



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

What Shapes Cooperation Between Incarcerated People and Officers?

Key Takeaways

- How fairly and respectfully officers treat incarcerated people is the strongest factor for whether those individuals say they are willing to follow officers' directions and accept officer authority.
- Fair treatment builds cooperation partly by making officers seem more legitimate in the eyes of incarcerated people, but fairness also boosts cooperation on its own.
- Cooperation is not only about fair treatment; personal and situational factors such as a person's outlook on life, physical health, race, and the level of violence in their unit also matter.

Why This Matters

Prisons rely heavily on the cooperation of the people they hold. Everyday order and safety depend not just on rules and controls but also on the routine interactions between correctional officers and incarcerated people. When incarcerated people are willing to accept officer authority and follow directions, facilities run more safely; when they are not, order becomes harder to maintain.

A long line of research points to procedural justice—the idea that people are more willing to accept authority when they are treated fairly, given a voice, and shown respect—as a key to cooperation. Studies in US and international prisons have found that fair treatment by staff is linked to fewer rule violations and stronger views of officers as legitimate. However, most of this work has focused on fairness and legitimacy alone and has paid less attention to how a person's own health and well-being shape their willingness to cooperate, even though poor physical and mental health are common in prison populations.

This study examines whether factors beyond fair treatment—including personal characteristics, wellness metrics, and conditions inside the facility—help explain incarcerated people's willingness to cooperate with officers.

How the Study Worked

The researchers surveyed 365 incarcerated people across five Minnesota prisons in the summer of 2024. The survey asked participants about their views of how officers treat them, how legitimate they see officer authority, their physical and mental wellness, their sense of safety, and their outlook on life. The main outcome was "willingness to cooperate," measured by how much incarcerated people agreed with statements about accepting officer decisions and following directions. Notably, this study captures what people said they were willing to do, not their observed behavior.

The researchers then used a statistical method that allows them to examine which factors are linked to willingness to cooperate while holding other factors constant so they could tell, for example, whether fair treatment still mattered after accounting for an incarcerated person's age, race, health, and unit conditions. They added groups of factors one at a time, ending with views of fair treatment and legitimacy, to examine how much each contributed to the picture.

What Was Learned

- **Fair treatment and legitimacy mattered most.** Views of how fairly officers act and how legitimate their authority is were the strongest factors linked to willingness to cooperate. These factors were more strongly linked to willingness to cooperate than any personal or facility characteristic.
- **Fairness works both directly and through legitimacy.** Fair treatment raised cooperation partly by making officers seem more legitimate, which accounted for about one third of fairness's effect. The rest of fairness's influence operated on its own.
- **A person's outlook on life stood out.** Incarcerated people with a stronger sense of purpose and hope for the future reported more willingness to cooperate, and this finding held even after accounting for fair treatment and legitimacy.
- **Some group and health differences appeared.** Black respondents and respondents of other races reported somewhat lower willingness to cooperate than white respondents, although the gaps were modest on the survey scale. Incarcerated people who rated their physical health higher tended to report slightly lower willingness to cooperate—a pattern the authors suggest may reflect feeling less dependent on officers for protection.

What This Means in Practice

The clearest takeaway is that how officers treat incarcerated people day to day is central to gaining their cooperation.

The researchers point to the core parts of procedural justice (giving people a voice, staying neutral, treating them with dignity and respect, and acting with trustworthy motives) as practices that build officer legitimacy and, in turn, cooperation. They recommend embedding these principles into everyday correctional practice.

One point the researchers emphasize is that officer legitimacy is earned, not automatic. Officers have authority on paper, but that authority only turns into cooperation when incarcerated people view it as fair and justified. Because people in prison interact with officers constantly, they judge officers less by their formal role than by how they behave day to day—whether they act with consistency, humanity, and respect. Small, routine interactions therefore carry real weight, and legitimacy is built up, or worn down, over time rather than established once.

At the same time, the researchers are clear that fair treatment alone is not enough. They recommend that facilities also support incarcerated people's physical and mental well-being, work to reduce violence, expand programming (such as work, education, family engagement, and treatment) that builds a sense of purpose and review policies and practices to identify and address racial disparities.

Source article

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