For example, compared to Norway (Mjåland and Laursen, 2021), it appears that there is a clearer hierarchy among incarcerated persons in the Netherlands, although some respondents also emphasised a sense of equality.

Second, in prison, where individuals are confined in close quarters with incarcerated others who are oftentimes strangers to each other, the goal of feeling safe is paramount. When encountering potentially threatening situations, incarcerated men may feel a heightened need to protect themselves, resorting to violence as a means of self-defence. Interviewees shared experiences of resorting to violence to establish a sense of safety, even in situations where threats were ambiguous. In such cases, certain incarcerated individuals resorted to violence as a form of prevention, using it as a protective measure against anticipated future threats. This highlights how personal interpretation and heightened awareness of potential safety concerns shape the behaviours and responses of incarcerated men as they navigate interactions in prison. More generally, being physically attacked in public without fighting back is perceived as a sign of vulnerability, as previous research has highlighted (e.g. Edgar and O'Donnell, 1998; Edgar et al., 2003). As a result, this category underscores the importance of recognising the victim-offender overlap; that is, people can take on different roles during potentially violent situations. Adopting a situational approach encourages a nuanced understanding that moves beyond static victim-offender distinctions. In fact, prison violence studies may benefit from refraining from using these generalised labels altogether (Van Ginneken and Wooldredge, 2024). Interestingly, the cell emerged as both a safe and dangerous space. This aligns with relatively novel research that challenges the conventional perception of the cell as a sanctuary, such as Jewkes and Laws (2021), who highlight the emotionally complex and sensory-laden relationship between confined individuals and carceral spaces. Cells can invoke negative and positive emotions. Our study's focus on violence foregrounds the cell's potential as a relevant factor where personal safety is negotiated, security threats materialise, and, at times, violence unfolds. The frequent mention of the cell by respondents may be linked to the increasing practice of cell-sharing in Dutch prisons, which – especially when imposed and without consideration of individual preferences – has been reported to have negative effects on well-being and safety (Van Ginneken and Palmen, 2022).

Third, shared interests can be pursued, protected, or managed either individually or together in informal social groups that form in prison. When threats to collective resources, privileges and values arise, incarcerated men may respond with intimidation tactics, engage in physical altercations, or resort to retaliatory acts. These potentially violent situations typically revolve around individual interests that are also shared; that is, they do not exceed a certain degree of self-interest. While often more material or tangible in nature, the presence of sex offenders is seen as a violation of core moral *values*, disrupting social cohesion and making them frequent targets of violence. This is well documented in the literature, with sex offenders often being viewed with disgust and perceived as deserving of violent retribution (Edgar and O'Donnell, 1998; Ricciardelli and Spencer, 2017). The social dynamics in Dutch prisons provide further insight into

how shared interests function. Possible explanations include weak social bonds between incarcerated persons in Dutch prisons, attributed to an individual-based behavioural reward system, as well as high turnover rates (Kreager et al., 2016; Sentse et al., 2021). By contrast, in prisons with stronger extra-legal governance such as by gangs (Skarbek, 2014), shared interests and values could be more pronounced. Dutch prisons, with lower incarceration rates and shorter sentences, may instead rely more on informal social control based on shared norms and loose networks, aligning with Sykes' (1958) concept of inmate codes and solidarity.

Moreover, our findings underscore the importance of considering the role of the presence (or absence) of bystanders in shaping potentially violent situations, extending beyond the immediate parties involved. While existing prison literature has linked peer pressure to increased violence (e.g. Gicharu et al., 2020), our explorative study also suggests a positive role in violence prevention, by discouraging confrontations or actively intervening in physical altercations.

The relevance of threats to status, safety and shared interests can vary from one situation to another. There may be circumstances where these threats are minimal, with a low likelihood of violence. This underscores the importance of considering the subjective interpretations of situations by incarcerated individuals when seeking to understand or explain prison violence. Therefore, this study reinforces that prison violence arises from the interaction between individual and situational factors, rather than from them being separate or independent, as previously noted by prison researchers (Bottoms, 1999; Tamatea et al., 2023; Toch, 1977; Van Ginneken and Wooldredge, 2024). In potentially violent situations, we have identified relevant individual factors in incarcerated persons' perceptions of others, such as physical attributes, ethnic background and criminal convictions, which shape social interactions and the corresponding enacted behaviours. As individuals spend more time in prison, they become more familiar with the environment, which may affect how they respond to and experience potentially violent situations. This familiarity could alter their perception of threats or the severity of a situation, thereby shaping their reactions. However, no systematic comparison was made due to the study's exploratory nature. While these and other possible individual factors are not strictly part of the situation itself, they still play a significant role in how situations are interpreted and experienced (Rauthmann et al., 2020). The situation and the person are, therefore, inseparable, as each relies on the other for meaning and interpretation.

Several limitations should be noted. First, there may be additional situational circumstances at play beyond what has been discussed, both in terms of the situation itself and its emotional or physical aspects. When discussing experiences with violence, respondents detailed various emotional states, primarily negative ones like anger, fear, envy and frustration. In fact, imprisonment is known to evoke intense emotions that incarcerated individuals strive to manage (Laws, 2022). While an in-depth exploration was outside the scope of this study, it is recognised that emotions evoked by situations can shape behavioural decision-making (Lerner et al., 2015). Therefore, conducting further research on emotions in relation to potentially violent situations could provide deeper insights into prison violence. Second, while in-depth interviews offer rich insights into participants' views, they also require critical self-reflection on past experiences and behaviours. This task can be challenging as recollections may be influenced by memory biases or

narrative reconstructions, leading to inaccuracies (Holland and Kensinger, 2010). Therefore, future research on prison violence may benefit from alternative data collection methods. For example, observational studies offer direct insights into violent interactions, either during ethnographic fieldwork or by using video surveillance recordings (Lindegaard and Bernasco, 2018), and could also be used in prison settings. Moreover, experimental vignette studies on violent decision-making are considered beneficial because they utilise depictions of a scenario, enabling research to investigate behavioural decision-making within a specific situation (Atzmüller and Steiner, 2010). Visual vignettes using virtual reality offer particular promising avenues to explore by providing a strong sense of presence and realism (Van Gelder et al., 2019). Ultimately, understanding and addressing prison violence requires a shift away from solely identifying individuals who engage in violence and towards a consideration of the situations that give rise to violence.

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