COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR AND THE FACTORS THAT CAUSE PRISON RIOTS

A Report of a Senior Study

by

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Editor
ABSTRACT

This thesis is focused on the central question of why prison riots occur. To answer this question, I describe and analyze three case studies of prison riots: the 1971 riot at Attica Correctional Facility, the 1980 riot at New Mexico State Penitentiary, and the 2002 riot at Folsom Prison. I analyze these using theories of collective behavior, such as the minimax theory, the emergent norm theory, and the value-added theory. By identifying the central structural and organizational problems that contribute to these riots, I am able to test which theories of collective behavior best explain why riots occur. By recognizing these patterns, it will be easier to predict prison riots in the future.
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INTRODUCTION

September 9, 1971, almost 1,200 prisoners rioted and seized control of Attica prison. It was later described as the deadliest prison riot in the nation’s history. Thirty-three correctional officers were taken hostage. After four days, the uprising ended when New York State Police retook the prison by force, opening fire in the yard and killing inmates and hostages. When the facility was retaken by police, at least thirty-nine people were dead, including ten correction officers and civilian employees. Twenty-nine inmates were killed and eighty-nine were wounded (People).

This thesis is driven by the central question of why prison riots occur. Drawing from theories of collective behavior and the factors causing prison riots, I describe and analyze three case studies of prison riot in order to better understand the emergence of and response to prison riots.
To better understand prison riots, it is important to study collective behavior. Knowledge of crowd behavior and social movements can reduce loss of life and injury and help prevent conflict from rising in a destructive way. Most of the loss of life during civil disorders is caused by control agents who overreact because they lack experience in crowd control (Marx and McAdams). Collective behavior is “a type of social behavior that occurs in crowds and masses” (Johnson 48). Collective behavior deals with the way behaviors emerge as a response to problematic situations (Marshall). Collective behavior includes crowds, riots, fads, disasters, panics, and social movements.

There are different types of collective behavior that emerge from a crowd. Collective behavior can range from violent mobs and riots to harmless fads and fashions. The type of collective behavior focused on in this thesis is riots. A riot is “an outbreak of illegal violence against changing targets committed by individuals expressing frustration or anger against people or property” (Ballantine and Roberts 500). These outbreaks are often noisy and full of confusion. Riots typically start because of a sense of deprivation. Hunger, poor housing conditions, discrimination, or an unfair government are all factors that can start a riot (Ballantine and Roberts 500).
One theory of collective behavior that is particularly relevant to understanding prison riots is the minimax theory. The minimax theory, also referred to as game theory, is based on the principle that individuals try to minimize their losses and maximize their benefits. According to this theory, people are more likely to engage in risky behavior if they feel that the rewards outweigh the costs. The minimax strategy is based on the principles of rational choice theory. The basic idea of rational choice theory is that patterns of behavior in society reflect the choices made by individuals as they try to maximize their benefits and minimize their costs. In other words, people make decisions about how they should act by comparing the costs and benefits of different courses of action (Scott). In 1921, French mathematician Emile Borel, had the original idea for the minimax theory, which was developed further by John Von Neumann in 1928 (Heims). In a prison scenario, prisoners might become involved in a riot if they believe that the perceived outcome of the riot will be more satisfying than their current situation.

A second theory of collective behavior relevant to understanding prison riots is the emergent norm theory, developed by Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian in 1957. The emergent norm theory addresses the breakdown of norms where collective behavior takes place. According to this theory, each individual in a crowd has different emotions and attitudes that help influence their behavior. In a crowd situation, individuals tend to look to others for clues about how to act and what is acceptable (Ballatine and Roberts 499). According to Turner and Killian, when a crowd comes together, there is no norm and no leader in control of the crowd. The attention of the crowd is instead drawn towards those that act in a unique manner. This unique behavior slowly emerges as the norm. As time passes, the norm becomes well accepted and there is pressure from the crowd to conform
to the new norm (Turner and Killian 82-83). If similar interests draw people together, distinctive patterns of behavior will emerge in the crowd (Aguirre, Wenger and Viggo). In a prison scenario, unique actions such as yelling and fighting become the norm. The crowd then conforms to the norm and yelling and fighting become accepted behavior.

The third theory of collective behavior is the value-added theory, developed by Neil Smelser in 1962 (Smelser 132). According to the value-added theory, there are six necessary factors for collective behavior. The first factor is structural conduciveness. This means that there must be an existing problem that creates a possibility for change. The second factor is structural strain, which occurs when the current social structure is not meeting the needs or expectations of the citizens and there is widespread dissatisfaction with current arrangements. The third factor is the spread of a generalized belief. Common beliefs about the cause, effect, and solution of the problem must spread through the population. The fourth factor is the precipitating factor, or what pushes people over the line. A dramatic incident occurs and it incites people to take action. The fifth factor of the value-added theory is the mobilization for action. Leaders come forward and set a path of action, or an emergent norm develops that stimulates common action in a population or crowd. The final factor in the theory is the failure of social control. If police, military, or leaders are unable to stop the crowd, a social movement is likely to occur. According to the value-added theory, when all six factors are present, some sort of collective behavior will occur (Smelser 132-34). In a prison scenario, when all six factors occur, it can lead to a prison riot.

Due to their intense structural conditions, total institutions are a common site for collective behavior. A total institution is “a place where people are bureaucratically
processed, while being physically isolated from the normal round of activities, by being required to sleep, work, and play within the confines of the same institution” (Marshall 88). A total institution keeps people away from the public when they are considered not suitable to live in society. Some examples of total institutions are mental hospitals, concentration camps, boarding schools, monasteries, and prisons.

Erving Goffman, arguably one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, described prisons as a type of total institution that is organized to protect the community against intentional dangers to the public (Goffman 4). Life in a total institution is very different than life outside the institution. In a prison, inmates’ individual possessions are stripped away and the feeling of one’s own identity is lost (Goffman 20). Inmates’ clothes and possessions are taken upon entering the prison. Nothing from the outside is allowed in. Any personal property that is found therein leads to severe punishment. Prisoners are given new clothing that matches every other inmate. In addition, these clothes are clearly marked as belonging to the prison. Personal hygiene items are also provided by the prison. Perhaps the most significant identity possession taken is one’s name. Names are replaced by numbers. Prisoners are then referred to as a number (Goffman 18).

Personal identity is not the only identity lost in a total institution. A prisoner’s cultural identity is also restricted. One factor of cultural identity that is restricted by prison rules is a prisoner’s religion. Religion can protect values within the community and promote a sense of belonging (Bhugra and Becker). In prisons, there is no preferential treatment for inmates with specific religious beliefs. For example, the Islamic faith has many religious duties and restrictions that are required by Islamic law.
It is forbidden for Muslims to eat ham or pork in any form, even pork fat used in cooking (Ammar, Weaver and Saxon). Prisons will not cook food separately, so Muslims either have to eat it or go without. Every Muslim is also required to pray five times each day at specific times and to wash their hands, head, face, and feet before prayer. Also, according to the Islamic faith, every Muslim should have access to the Koran (Ammar, Weaver and Saxon). In prisons, it is not practical to accommodate these requirements, especially when outside material is not allowed inside.

Language and leisure activities are also significant to one’s cultural identity and are restricted upon entering an institution. Immigrant inmates’ cultural differences may be lost during the assimilation process. For example, non-English-speaking Hispanic inmates in American institutions must learn to speak English in order to fit in. Leisure activities, including, sports, music, movies, and literature, are all significant parts of one’s culture. Inmates in prison are very limited in the activities they are allowed to take part in. Watching movies or listening to music is a privilege that is not easily earned (Bhugra and Becker). Instead, inmates are forced to live very boring lives. For example, inmates are allowed only minimal time outside of their cells for exercise. Most inmates’ days are spent locked in a cell.

In a total institution, the entire day is structured and the routine rarely changes. In the book *The Making of an Inmate*, Ann Cordilia describes inmates in a total institution: “The fact that they must constantly follow orders makes some inmates compare themselves to robots. They also commonly compare themselves to children. Like children, they lack freedom” (Cordilia 3). There is a set time to wake up, a set time to eat, a set time for bathing, a set time for recreation, if allowed, and a set time to go to bed.
Inmates feel great frustration at the powerlessness over their own lives. Expressing those feelings, however, can come at a great cost. Inmates who recognize the power the system holds over their lives tend to go along with the situation, at least on the outside (Cordilia 3).

Inmates are completely at the mercy of those in charge; inmates who act against the rules of the prison are subject to punishment. Prisoners are often subjected to physical and verbal abuse from guards or other members with power. For example, in 1967, Arkansas prison officials were found guilty of crimes such as pushing hypodermic needles under the fingernails of inmates, as well as beatings with everything from fists to knotted ropes and shovel handles, to rubber hoses and straps of leather five feet long. There was also torture with pliers and burning with cigarettes (Goldfarb and Singer 80). A less extreme version of physical abuse includes inmates being forced to bend over and hold their body in a humiliating pose or provide humiliating verbal responses (Goffman 22). One form of physical abuse that is frequently used today is confinement of inmates in isolation, or the “hole.” A prisoner is sent to isolation for allegedly breaking the rules or causing trouble (Goldfarb and Singer 80). Isolation consists of a small concrete cell with very little light and no ventilation. More common than physical abuse today is verbal abuse. Staff frequently call inmates obscene names, curse them, point out negative attributes, and tease them (Goffman 23).

In many cases, inmates do not report abuse because of the “prison code.” The prison code, or convict code, is a formalized value system of norms that emphasize group cohesion. Studies of inmate subculture in the 1950s revealed increasing cooperation between inmates and the staff. An older inmate at the Washington State Penitentiary
described the system: “The convict code…you didn’t have nothing to do with a bull…a snitch was a snitch, a good convict was a good convict…your word meant something and we had responsibility to one another, they had respect, not nobody’s got respect for nobody, a word don’t mean nothing” (Stastny and Tymaur). Studies of prison life suggest that prison code can be classified into five major themes. First, do not interfere with inmate interests. Basically, never tell on a prisoner. Be loyal to your class, the convicts. Second, do not lose your head. Play it cool and do your own time. Third, do not exploit inmates. Do not break your word, do not steal from the cons, do not sell favors, and do not be a swindler or a cheat. Fourth, do not show weakness. Do not whine, and do not cry guilty. Be tough; be a man. Lastly, do not be a sucker. Stay sharp. Do not commit to values imposed by guards (Sykes and Messinger 195-97).

Even though prisoners extremely dislike prison guards, the two actually need each other and exist in a collaborative reality. According to the inmate-balance theory, developed by Charles Tittle in 1995, there is a mutual relationship between inmates and authorities. Todd Clear, one of America’s leading experts in the study of corrections, describes the inmate-balance theory as, “A prison system where officials must tolerate minor infractions, relax security measures, and allow inmate leaders to keep order, in order for the prison to operate effectively” (Clear, Cole and Reisig 321). This relationship allows inmates more freedom to engage in illegal activities, such as gambling and sexual intercourse. In exchange, inmates will “police each other” to ensure that the prison is free of any major disruptions. Conversely, conflict occurs when prison officials break their unofficial contract with the inmates by cracking down on the illegal
activities. With prisoners’ reasons to maintain order gone, some type of conflict is likely to occur (Wood and Dunaway).

In contrast to the inmate balance theory, the administrative control theory is a result of authorities’ neglect rather than their awareness. The administrative control theory, created by sociologist John Dululio in the mid 1990s, states that “prison disorder results from unstable, divided, or otherwise weak management” (Clear, Cole and Reisig 323). This theory argues that conflict results from the poor management of correctional facilities. Poor management has three central components: inadequate conditions, weak security, and the emergence of group formations among inmates, such as gangs (Clear, Cole and Reisig 323). In poorly managed prisons, the more dissatisfied inmates are with the management of the prison, the more likely they are to engage in violence and collective action (Wood and Dunaway).
CHAPTER II

FACTORS THAT CAUSE PRISON RIOTS

In the years since prisons were first built, the primary purpose has changed from holding facilities to punishment to rehabilitation. The first prison ever established was Brideswell Prison in London. It was originally built in 1515 as a palace for Henry VIII, but was later given to the city of London and transformed into a correctional facility in 1552 (McKelvey 2). In the beginning, prisons were built to hold those accused of a crime pending the results of their trial. Prisons were rarely used for incarceration (Barnes). In the late 1700’s, prisons were a form of punishment for vengeance. The theory behind early prisons was penitence. The word penitentiary in Latin is “penitence,” which means to seek forgiveness, to be sorry for one’s sins, to be alone to think about the shame of one’s wrongdoings (Clark 20).

The goal of prisons in the United States today is rehabilitation. The theory of rehabilitation is based on the belief that rational people will not injure others. It is also important for prisoners to understand that society provides a purpose and opportunity for them after prison (Clark 21). Rehabilitation is important today because a high number of prisoners are released back into society. According to a recent article on California’s prison reform, over ninety-five percent of prisoners incarcerated in California are released back into society (Russo).
While the purpose of prisons has changed over the years, the factors that cause prison riots have not. There are many factors that cause prison riots. One major factor is overcrowding. Overcrowding in prisons has plagued the United States over the last thirty years. The massive influx of prisoners began in the late 1970s and continues today. An increase in prisoner population puts a strain on taxpayer dollars, with an average cost of $30,928 per inmate per year (Aker). California has the largest prison system in the nation; over the last thirty years, the prisoner population there has increased eight fold. In Texas, the prisoner population doubled between 1992 and 1997 (Haney). As of February 28, 2008, there are 230 million adults in America in prison. That is one out of every ninety-nine people in America (Liptak). Overcrowding is a big problem in prison because it leads to unhealthy conditions.

Prison cells are typically built to hold two people. However, overcrowding is such a problem that prisons sometimes put three or four people in a two person cell. When there are more than two people in an 8x12 cell, living conditions can be unhealthy. An overpopulated prison means that some prisoners must sleep on the floor. Crowding can be associated with low psychological well-being. For example, the rate of suicide in prison increases with overcrowding (Lawrence and Andrews). Physical conditions are also worse due to overcrowding. In 1980, the federal case Ruiz v. Estelle declared the entire Texas prison system unconstitutional partially because over one thousand inmates were sleeping on the floor of prisons that were already double the population size they were built to hold (Angelos and Jacobs 101). When inmates are living on hallway floors wherever there is space, they do not have access to toilets. In addition to a lack of
facilities, there is a general overuse of plumbing. Overuse of equipment that is built to
operate under “normal” conditions leads to frequent breakdowns (Freeman 87).

Hygiene is also difficult in overcrowded situations because access to showers is
limited to once a day. Ventilation is especially crucial when temperatures outside rise.
Ventilation can be a problem in overcrowded prisons because of the large number of
people. In the summertime, inmates are living in hot overcrowded cells. When the
temperatures rise to a certain point, inmates become agitated. Many become extremely
violent (Cobb 75).

The relationship between aggressive behavior and crowding is well established in
the prison system. Claire Lawrence, a psychology professor at the University of
Nottingham in England, has studied the influence of prison crowding on inmates’
perception of aggression. Lawrence showed that environmental conditions can influence
how inmates interpret fellow prisoner’s behavior. When individuals interpret others’
behavior as aggressive, whether intentional or unintentional, they are more likely to
retaliate. According to Lawrence, “Those who are subjected to crowded conditions, and
who lack a social support network, may become more prone to distress. That distress is
linked to an increase in aggression” (Lawrence and Andrews). Overpopulated prisons
also have a shortage of security staff. The ratio of prison guards to prisoners is growing
every day. As a result, it is harder to monitor the prison as closely (Fong).

With overpopulation, there is a limited amount of resources. In prisons,
overcrowding leads to a fight for these limited resources. For one, the numbers of inmate
work programs are limited. Only about fifteen percent of inmates have prison work jobs.
These jobs offer inmates a break from the boredom of prison life. Prison work jobs also
offer a way to rehabilitate prisoners by training them with job skills they might need in the future. Inmates with work jobs feel like they have more of a purpose in prison. (United). Without correct rehabilitation, two-thirds of released prisoners will find themselves back behind bars within three years. According to a 2006 Zogby International poll from the University of Pittsburgh’s Institute of Politics, eighty-seven percent of Americans are in favor of rehabilitative services for prisoners, as opposed to a punishment-only system. This push for rehabilitation has led to the Second Chance Act, which was passed in April 2008 and provided $192 million dollars in services to offenders and their families for reentry into society (Pogorzeleski et al.).

Inmates in prison must also fight for medical treatment. Overcrowding has stretched prison infirmaries’ supplies thin. Physical illnesses in prisons are treated poorly if at all. Prisoners needing dental work do not always get adequate attention (Clark 17). In addition, conducting mental health evaluations in overpopulated prisons is an overwhelming job for psychiatrists. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, an estimated sixteen percent of adult prisoners report having a mental disorder. However, only a fraction of those who need treatment actually receive it (Pogorzeleski et al.). In February 2008, the Department of Justice filed a lawsuit against Santa Fe County in New Mexico accusing the county of depriving inmates of their constitutional rights to health care. The lawsuit argues that administrators failed to protect inmates “from serious harm and undue risk of serious harm by failing to provide adequate medical and mental health care and failing to provide safe and sanitary living conditions” (“Inmate”). While overcrowding alone does not start prison riots, the tension that results from the strains caused by overcrowding may lead to violence (Cobb).
Race also plays a significant role in prison riots. Racial tensions cause constant uneasiness between prisoners. Since the colonial era, racism has been a major issue in the United States. Discrimination against minorities in the treatment of prisoners continues to exist in virtually all prisons today, especially in the South where racism was the strongest before the Civil War (Goldfarb and Singer 83). Hispanics now outnumber blacks in the United States and are now the largest minority (Nesser). More recently, tensions between Hispanics and African Americans have escalated, and are often rooted in access to jobs and political empowerment.

For many African Americans, the “code of the street” is important in understanding how prisoners relate to one another in prison. The code of the street is a way to measure status among group members. Ranking elements include the willingness to fight, protecting one’s manhood, living on the edge, risking death, and showing no fear as protection from being victimized by others. The basis of the code is respect or being treated right (Anderson 80). Respect for most African Americans is hard-won but easily lost. For that reason, blacks refuse to be oppressed by any racial majority without conflict. If a prisoner has the respect of other inmates, he can avoid “being bothered” by other inmates.

When dealing with an overcrowded, mixed-race prison where cellmates are randomly assigned, tensions between different races can escalate to a full-out race riot. In 2006, a race riot broke out among blacks and Hispanics at the Northern County Correctional Facility in Los Angeles, a maximum security prison. The fighting involved about two hundred inmates. One black man was beaten to death and over one-hundred
inmates were injured. Prison officials declared the riot a result of a feud between Hispanic and black gangs (“Hispanic”).

Prisoners join gangs in prison for protection from other inmates. Typically, in minimum-security prisons, there are not going to be many gangs. In larger prisons, including maximum-security prisons, there will be much more gang activity. In more recent years, American prisons have seen a rise in violent, race-based prison gangs. The Aryan Brotherhood, a notorious and deadly white supremacist gang formed in San Quentin in the 1960s, was the first of these race-based gangs. Since then, gangs that are white, black, and Hispanic dominate in the prison system (Pitcavage). Being a member of a gang gives inmates a sense of belonging. When prisoners join a gang, typically they are in for life. The gang turns into a “brotherhood” for inmates. Like prisoners and the prison code, gang members must abide by a strict code of conduct. The penalty for a violation of the code is most often death (Fong). A 1999 study by sociologists Bert Useem and Michael Reisig, showed that prisons that controlled the development and power of prison gangs experienced fewer riots (Useem and Reisig).

Another major factor that causes prison riots is a violation of prisoners’ rights. Prior to the 1960s, the Supreme Court did not get involved in the issue of prisoners’ rights. This period was known as the “hands-off” period. During this time, criminals upon conviction lost virtually all legal rights. Any rights they had were rights given to them by the state. Modern prisoners’ rights cases began in the 1960s alongside the Civil Rights movement (Angelos and Jacobs 102). In the early 1960s, courts demonstrated an increase in willingness to protect the rights of prisoners as stated in the Constitution. This period was known as the “rights period.” The change can be attributed to several
factors. First of all, prisoners began to be more aggressive in declaring their rights. Second, there was an increase in lawyers who were willing to take on prisoners’ rights cases, mostly as pro bono work. Third, judges were presented with cases that involved such horrifying conditions that they insisted something be done to protect prisoners’ rights (Call).

Between 1960 and 1980, the courts began upholding two very important amendments involving prisoners’ rights. The Eighth Amendment, which states that “excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted,” protects inmates from cruel and unusual punishment (Patterson A-16). The Eighth Amendment also forbids punishment that is disproportionate to the offense, or is excessive and unnecessary. Many prisoners believe that isolation, or solitary confinement, violates their Eighth Amendment rights. In 1969, the court case Holt v. Sarver was monumental in changing the way prisoners could be held in isolation. The court found that, “Confinement of inmates in isolation cells that are dirty, overcrowded, and unsanitary constituted cruel and unusual punishment” (“Prisoners”). The court also stated that prolonged confinement of men in the same cell in unsanitary, dangerous conditions was “Mentally and emotionally traumatic, hazardous to health, and is degrading and amounts to cruel and unusual punishment” (“Prisoners”).

Another important amendment is the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868. According to this amendment, “No state may deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law” (Patterson 118). This meant that governments must extend most of the rights in the first ten amendments of the Constitution to all prisoners, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the
right against unreasonable search and seizures. Prison administrators are also no longer allowed to censor outgoing mail or prohibit visits from lawyers who were representing inmates (Call).

The rights period started to collapse in the 1980s, when courts began ruling against inmates. In 1982, the Federal court case Rhodes v. Chapman found that double-bunking inmates in cells made for single occupancy was unconstitutional and violated inmates’ Eighth Amendment rights. However, the Supreme Court overturned the case, ruling that “Double-bunking is not punishment and is therefore lawful, and the Constitution does not mandate comfortable prisons” (Angelos and Jacobs 104). During this time period, the Courts declared that an inmate is to have no say in the decision to transfer an inmate, as well as the decision to exclude visitors because of alleged misconduct on the inmate’s part (Call). The Court also ruled against search cases. In 1984, the Court case Hudson v. Palmer ruled that, “The Fourth Amendment, protection from unreasonable search and seizures, does not apply to cell searches because inmates have no expectation of privacy in their cells” (Call). The Court also ruled that “Inmates have no due process right to observe the shakedown searches of their cell” (Call).

Presently, any violation of prisoners’ rights can lead to prison riots. Putting inmates in isolation for alleged bad behavior or slight rule infractions makes prisoners angry. Forcing prisoners to live in overcrowded and unsanitary conditions is unconstitutional and intolerable. Denying prisoners medical attention increases tension between inmates and guards. Furthermore, if prisoners are being abused by guards, the inmates will eventually stand up for themselves, and some sort of disorder will occur.
Many prison officials live in constant fear of riots. Prisoner uprisings frighten the warden, as well as the public. The warden is afraid he might lose his job and his reputation for good management, and the public worries about the loss of control. Prison riots call attention to some aspects of breakdown in prisons. They do not, however, call much attention to the real factors that provoke the riot. Instead, officials call for stronger steel, heavier bars, and a need for a more strict management of the prison (Meninger 52-54).
CHAPTER III

METHODS OF ANALYSIS

To analyze the factors that lead to prison riots, I chose three case studies to evaluate and apply the theories of collective behavior: riots at Attica Correctional Facility in New York in 1971, New Mexico State Penitentiary in New Mexico in 1980, and Folsom Prison in California in 2002. These three cases exemplify three different types of riots, allowing me to assess how well the theories apply across different contexts. Additionally, my case selections include riots from different time periods between 1971 and 2002. One riot was between inmates and the prison administration. Another riot was inmates versus inmates, but was not a riot based on ethnicity. The final riot I evaluate was a race riot. My analysis will highlight patterns of why the riots occurred across these three different contexts.

The riot at Attica Correctional Facility took place in 1971 and is arguably one of the most famous prison riots in US history. For this reason, there have been many sociological studies on the prison, but none on why the riot actually occurred. This particular riot occurred between inmates and the prison administration. Of the three riots, Attica had, by far, the most available information. Some of the main sources in my analysis of Attica’s riot include an article that was printed in *TIME Magazine*, titled
“War at Attica: Was there No Other Way?” Another source comes from the book *Attica: My Story*, a first-hand account written by State Corrections Commissioner Russell G. Oswald, who played the main negotiator to the inmates during the riot. Another source used in my analysis comes from the journal *Theory and Society*, titled, “A Theory of Prison Riots.” This article analyzed several case studies, including two that I am analyzing, focusing on the structure of the prison in relation to inmates and administration. This article provided useful descriptions of the riots. Data from this source was obtained through in-depth interviews of both inmates and guards that were conducted shortly after the riot, as well as from government investigative reports on some of the riots.

The next prison riot I analyze took place at New Mexico State Penitentiary in 1980. This riot was one of the bloodiest prison riots, if not the bloodiest, in the history of the US. This riot was between the inmates of the prison. Information was also plentiful on this riot. Some main sources include an article titled “The 1980 New Mexico State Penitentiary” from the journal *Social Problems*. Information in this article is based on interviews with inmates, guards, and officials during the official investigation into the riot that was ordered by the New Mexico Legislature. I again used the article from *Theory and Society*, titled, “A Theory of Prison Riots” in my analysis of this prison riot.

The final case study analyze was at Folsom Prison in 2002. It is important to note that because the riot was more recent, and also subject to a conspiracy and cover-up by prison administration, there is not much information available. My main source for this riot comes from a documentary made two years after the riot titled, “A Code of Silence: A Documentary about a Prison Riot that Never Should Have Happened.”
This documentary included audio and footage from security tapes on the day of the riot. Other sources include a one-page news story written just days after the riot explaining what happened, and a suicide note written by one of the guards involved in the riot.

I will first describe the conditions for each riot, and then I will analyze how well various theories of collective behavior fit into each case. My conclusion identifies patterns and possible prevention strategies to avoid riots in the future.
CHAPTER IV

RIOT DESCRIPTIONS

Attica Correctional Facility

On September 9, 1971, at 8:20 am, a riot started at Attica Correctional Facility in Attica, New York. Attica is an all-male maximum security prison holding inmates considered to be the most dangerous criminals. Twenty-eight percent of the prisoners were serving sentences of twenty years imprisonment or longer. Around ninety percent of the inmates had prior criminal records (Oswald 7). Attica prison was originally built to hold 1,600 prisoners, but at the time of the riot, held around 2,250 inmates. Also, at the time of the riot, seventy-five percent of the prisoners were black or Puerto Rican and twenty-five percent were white (“War”).

The riot started when a group of inmates refused to line up for one of the prison jobs “while being threatened by the guards’ clubs” (Kimball and Useem 93). All of a sudden, one of the inmates hit a guard. The guard backed down from a fight, but that night, the inmate accused of the act was taken from his cell to a disciplinary cell block (Kimball and Useem 93). He resisted but was eventually carried away, and rumored to be tortured (“People”). The next day, inmates returning from breakfast jumped and beat up the guard who was involved in the confrontation the day before. The inmates then attacked several other guards and used their keys to release other inmates. Security gates broke, which allowed the riot to spread to other cell blocks (Kimball and Useem 93). The
guards were completely outnumbered; fewer than one hundred officers supervised 2,250 inmates (“War”). It did not take long for inmates to take over the prison.

At the start of the riot, the inmates were completely disorganized. It was chaos. Many correctional officers were taken hostage by the rioting inmates. After several hours, a leadership group of inmates emerged and took control of the yard. One of the inmate leaders later wrote, “Someone had to take over or there would be fistfights for cartons of cigarettes. As I began to speak, people stopped and moved to where I was speaking. I stood on a table and people listened to me. I spoke for ten minutes and requested the hostages be brought into the middle of the yard” (Kimball and Useem 94). Another leader declared that, “This is not a race riot. We are all in this together…There are no white inmates, no black inmates, no Puerto Rican inmates. There are only inmates” (Kimball and Useem 94).

State Corrections Commissioner Russell G. Oswald arrived at Attica around 2:00 pm to begin negotiations. Oswald and a few reporters walked into the middle of the prison where the leaders dictated a list of demands. The hostages were kept closely guarded. Oswald intended to discuss the demands after the hostages were released, but ultimately found the demands suprising. The prisoners wanted “religious freedom for Black Muslim worship,” permission to hold political meetings “without intimidation,” and no more mail censorship (“War”). The hostage negotiations continued for days.

On the first day of negotiations, Oswald made two other peace-making moves in order to get the hostages released. Over several days, Oswald agreed to twenty-eight of thirty prisoner demands. The two he did not allow were complete amnesty to inmates involved in the riot, and the firing of current Warden Mancusi. After four days of
negotiations, tensions rose. Inmates felt that if they released hostages, they would lose
their bargaining power. Inmates also feared physical beatings from the guards once they
surrendered (“War”).

The prisoners wanted to speak to New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller.
One of the inmate leaders said, “We must have Rockefeller. We need Rockefeller here to
save the lives of his hostages. I say his hostages because he created this situation”
(“People”). New York State Governor Nelson Rockefeller refused to come to the scene
of the riot and meet with the inmates. Oswald told inmates he could no longer negotiate
with them and that they must give themselves up. Once negotiations fell through, the
inmate leaders threatened to kill several hostages by cutting their throats (Oswald 265-
67). Oswald again begged Rockefeller to come to the prison to calm the riot. After
Rockefeller refused again, Oswald stated that he would order the New York State Police
to retake the facility by force (“People”). Rockefeller agreed and Oswald gave the order.

On September 13, 1971, at 9:46 am, helicopters dropped tear gas into the yard and
the prison filled with smoke. New York State Police and state troopers fired into the
smoke. More than 500 officers armed with shotguns, pistols, and clubs charged into the
prison, shooting as they ran. Gunfire continued for nearly an hour. When the battle was
over, twenty-six inmates and nine correctional officer hostages had been killed (“War”).
It was later determined that all of the correctional officer hostages died from gunshots
inflicted by State Police and guards (“People”). At least eighty-three prisoners were
wounded seriously enough to require surgery.
At 1:30 am on February 2, 1980, inmates began rioting at the New Mexico State Penitentiary in Santa Fe, New Mexico. New Mexico State Penitentiary is an all male, maximum security prison. Originally built to hold 950 inmates, at the time of the riot, the prison housed 1,157 prisoners. On the day of the riot, ninety-one percent of the inmate population was white or Hispanic, and nine percent was black (Colvin 457).

The riot started when several inmates overpowered and severely beat four guards while performing routine dorm inspections. After gaining control of the wing, security lapses allowed the inmates to take control of the prison. Security gates separating the wing from the main institution were left unlocked. A “shatter-proof” window protecting the control center was easily broken. Also, renovating crews had left behind acetylene torches, which inmates used to burn open locked gates and anything else that would burn (Kimball and Useem 89). After taking control of the prison, inmates began a “crazed, demonic, frenzy of violence, attacking, raping, and killing one another with a viciousness no Hollywood director could ever replicate. Prisoners were dragged out of their cells, stabbed, tortured, beat, burned, hanged, and hacked apart” (Causas).

The assaults and killings were not random; they were selective. The targets were inmate informants, also known as “snitches” (Colvin 485). A set of keys lost by a guard amidst the chaos allowed inmates access to other inmates being held in the protective custody unit. One inmate stated, “Most of the people attacked were rats…They knew this was an opportunity that if they ever had to kill somebody, this would be the time to do it, so they did it” (Kimball and Useem 89). Twelve of the inmates killed were “tortured with blow torches, set afire, and mutilated.
One was beheaded with a shovel” (Colvin 458). Among those killed were a child rapist and a mentally disturbed patient whose screaming “kept other inmates awake at night” (Colvin 458).

No group of inmates attained clear leadership status during the riot. The situation was disorganized and chaotic. Control over hostages and negotiations was very unorganized. Most inmates were “unaware that demands and negotiations were even taking place” (Kimball and Useem 96). A small group of inmates attempted to organize the riot. They presented a list of demands to prison administration and attempted to gather hostages in one place to use for negotiating. The small group of inmates was unable to pry hostages away from the other inmates until near the end of the riot, when two badly beaten hostages were handed over for release. The prison administration tried to keep in contact with the group in the faint hope of getting the hostages released. The small group was never really in control of the hostages and communication with prison administration was constantly interrupted by other inmates. The negotiations had “practically no impact on the outcome of the riot” (Colvin 459). Only two of the twelve hostages were released through negotiation. Most were released sporadically by the various groups that held them.

The riot ended thirty-six hours after it began. Prisoners stole barbiturates, or depressants, from the prison pharmacy. Inmates swallowed, and in many cases, overdosed on the drugs. This was one factor in the declination of the riot. Almost one hundred inmates were treated at a local hospital for overdosing. The riot officially ended when police led an armed assault on the prison, but few of the prisoners resisted. No inmates or hostages were killed or injured during the retaking of the prison by police
(Colvin 459). In total, thirty-three inmates were killed, and as many as two hundred prisoners were beaten and raped. Seven correctional officers who were taken hostage were beaten, stabbed, or sodomized, though none were killed (Colvin 499).

Folsom Prison

On April 8, 2002, a prison riot occurred at Folsom State Prison in Folsom, California. Folsom was America’s first maximum security prison, built in 1880. Today, however, Folsom is a medium security prison. Prison capacity in 2002 was just over 1,000 inmates. According to the California Department of Corrections, the prison population at the time of the riot was 3,691 (“Average”). The majority of the prison population consisted of Hispanic inmates.

The Folsom riot started when two known rival prison gangs, the Northern Hispanics (also known as Nuestra Familia) and the Southern Hispanics (also known as the Mexican Mafia) were let out together in the yard. The Southern inmates considered themselves more sophisticated and much more intelligent. The Northern inmates were comprised of primarily farmers and laborers. About a month prior, the two groups got into a similar incident and were just coming off a lockdown and slowly being allowed out of their cells (“Investigation”).

All of the Northern Hispanics were let out into the yard first. Then, all of the Southern Hispanics were released. At 10:26 am, two minutes before the riot, members of the Southern Hispanics began grouping together. The Southern Hispanics then marched across the yard toward the other gang. Captain Doug Pieper, a correctional officer at Folsom Prison, is on tape saying, “Here it comes.” He then radios the associate warden, Michael Bunnell, and asks, “You want me to put it down, right?” Bunnell says, “Not
yet” (“Code”). In a post-riot study by the National Gang Crime Research Center, Bunnell himself was suspected of being associated with the Mexican Mafia (Knox).

At 10:28 am, the Southern Hispanics met the Northern Hispanics in the yard and a melee began. It was chaos as inmates from both gangs were fighting with whatever weapon they could find. After ninety seconds, guards brought the prison back into order by guards armed with pepper spray and batons. After the riot, dozens of inmates were scraped and bruised, and one was rushed to UC Davis Medical Center with a gash on his hand (“Investigation”). No inmates were critically injured, but one correctional officer, Pat O’Dea, sustained a serious spinal cord injury. Doug Pieper, the officer who was told not to quell the riot before it began, was pressured by administration and the CCPOA (California Correctional Peace Officer’s Association) not to reveal what he knew about what happened before the riot. He was even demoted to a position where he could not access the information from the cover-up. However, Pieper still felt partially responsible that he could do nothing the day of the riot. Nine months later, Captain Doug Pieper committed suicide because of what he saw that day (“Code”). In Captain Peiper’s suicide note, he affirmed that, “My job has killed me” (Martin).
In my analysis, I will evaluate which theories of collective behavior best explain each riot. Though some theories are more applicable in one riot than another, my conclusion highlights patterns that emerge among all three. Identifying common factors in prison riots will make it easier to predict future prison riots.

Attica Correctional Facility

The theory that best explains why the riot occurred at Attica Correctional Facility is the value-added theory. This theory states that when six related factors are present, then some sort of collective behavior will occur (Smelser 134). The first factor is an existing problem that creates a possibility for change. Inmates were not content with the way they were being forced to live. Overcrowding was a big problem. Attica prison was originally built to hold 1,600 prisoners, but at the time of the riot, had 2,250 inmates (“War”).

The second factor of the value-added theory is that the social structure is not meeting the needs of the individuals and there is widespread dissatisfaction. Attica was not providing inmates with adequate rehabilitation and inmates were denied basic necessities. Inmates were only allowed one shower per week, regardless of their prison job. Also, inmates were only allowed one bar of soap and one roll of toilet paper per month (“War”).
The third factor of the value-added theory is the spread of a common belief through the population. The only way for circumstances to improve for inmates was to take it by force. The fourth factor is the precipitating factor where a dramatic incident occurs and incites people to take action. Abuse was a problem in the prison. Former inmates of Attica claim that solitary confinement was frequently used for minor infractions. In addition, beatings on the way to solitary confinement were common (“War”). When the prisoner who was accused of hitting a guard was taken from his cell to be possibly tortured by guards, this pushed inmates over the line and prompted them to act out against the administration.

The fifth factor of the value-added theory is the mobilization for action. The leadership group stepped up and set a path for action. The final factor is the failure of social control. The guards were unable to oppose the rioting inmates and the prison administration was forced into a four-day standoff (Kimball and Useem 93-95).

A second theory that helps to understand the Attica riot is the administrative control theory. Administrative control theory states that conflict results from poor management of correctional facilities, including inadequate conditions, weak security, and the presence of gangs (Clear, Cole and Reisig 323). Inmates in Attica were living in bad conditions and were tired of being denied basic human rights. Also, at the time of the riot, there were fewer than one hundred guards on duty to supervise 2,250 prisoners (“War”). Another factor that contributes to this theory is the subject of race. While over seventy-five percent of the inmates were either black or Puerto Rican, all 383 guards employed by Attica at the time of the riot were white. The guards were allegedly very racist and
showed favoritism to white inmates. Guards supposedly referred to their clubs or night sticks as “nigger sticks” (Kimball and Useem 113).

A third theory that helps explain the Attica riot is the minimax theory. According to this theory, people are likely to engage in risky behavior if they feel the benefits outweigh the costs (Scott). Inmates believed the benefits of rioting were that they could call attention to the problems that were occurring inside the prison. Once the problems become public, something could be done to fix them. On the other hand, the cost of rioting was that either the situation would stay the same, or things would get worse. Inmates at Attica believed that the benefits of the riot outweighed the consequences.

A final theory that helps us to understand the Attica riot is the emergent norm theory. The emergent norm theory states that when a crowd first comes together, there is chaos and people are looking to each other for a certain way to act. When one or a few begin to act in a certain way, others follow and the behavior of the few becomes the norm for the group (Turner and Killian 82-83). During the riot, a leadership group emerged and took control of the situation. The leadership group was the emergent norm. At first, the leadership group had no control, but after a short amount of time, most of the other inmates conformed to the new rules set by the group. They took charge of the hostages and also took control of negotiations and demands (Kimball and Useem 93-94). Inmates respected the new group’s authority and followed their orders.

New Mexico State Penitentiary

The theory that best applies to the New Mexico riot is the inmate-balance theory. According to the inmate-balance theory, there is a mutual relationship between inmates and guards. The guards allow inmates to engage in risky behavior, and in turn, the
inmates police themselves and make sure the prison exists without major conflict. When something happens that disrupts the order, these privileges are taken away, making inmates angry (Clear, Cole and Reisig 321). In New Mexico State Penitentiary, powerful inmates were persuaded into maintaining order because of their strong influence over other inmates (Colvin 453).

There were two powerful groups that resulted from this. First was the group of inmates that established programs such as a college prep program, an adult basic education program, and a computer course. The inmates in charge of the programs had great influence over who was allowed in the programs. Participation greatly improved chances for parole. Many of the inmates in power had been convicted of violent crimes, but were able to exercise their power in a nonviolent way. The inmate administration had a strong interest in maintaining order to protect their programs (Colvin 453).

A second group to emerge were the powerful inmates who controlled drug trafficking within the prison. Guards tolerated, and in some cases cooperated in, the drug trafficking. By allowing drug rackets, guards maintained order in the prison because any disruption might draw attention to the corruption of the authority. During the time of inmate control at New Mexico State Penitentiary, there were low levels of violence and escapes (Colvin 453).

In 1975, the control structure of the prison experienced a change that disrupted the nonviolent relationships between inmates. When the prison was accused of mismanagement, the warden was transferred to a “do-nothing” job in an office, and the deputy warden was fired. The governor appointed a new prison administration, which included the chief of security and the former warden’s assistant. The new administration
was very strict compared to the previous administration. They removed inmates from administrative positions in programs and shut down the drug trafficking. When the administration took control away from the inmates, incentives to maintain order vanished. Inmates organized protests and work strikes for years protesting the new administration (Colvin 454). One correctional officer said in an interview, “We are finally showing them who is in charge” (Colvin 454). A power struggle among the inmates began to develop. Power became increasingly based on violence. Inmates with a reputation for violence had the best chances for gaining power (Colvin 455). This power struggle led to the formation of the “new breed” gangs inside the prison.

A second theory of collective behavior that applies to the New Mexico State riot is the administrative control theory, which says that disorder stems from mismanagement, bad security, and the presence of gangs. The violation of prisoners’ rights contributed to mismanagement of the prison. In the ten years prior to the riot, the percentage of inmates in solitary confinement was five percent. In 1980, the percentage of inmates in solitary confinement was over twenty percent of the prison population. In 1977, three years before the riot, two inmates who would later emerge as riot leaders, filed a class-action suit on behalf of several other inmates against the state of New Mexico seeking improvements in conditions at the prison. The suit and negotiations dragged on until after the riot (Colvin 455).

Gangs are another important part of the administrative control theory. The gangs at the New Mexico prison were small, unstable, and not racially-based. They were mostly based on power and pride. Inmates who frequently participate in violence inside the prison began to develop an ideology of “moral weakness versus moral strength” based on
the inmate’s will to engage in violence, confront guards, and the ability to “tough it out” whenever they were being disciplined. These inmates grouped together and prison administration referred to them as the “new breed” inmates. Characteristics of these inmates include being violent, disruptive, and aggressive. New Mexico correctional administration blamed these inmates for the riot (Colvin 452).

Security is yet another component of the administrative control theory. Security was inadequate at the prison. Inmates described open doors and grills in between separate wings as “standard operating procedures” (Colvin 452). These open doors allowed the riot to spread quickly throughout the prison.

A final theory that helps explain the New Mexico riot was the minimax theory. Inmates were not happy with the way they were being treated and the way the prison was being run. Inmates expressed dissatisfaction with food and medical services (Colvin 452). Overcrowding was also a problem. New Mexico State Penitentiary was originally built to hold 950 inmates, but at the time of the riot, the prison housed 1,157 prisoners (Colvin 457). Inmates perceived that the benefits of rioting would outweigh the costs and then improvements could be made to their standard of living.

Folsom

The theory that applies best to the riot at Folsom Prison is the administrative control theory. Poor prison management was apparent with associate Warden Michael Bunnel calling the shots. Bunnel was previously under investigation for drug trafficking inside another prison, but got his job back when the case fell apart (“Code”). In the Folsom Prison riot, Bunnel was suspected of being associated with the Mexican Mafia (Knox). Pat O’Dea, a guard who helped initiate the investigation into the riot, believed
that because of his history, Bunnel most likely staged the riot ("Code"). One of the investigators into the riot said, “At the point that staff is no longer in control and yield to the wishes of gangs, then the prison system is no longer serving the public well” ("Code").

Overcrowding severely contributed to the inadequate conditions at the prison. Design capacity in 2002 was just over two thousand inmates. However, according to the California Department of Corrections, the prison population at the time of the riot was 3,691 ("Average"). That is almost twice the amount the prison was designed to hold.

The presence of gangs was the most prominent factor. About a month prior, the Mexican Mafia and the Nuestra Familia got into an incident and were just coming off a lockdown. The Folsom riot occurred because both gangs were released all together into the yard rather than released slowly gradually reintegrated over a period of time ("Investigation"). A second theory that helps us understand the riot at Folsom is the minimax theory. The inmates involved with the two gangs felt that the benefits of the riot, which include pride by attacking the rival gang with intentions of causing harm, were more important than the consequences of starting a riot.
CONCLUSION

Prison riots bring attention to aspects of breakdown that exist inside correctional facilities. Prison riots are inmates’ response to existing structural issues within prisons. The theory that best explains why prison riots occur is the value-added theory. When all six necessary factors occur, it will likely lead to a prison riot. There is a problem in a prison and there is widespread dissatisfaction among inmates. The problem must be fixed. A dramatic incident occurs and inmates mobilize for action. When prison administration cannot stop the inmates, the result is a riot. A second valuable theory for explaining why prison riots occur is the minimax theory. Prisoners participating in riots feel that the benefits of rioting outweigh the consequences (minimizing costs and maximizing benefits). Both of these theories draw attention to structural problems inside prisons, and can help us to avoid future conflict by making structural adjustments.

Changes did occur at each of the three prisons analyzed here as a result of the riots. In Attica, prison conditions worsened in the short term, but improved in the long term (Kimball and Useem 97). In the short term, surviving inmates claimed they were brutally beaten by authorities after police regained control of the prison. Also, an investigation three days after the riot ended showed that inmates were only being fed two meals a day and had not had access to showers in over a week (Oswald 404).

In April 1972, just over six months after the riot, Governor Nelson Rockefeller proposed twelve million dollars for the Department of Correctional Services to spend on
upgrading prison services. There was also a push to provide adequate training for personnel. In addition, the public suggested certain steps be taken to improve day-to-day living conditions for inmates, including improving food services, reducing cell time, easing mail censorship and visitation privileges, creating an inmate council to facilitate communication between prisoners and authorities, and developing work release programs (Benjamin and Rappaport 210).

In New Mexico State Penitentiary, the riot resulted in major improvements in prison conditions and in the policies of the state Department of Corrections (Kimball and Useem 97). A U.S. Justice Department study concluded that before the riot, the penitentiary was “one of the harshest, most punitive prison environments in the nation” (Useem 685). The riot led to significant improvements in living conditions, including the elimination of overcrowding, suppression of guard brutality, increased inmate programs, less reliance on snitches for information, and fewer restrictions in personal property (Useem 685).

After the Folsom riot, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger called for reform of “the code of silence.” He says that the code is a major problem in prisons today and that the misconduct of a few prison authorities brings shame to the many. Also, Associate Warden Bunnell was reassigned to another prison. An examination investigated the lockdown that occurred after the riot (“Code”). It is a good first step, but more needs to be done to prevent such prison riots from happening again.

Preventing prison riots necessitates a focus on prisoner rehabilitation rather than punishment. Former Supreme Court Justice Warren Burger stated, “If we tie a person to a chair for a long time, we can hardly be surprised if he can’t walk when we turn him
loose…We should develop sentencing techniques to impose a sentence so that an inmate can literally ‘learn’ his way out of prison, as we now try to let him ‘earn’ his way out of prison” (Oswald 353). One of the reasons prisons are overcrowded is because prisoners are not being rehabilitated. They get out and do not know how to achieve success legally and end up committing a crime and going back to prison. Rehabilitating prisoners would help to reduce overcrowding so that they can make it once they get out of prison.

Additional research should be done on rehabilitation programs available to prisoners in America. Are offenders given a chance to straighten out their lives, or are they thrown into institutions for punishment to “scare” them into doing the right thing? Inadequate rehabilitation programs for offenders means that once they are released, they do not know how to get by and end up getting into trouble again.

Furthermore, research should be done into the problems caused by overcrowding. Does every inmate have a bed to sleep in, and are there enough toilets in the facility in relation to the number of inmates? With the increase in prisoner population, are there enough guards? Are inmates receiving necessary medical care? Once these risk factors become evident, it will be easier to predict when a riot will occur.

It is beneficial to study collective behavior in relation to prison riots to understand how to prevent prison riots in the future. As Russell Oswald stated, “We must all never forget these tragic days, and we who bear the scars will never forget them. We who have lived have gone through sorrow and agony, and those who cannot remember the past are indeed doomed to repeat it” (Oswald 357). If people do not learn from past mistakes, the future is destined for the same failures.


