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Violence in prison: a situational design perspective

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2013

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/29426

Heron, Elizabeth Clare (2013) Violence in prison:a situational design perspective, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/29426>

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ABSTRACT

This study examined prison violence that takes place in male correctional centres (prisons) in South Africa. Prison violence is examined as a product of situational design factors within the prison environment, where such factors motivate and provide opportunity for incidents of violence among offenders. Acts of violence among offenders are evaluated and contextualized in terms of forms, motivations, distribution and frequency of violence, following which prison violence is evaluated from a situational design perspective.

The research areas in this study determined the directives that govern prison architecture and examined the benchmarks that measure effectiveness in terms of prison design; determined the governing principles of environmental psychology theories and practices; evaluated the forms of violence that take place in maximum security prisons in South Africa and further determined the design features and construction materials adopted in prison design, that motivate and provide opportunities for violent behaviour which in turn jeopardize offender and staff safety.

Literature review in this study presented the history and evolution of prisons particularly the relationship between prison form and function, as well as the role of prisons in meeting the historical and current philosophies of punishment. In addition, literary theories surrounding environmental psychology and situational design were presented. Following this, literature was presented on the theoretical debate on the effectiveness of prison design on human behaviour, particularly violent behaviour that occurs in prisons.

This study examined the situational impact on prison violence within four correctional centres in South Africa namely, Johannesburg Correctional Centre, Pretoria Central Correctional Centre, Modderbee and CMax. The data collection process included discussions with prison personnel, assessment of historical data, participant observation, unstructured interviews with officials, surveys in the form of interviews and questionnaires with offenders.

Findings of this study presented prison violence from a situational perspective by identifying the specific locations within prisons that presented higher propensity for violence. Analysis

of results demonstrated how prison design and construction material choice in prison design impacts on violence in prisons.

Findings further indicated that specific geographic locations within the prison environment motivated and provided opportunities for prison violence; that design features and material choice adopted in the prison environment motivated prison violence among offenders in male prisons and that design features applied in prison design motivated frustrations among offenders and in turn perpetuated violence among offenders.

The findings are presented from the perspective of the users of prisons, namely male offenders, and findings expose prison violence from the South African context.