A NATIONAL STUDY OF WARDENS' PERCEPTIONS OF PRISON SEX IN THEIR INSTITUTIONS

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The topic of prison sex has long been one of the most marginalized and controversial issues in penology. In 1934, Joseph Fishman, a former inspector of federal prisons, wrote “the subject of sex in prison - so provocative, so vital, so timely . . . is shrouded in dread silence” (5). Over sixty five years later, this statement still holds true. Prison sex researchers have, however, made valuable advances to the study of inmate culture and life. In addition, they have assessed correctional officers’ attitudes toward and estimates of consensual and coerced sex in both male and female prisons (Eigenberg, 2000, 1994, 1989; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Burnby, and Donaldson, 1996; Nacci and Kane, 1984, 1983; Propper, 1982, 1981, 1976; Giallombardo, 1966; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965). Unfortunately, prison sex researchers have neglected to address correctional administrators’ attitudes and perceptions of prison sex. These are the same men and women who shape correctional policies regarding prison sex in their respective institutions.

According to Tewksbury and West (2000), prison sex studies are important for three reasons. First, researchers need to understand the experience of inmates and the institutional culture in which they reside. Inmates are often deprived of heterosexual outlets while incarcerated which may lead to “extreme emotional, psychological, and perhaps physical distress” (Tewksbury and West, 2000:368). Because of the sexual deprivations placed on inmates, they may engage in either consensual same-sex sexual activity or coerced others into sexual activity.

Second, correctional administrators should be concerned with the spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV/AIDS within prisons. According to the latest statistics, the rate of confirmed HIV cases in prisons is five times higher than in the free society (Maruschak, 1999) and the rate of confirmed AIDS cases in correctional facilities is six times
higher than in the U.S. population (Hammett, Harmon, and Maruschak, 1999). Therefore, these health issues which are related to sexual activities among inmates become “both institutional and public health care concerns” (Tewksbury and West, 2000:368).

Third, a link exists between prison sex and violent behavior within the institution (Wooden and Parker, 1982; Lockwood, 1980). According to Struckman-Johnson, “sex in prison is a major cause of violence . . . of upset and turmoil” (Lockwood, 2000:B1; Associated Press, 2000: B6). Toch (1965) and Sylvester, Reed, and Nelson (1977) have also argued that violence in prisons has a clear homosexual underpinning. For instance, Sylvester, et al. (1977) found that one of the leading causes of inmate homicides was same-sex sexual activity in prisons.

In addition, research on prison sex provides correctional administrators and staff with more complete knowledge of their correctional institutions. All forms of prison sex including masturbation, consensual sex, and coerced sex is illegal and forbidden in most institutions. According to Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, and Bennett (1995), it is forbidden “so that correctional officers can fulfill their objective of a safe and secure environment” (414). Because of the severe deprivations placed on inmates, prison sex becomes a commodity which can then fuel an “underground economy” (Saum, et al., 1995; Silberman, 1994). Therefore, correctional administrators and staff must be aware and concerned about the amount of sexual activity occurring in their institutions so that they may provide additional safety and security to their inmate populations as well as society. Tewksbury and West (2000) state, “It should be of institutional concern to understand sexual expression among inmates who are safe and discreet, and to control unsafe and unwanted sexual expression among inmates who use sex as a weapon” (377).
Correctional administrators, especially those with authority to make policy decisions and to oversee the implementation of policies and procedures, are critical players in the daily lives of prison inmates. In their capacity, such administration (i.e., wardens, superintendents; etc.) are able to significantly influence the structure, culture, and activities of their institutions. Clearly, these individuals are subject to a great number of influences, including both official and unofficial factors. Official influences, such as legislation, case law, and policy decision made at a higher political level may be only a small part of the constellation of influences on such administrators. What is not fully understood at this time is what the unofficial influences (personal and socially constructed attitudes, beliefs, and values) are that interact with official influences to guide the policy decisions for institutional management.

Understanding the attitudes, values, and beliefs of wardens concerning a particular aspect of institutional operations and management is the focus of the presently proposed research. Specifically, we will examine the perspectives of prison wardens on sexual activities and programming in their institutions.

THE PRESENT STUDY

Several prison sex studies have addressed the issues of homosexuality and rape in both male and female correctional institutions, (Greer, 2000; Owen, 1998; Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, Rucker, Bumby, and Donaldson, 1996; Saum, Surratt, Inciardi, and Bennett, 1995; Tewksbury, 1989a; Tewksbury, 1989b; Nacci and Kane, 1984, 1983; Propper, 1982, 1981, 1978, 1976; Wooden and Parker, 1982; Bowker, 1980; Hopper, 1980; Lockwood, 1980; Sagarin, 1976; Mitchell, 1975; Scacco, 1975; Nelson, 1974; Hefferman, 1972; Tittle, 1972; Giallombardo, 1966; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965; Halleck and Hersko, 1962; Selling, 1931; Ford, 1929; Otis,
1913) the most recent of which took place in Kentucky. Unfortunately, Hensley was unable to compare his findings on prison sexuality with data from the prison wardens at these institutions. It is our intent with this study to compare the findings from the data collected from the wardens of Kentucky correctional institutions to the data collected on the inmates’ sexual behavior in Kentucky. Therefore, the current study will be undertaken to gain valuable information about wardens’ attitudes and perceptions of prison sex (both consensual and coerced) which is relevant for the new millennium. In addition, we will gather the necessary data from other prison wardens throughout the United States to compare their perceptions about prison sex with Kentucky prison wardens.

In order to accomplish these goals, anonymous surveys will be distributed to the approximate 1,500 prison wardens in the United States. This information will be gathered from the American Correctional Association’s Juvenile and Adult Correctional Departments, Institutions, Agencies, and Paroling Authorities (2000) which lists the addresses and contact persons for each institution. Each warden will receive the questionnaire along with a cover letter and a stamped, self-addressed envelope (See Appendix A for the survey). The cover letter will describe the research project as well as provide important instructions and information to the respondent. The respondent will not be required to sign an informed consent form as all data collection concerns the study of public officials. This will allow for enhanced anonymity and confidentiality. If the subject completes the questionnaire, it will imply informed consent. The cover letter will also clearly state that the subject’s participation is voluntary and they are free to withdraw from the study at any time. Each respondent will be given 2 weeks to complete and return the questionnaire.
Dr. Christopher Hensley, Director of the Institute for Correctional Research and Training at Morehead State University and Dr. Richard Tewksbury, Professor of Justice Administration at the University of Louisville will direct the project and coordinate the production of the final bulletin for release to Eastern Kentucky University's (EKU) Justice and Safety Center (JSC).

The proposed project will begin in January 2001 and conclude in August 2001. During January, all written materials will be finalized and cover letters and questionnaires will be copied and prepared for distribution. Data collection and input will take place from February to April. Both project directors will conduct analysis of the data during the months of May and June. The final bulletin will be submitted to JSC in August (Please see the following proposed timeline).

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