



Closed Circuit Television in Communal Prison Cells

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Introduction

1. During the course of 2011 some members of the Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services expressed an interest in the installation of closed circuit television cameras (CCTV) in communal prison cells to reduce inter-prisoner violence.¹ CSPRI hopes to shed some light on this issue by setting out, briefly, available research for the members of the Portfolio Committee on Correctional Services on the use of CCTV in communal prison cell settings. A more comprehensive review of the extant literature on prison violence has been done elsewhere and will not be repeated here.²
2. This brief review does not discuss the technical aspects of CCTV or the cost implications. It merely attempts to answer the question: Does CCTV reduce prison violence?
3. The extant literature is, unfortunately not as comprehensive as one may have hoped for. Nevertheless, there is a fair amount of information on the use of CCTV for the purposes of curbing crime in public spaces, much of which can be extrapolated and understood in the context of a prison.

Research

4. In general, the use of CCTV in prison (as well as out of prison) has been shown to reduce some non-violent crimes. Its impact on violent crime, however, is negligible.³

¹ 'MPs call for CCTV cameras in prison cells' *The Sowetan*, 8 September 2011.

² Muntingh, L. (2010) *Reducing Prison violence – implications from the literature for South Africa*, CSPRI Research report No. 17. Bellville: Community Law Centre.

³ Allard, T., Harding, R., & Wortley, R. (2008) 'The Effect of CCTV on Prisoner Misbehaviour' *The Prison Journal*, 88 (3) 404-422.

5. In discussing CCTV usage, it is helpful to divide “crime” into two categories: “planned crime” and “spontaneous crime.” For the most part, spontaneous crimes are typically violent in nature, i.e. assault, rape and murder. Planned crimes involve both violent and non-violent events. The inability of CCTV to affect violent crime is attributed to its spontaneous nature.⁴ The fact that the situation is being monitored do not act as deterrent in such situations.
6. The only available experimental data revealed that 75% of non-violent offences occurred in locations that were not under camera surveillance, whereas violent offences were more evenly distributed in locations that were (41%) and were not (59%) under camera surveillance. These figures support the transferability of findings from studies that have been conducted in public places where CCTV has been found to have more effect on non-violent offending.
7. Research findings also caution the following:
 - a. that there is a tendency on the part of correction or police officials to focus less on areas under camera surveillance, thus rendering these spaces even more vulnerable and prone to violence; and
 - b. violence is often displaced away from areas under surveillance into more private spaces (such as bathrooms and showers). This means that violence simply moves, and is not removed.⁵ The effect is therefore simply one of displacement.
8. For the purpose of policing violence, in general, research indicates that inmate-on-inmate assaults have been found to occur predominantly in multipurpose areas where inmates congregate and engage in unstructured activities (e.g. dining rooms, exercise yards and corridors) as well as cells and showers. Assaults are far less likely to occur in areas where highly structured activities happen, such as educational classes, technical training etc.⁶

⁴ Id.

⁵ Id.

⁶ Poyser, S., (2004) ‘Does the effectiveness of CCTV as a crime prevention strategy outweigh the threat to civil liberties?’ *Police J.* 77, 120.

9. The above has been confirmed in Bulgarian prisons, also characterised by overcrowding and low numbers of officials supervising high numbers of inmates:

Thus, between 80 and 240 persons deprived of liberty daily share the space of a single corridor. In most cases the supervision of such a corridor is assigned to only one officer who is incapable of adequately neutralising inter-prisoner arguments, brawls, and physical fights. CCTV installations in corridors do not provide sufficient warranty against the occurrence of violence. What is more, in order to circumvent formal sanctions, perpetrators of violence are known to confine their aggression to the space of cells and toilet facilities, which are not under camera surveillance.⁷

10. The extent to which officials are able to continuously monitor the CCTV has also been to be problematic. Placing the display screens in busy offices is ineffective because they are simply not monitored.⁸ The implication would thus be that dedicated staff would be required whose task it would be to monitor CCTV screens.
11. Recorded video footage of an incident, provided it is of the requisite quality, has reportedly been useful in the investigation of incidents.⁹ This application would therefore not have a direct preventative impact, but can be especially useful during the collection of evidence in an investigation.
12. There are at this stage no research findings from the available literature confirming a link between the use of CCTV and a reduction in the incidence of sexual violence in prisons.

The Right to Privacy

13. Although this issue has not been canvassed before the courts, it is very unlikely that a surveillance camera in a communal cell would be considered an unjustified limit on

⁷ Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (2011) *Submission To The UN Committee Against Torture for its Consideration of the 4th and 5th Periodic Reports of Bulgaria at the 47th Session Of The Committee*, Sofia: Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.

⁸ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2011) *Report on HMP Dumfries: Full Inspection 4-12 April 2011*, The Scottish Government, para 3.1.2.

⁹ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (2010) *Report to the Government of Ireland on the visit to Ireland carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) from 25 January to 5 February 2010*, Council of Europe: Strasbourg, p. 21.

the right to privacy in light of the important interests it would purportedly be protecting. It would be necessary, however, to strictly regulate the use of a surveillance camera in order to ensure that the data captured would not be used for illicit purposes.

Conclusion

14. Reducing levels of violence and victimisation in prisons should be assessed against a broader context which included, but is not limited to inmate culture, staff culture, and managerial responses to misbehaviour and violence.¹⁰ There is some evidence that situational prevention (reducing the risk for violence in particular settings) holds promise but this has not been demonstrated conclusively.¹¹ The use of CCTV would fall in this category of measures taken to reduce prison violence. Moreover, situational prevention does not focus on prisoner and staff culture, or the overall management approaches.
15. The available research findings indicate that CCTV may assist in reducing planned acts of misbehaviour but its effect on unplanned acts is negligible. Furthermore, reducing violence and victimisation in prison appear to be an institutional problem and solutions should be sought on this level. Once institutional problems have been addressed it is more likely that the use of CCTV can contribute to safer prisons.

End.

¹⁰ Byrne, J.M., Hummer, D. and Taxman, F.S. (2008) *The Culture of Prison Violence*, Boston: Pearson.

¹¹ Id. p. 57.