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Prison Conditions That Drive Contraband Drugs, Cellphones, and Weapons

Key Takeaways

- The conditions that predict the amount of contraband drugs, cellphones, and weapons in prisons are not the same, so prisons need different strategies to address each type of contraband.
- Prisons that offered substance use treatment had fewer recoveries of each type of contraband, and prisons with more female staff had fewer recoveries of drugs, weapons, and cellphones.
- Work-release and outside-work programs were linked to fewer weapons, and offering contact visits was not linked to more contraband of any type.

Why This Matters

Contraband—items that are banned or prohibited for residents, such as illicit drugs, cellphones, and homemade weapons—threatens the safety and security of prisons. Such items can fuel violence, illegal economies, and criminal activity both inside and outside the facility. Yet correctional leaders have had little solid data on what makes contraband more or less common in a given prison.

Earlier research showed that weapons, cellphones, and drugs together make up about 70 percent of all contraband found in prisons. One study counted 25,840 cellphones recovered across 20 states in a single year. Another study estimated that, over a year, contraband weapons were used in about 1 assault on staff and 5 assaults on other residents for every 1,000 people held.

Most of that earlier work looked at only one type of contraband or lumped all types together. This study is one of the first to examine, across many prisons, which facility and population characteristics are tied to each type of contraband.

How the Study Worked

The researchers used the National Survey of Correctional Contraband that gathered records from 301 prisons across six states, covering about 20 percent of US state prisons at the time. Each prison reported how many contraband items staff found during 2018, with counts reported separately by type, resulting in four outcomes: total contraband, drugs, weapons, and cellphones. For each prison, the team also recorded a wide range of facility and population features, such as security level, prison size and age, staffing levels, the share of staff who were female, and which programs the prison offered.

The researchers then compared contraband recovery rates across prisons with different features, adjusting for how many people each prison held (so larger prisons were not automatically counted as worse) and for differences among states. They ran this comparison separately for drugs, weapons, cellphones, and total contraband, allowing them to see whether the same features mattered for each type.

What Was Learned

- **Different types of contraband are linked to different prison conditions.** Some prison features predicted only one or two types of contraband. For example, older prisons had more cellphones, while larger prisons had more weapons—even after accounting for how many people they held.
- **Substance use treatment was the only factor tied to lower recoveries of every kind of contraband.** Prisons offering substance use treatment had about 30 percent fewer drug recoveries and lower weapon and cellphone recoveries.
- **Prisons with more female staff had less contraband.** Each one-point rise in the share of female staff was linked to about 2 percent fewer drugs, weapons, and cellphones, refuting the common concern that residents manipulate female staff into smuggling.
- **Work release and outside work programs were linked to fewer weapons.** Offering each type of program was associated with about a 50 percent reduction in the rate of weapons recoveries over the year. Offering contact visits, by contrast, showed no link to more contraband of any type.

What This Means in Practice

Correctional administrators have evidence-based levers—such as substance use treatment, staff diversification, and work programs—that they can act on to reduce specific types of contraband and make their facilities safer. The strongest lever is substance use treatment, which is tied to fewer recoveries of each type of contraband: drugs, weapons, and cellphones. The researchers also point to two further steps the data support: diversifying staff, because prisons with more females on staff had less contraband of all three types, and expanding outside-work and work-release programs, which were tied to about 50 percent fewer weapon recoveries. Because different features were linked to different types of contraband, the researchers stress that interdiction works best when it is matched to the specific type of contraband a facility is trying to stop rather than treated as one broad problem.

The researchers are clear that these findings show associations, not proof of cause and effect, because the data came from a single year rather than tracking prisons over time. They also caution that prisons with work release and outside work programs tend to hold lower risk residents, which may partly explain the lower weapon counts, and that the study counted only the contraband staff actually found—so the actual amount in any facility is likely higher, and prisons using more anticontraband strategies recovered more items partly because those efforts helped staff find more contraband. On the female staff finding, they note it is not yet clear why the association holds. Female staff may be more effective at managing incarcerated people, or they may be less likely to find and recover contraband, and more research is needed to know which explanation applies.

Source article

Peterson, B. E., Kim, K. D., & Shukla, R. (2024). The sociology of contraband: Examining the correlates of illicit drugs, cellphones, and weapons in U.S. prisons. *The Prison Journal*, 104(3), 365–389. https://doi.org/10.1177/00328855241240143

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