

# The Resolve to Stop the Violence Project: transforming an in-house culture of violence through a jail-based programme

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## Abstract

**Background** The usual modes of incarceration have not been found to curb violence significantly, even while in custody. A jail-based programme called the Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) was created with the hypothesis that immersing men with a history of serious, recent and often multiple violent crimes in an intensive, multi-modal in-house 'culture' would serve as a possible first step to preventing further violence.

**Methods** Two years of incident reports were reviewed for the programme dorm and a regular dorm, both typically serving an average of 56 male inmates of similar composition, for historic and between-dorm comparisons.

**Results** During the year before RSVP began, there were 24 violent incidents serious enough to have constituted felonies had they occurred in the community (roughly three per month) in the 62-bed dorm. During the first month RSVP was in effect there was one such incident; and for the following 12 months, there were none. During that same year, the control dorm that still followed traditional jail practices had 28 violent incidents.

**Conclusions** Correctional efforts may improve with the transformation of subcultures into therapeutic communities that facilitate the practice of prosocial skills over attitudes and mores that engender violence.

**Keywords:** jails, prisons, prison violence, violence prevention

The United States has undergone a dramatic transformation in the way it deals with crime (including violent crime) since the late 1970s. After maintaining a stable incarceration rate averaging 100 people per 100 000 population for 120 years,<sup>1</sup> rates have grown at an unprecedented pace to make the United States the leading incarcerator of the world, placing almost 700 people per 100 000 population, or over 2 million, behind bars.<sup>2</sup> This rate is six to 17 times that of other industrialized democracies and greater even than that of Russia, which incarcerated 644 per 100 000 in 2001.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the United States, with about a half million more prisoners than China, not only imprisons many more people than any other nation, but has about a quarter of all the world's prisoners behind its bars.<sup>4</sup> With this rate of expansion, consuming 167 billion and increasing dollars per year,<sup>5</sup> and incarcerating a majority of non-violent criminals, the prison

industry in the United States can be seen as creating a subculture that may have implications for society at large.

The effects of incarceration on violent behaviour have not been encouraging.<sup>6–10</sup> For more than a quarter of a century, until the late 1990s, despite the increasing incarceration rate year after year, the United States experienced an epidemic of criminal violence. During this entire time, the murder rate never dipped below the level of 8 per 100 000, a level twice as high as it had been during the previous quarter of a century. If the enormous expansion of punitive prisons actually prevented violence, this should not have happened. Rather, there is evidence that the more punitive the methods of crime control, the more violent the offenders become, as in the case of capital punishment, whose institution stimulated violence in ways that far outweighed whatever preventive effect there might have been of executing those who already committed murder. As imprisonment became so commonplace as to encompass almost 10 per cent of some ethnic groups, it came to be seen more as a 'rite of passage' than as a stigma in certain communities. In the states that instituted the taking of lives as a legitimate means of punishment, homicide rates skyrocketed, as if perpetrators were absorbing an ethos that condoned *their* 'capital punishments' as ways of obtaining *their* 'justice'. Overall, it has been observed that, unless mitigating factors are present, recidivism goes up, not down, with imprisonment.

There are a growing number of works that emphasize the cultural aspects of incarceration.<sup>11–13</sup> Being potent bundles of moral, cognitive, emotional, and social forces, cultures can exert their influences in surprising ways, and people are complicated enough to absorb the value systems that are fundamental and pervasive in shaping the basic assumptions of a subculture

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or institution in which they take part. Incomplete views of violence as a purely individual phenomenon have caused societal intervention to stop at the simple warehousing of offenders, and however ironic, society has chosen to reduce the criminality of an offender through an involuntary union with thousands of other criminals. The deprivation, social disruption, anonymity, and mutual distrust that have disenfranchised the individual from the wider cultural context and made its societal norms 'unviable' are intensified,<sup>14–18</sup> while one is schooled among a concentration of individuals who not only share similar mores and attitudes about violence but whose perpetration and provocation of it prevail within the correctional system. Apart from the negative effects of incarceration on prospects of job employment and social readjustment, resulting in low income, family disruption, and increased future risks of violence among progeny, there is an acculturation process that facilitates the acceptance of the horrid destructiveness of violence as a part of everyday life. This being so, are there ways of reversing this trend, or shaping it in the positive rather than in the negative?

## Setting

The San Francisco County Sheriff's Department's Resolve to Stop the Violence Project (RSVP) attempted to do this in part by transforming a jail culture. Established in September 1997 and originally located in San Bruno, California, the programme admitted a wide spectrum of violent offenders, from first-time or early offenders to repeat offenders of heinous crimes. Inmates with broadly defined violent charges such as assault, domestic violence, robbery, and rape are mandated to the programme by the San Francisco County Sheriff's Department, the courts, or the Adult Probation Department, or referred by jail classification officers or by themselves on a voluntary basis. Due to a long waiting list, however, not all those who are sentenced or referred get into the programme and may wait in other dorms. The RSVP dorm in San Bruno adjoins another dorm of similar layout and criteria for admission.

The goal of RSVP is to attempt to address areas where ordinary corrections have failed: (1) to use the jail to create an alternative environment that curbs rather than engenders violence; (2) to help prepare offenders for shaping productive lives for themselves in their communities while refraining from violence; and (3) to provide avenues for them to contribute to healing the harm they have caused while providing necessary emotional and practical support to their victims and to the general community. Among the many components, the so-called Offender Accountability portion occurs in-house, in a direct supervision, 62-bed dormitory for male prisoners. The length of the programme depends on the inmate's length of stay, but a consistent 'subculture' is created within the milieu by virtue of being an intensive, 12-hours-a-day, 6-days-a-week programme that teaches male-role reconstitution, accountability, empathy, alcohol and drug recovery, creative expression, and awareness of one's contribution to the community.

Understanding the importance of environmental immersion, careful measures are taken to provide structural elements that are favourable to a shift in subculture: (1) direct supervision; (2) consistent supervision; (3) a racial and ethnic composition of instructors that reflect the population; and (4) positive role modelling with sworn staff and service providers so as to maintain a coherent message. This is done with the recognition that the acculturation process is multi-modal, involving elements that are simultaneously taught at the conscious and didactic level, as others are absorbed more through the senses and the surroundings.

## Methods

### Sample

Data for this analysis was drawn from the records of the San Francisco Sheriff's Department, Police Department, and Court Systems as part of an ongoing assessment of RSVP. Chosen for this study were two open dormitories in one of the San Francisco County Jails, each with a capacity of 62 and housing men of similar characteristics (other than violence charges) as deemed by the classification unit. One of these units was the RSVP programme dorm, and the other dorm was designated as the control group. The lengths of stay for inmates in either dorm at the time of study varied widely (range 2–920 days), with a mean of 165 days.

Assignment of inmates to either dorm was initially considered to be random for the most part, apart from customary discretions by classification (e.g. separating rival gang members or vulnerable individuals, ethnically diversifying so as to prevent racial gang-ups, etc.), which could apply to either dorm. Since the institution of RSVP, a history of violence was intended as a criterion for assignment into the programme dorm, although a small number without a history of violence still came to be included. To ensure population equivalence, a random date approximately 1 year post-inception of RSVP was chosen for a descriptive analysis and cross-sectional analysis of inmate constitution. Specifically, inmates were compared by age, race, education, length of stay, current charges, probation status, medical status, substance dependence, seriousness of the crime, and level of required security (e.g., maximum, medium, or minimum), and other descriptors or categories. Anecdotal evidence supported the assumption that the tabulated inmate characteristics would be representative of the population over the study period.

### Sheriff's Department records

Incident reports over a 2-year period were reviewed, which included a 9-month period preceding the inception of the programme and a 15-month period post-inception. All significant incidents were thought to be recorded in a consistent manner for all dorms, given the frequent rotation of correctional staff. The Sheriff's Department cataloguing system was retained for categorization of events. The court computer system and

RSVP records were reviewed for a description of inmates present in cross-sectional time, noting demographic characteristics and classification based on past history and current offense.

### Statistical analyses

Initial analyses involved a descriptive study and tabulation (Table 1) of the demographic features of inmates. Independent *t*-tests, and  $\chi^2$  test for race, were performed and significance determined to confirm comparability of the two groups. A two-tailed *t*-test was performed to assess the difference in in-custody

overall and violent incident rates. All statistical analyses were performed with SPSS/PC version 10.0.

### Results

Table 1 provides a comparison between the programme and control groups on select demographic and criminal history measures. One hundred per cent of the inmates were male, and they were between the ages of 19 and 54, with a mean age of 30.4 years ( $SD=9.10$ ). They were 24.0 per cent Caucasian, 39.6 per cent Black, 24.0 per cent Hispanic, and 12.5 per cent Asian

**Table 1** Demographic and criminal characteristics of programme and control groups

Variable	Program ( <i>n</i> =52)		Control ( <i>n</i> =53)		Significance
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Age (years)	31.4	9.33	29.3	8.77	NS*
Race	Percentage		Percentage		Significance
Caucasian	23.1%		25.0%		NS
Black	40.4%		38.6%		NS
Hispanic	25.0%		22.7%		NS
Asian	11.5%		13.6%		NS
Secondary school test results	Percentage		Percentage		Significance
Pass	1.9%		6.8%		NS
Incomplete	3.8%		4.5%		NS
Length of stay (days)	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Significance
Range	166	124	162	145	NS
Type of crime	Percentage		Percentage		
Felony	90.4%		93.2%		NS
Misdemeanor	5.8%		4.5%		NS
Probation violation	26.9%		50.0%		NS
Classification code					
1–4 (more serious crime)	90.4%		93.2%		NS
5–9 (less serious crime)	9.6%		6.8%		NS
B (non-violent crime)	28.8%		84.1%		$T=-5.69$ ( $p<0.0005$ ) (as above)
V (violent crime)	53.8%		11.4%		
Security level					
Minimum	0%		0%		$T=-2.24$ ( $p<0.05$ ) (as above) (as above) (as above)
Medium	32.7%		47.7%		
Medium–high	15.4%		27.3%		
Maximum	50.0%		25.0%		
Prior history					
Crime against person	65.4%		11.4%		$T=-6.53$ ( $p<0.0005$ )
Felony conviction	51.9%		65.9%		NS
Prison sentencing	25.0%		15.9%		NS
Drug addiction	17.3%		27.3%		NS
Medical	3.8%		9.1%		NS
Psychiatric	0%		4.5%		NS
Number of arrests in past year	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Significance
Number of violent arrests in past year	1.55	1.14	1.98	1.75	NS
Number of violent arrests in past year	0.96	0.80	0.34	0.78	$T=3.82$ ( $p<0.0005$ )

\**t* or  $\chi^2$  test not significant, or  $p\geq 0.1$ .

or of other ethnic background. Inmates in either dorm had a history of significant involvement of the criminal justice system over the past year, with a mean of 1.75 (SD=1.46) overall arrests and 0.67 (SD=0.84) violent arrests. 8.3 per cent took tests to gain a secondary school diploma with a success rate of 50 per cent. Length of stay ranged from 2 to 920 days, with an average of 165 days (SD=133). Legal status data indicated that 91.7 per cent were in custody because of felony charges, 5.2 per cent because of misdemeanour, and 37.5 per cent had violated probation. 8.3 per cent were classified as having committed the most violent crimes, and 38.5 per cent required maximum security. 21.9 per cent exhibited signs or records of severe substance dependence, and 6.3 per cent were found to have a medical condition requiring segregation.

The groups were comparable across variables of gender, age, race and educational level. They were also similar in terms of types of crime (felony versus misdemeanour), lengths of stay, and seriousness of crime (scored in the range of 1–9, where lower scores indicate greater seriousness). Inmates in the programme group, however, were more likely to be given the categorization 'V (Violent)' than 'B (Non-violent)' compared to the control group. They had a significantly higher violent arrest rate in the prior year, although the control group had a slightly but not significantly greater rate of overall arrests. Inmates in the programme group were more likely to have been charged with a 'Crime against Person' in the past, although no other significant differences were detected in prior histories (including felony conviction, prison sentencing, drug addiction, and medical or psychiatric issues). Analyses proceeded despite these differences, for it was thought that positive results, if any, would only be strengthened by these clear tendencies for violence within the programme group.

A comparison of incident reports, as per the Sheriff's Department records, is summarized on a quarterly basis in Table 2 and illustrated in Figures 1 and 2. Before inception of

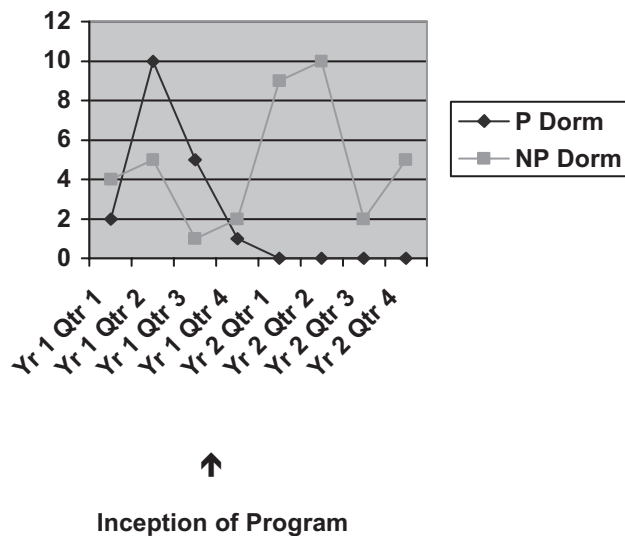
RSVP, the (pre-)programme and control dorms were comparable for both violent incident rates ( $T=0.89$ ;  $p=0.42$ ) and overall incident rates ( $T=0.69$ ;  $p=0.53$ ), with slightly higher violence and overall rates for the programme dorm. After inception of the programme, incidents in the programme dorm decreased to one violent episode in the first quarter and then none thereafter for a full year, decreasing by 96.5 per cent ( $T=3.17$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) in terms of violent incidents and 96.7 per cent in terms of overall incidents ( $T=2.97$ ;  $p<0.05$ ). Incidents in the control dorm, on the other hand, increased but not to a statistically significant degree: 68.0 per cent ( $T=-0.94$ ;  $p=0.39$ ) in terms of violent incidents and 75.0 per cent ( $T=-1.73$ ;  $p=0.14$ ) in terms of overall incidents. While the statistical insignificance may suggest that the increases are within normal variation, it might be notable that one year post-inception, the RSVP dorm still contained inmates with far more violent histories than the control dorm. Postulations from qualitative information can be made: inmates could have 'acted out' in the attempt to transfer into the RSVP dorm, for many such requests were made, despite RSVP not being a voluntary program; unpleasant dynamics could have resulted inadvertently from correctional officers' preference to work in the RSVP dorm, which was a far more popular assignment; or both inmates and officers could have felt comparatively 'neglected' in the traditional setting while an intensive, attention-gathering programme was in progress next door. The resulting comparison revealed that the programme dorm had a violent incident rate of 3.6 per cent of the control dorm ( $T=-3.17$ ;  $p<0.05$ ) and an overall incident rate of 2.9 per cent of the control dorm ( $T=-5.87$ ;  $p<0.0005$ ).

## Discussion

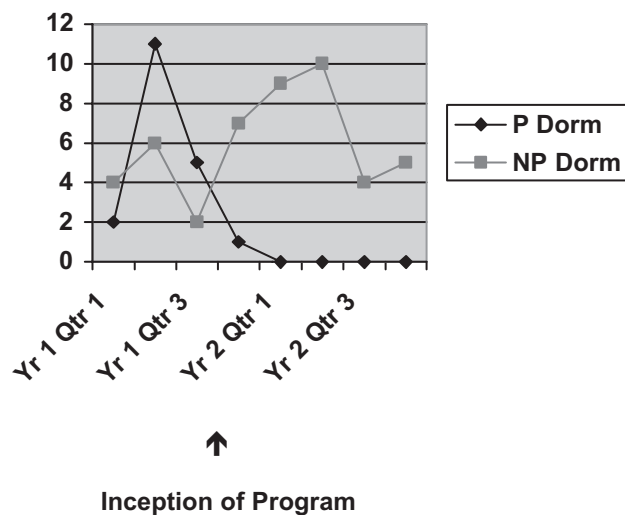
Difficulties in experimental designs are inherent in field research, especially when the ethical issue of denying qualifying

**Table 2** Violent and non-violent incident rates in programme and non-programme cell-blocks

Quarter	Incidents					
	P Dorm			NP Dorm		
	Number	V	NV	Number	V	NV
Y1Q1	2	2	0	4	4	0
Y1Q2	11	10	1	6	5	1
Y1Q3	5	5	0	2	1	1
Y1Q4 (Inception of program)	1	1	0	7	2	5
Y2Q1	0	0	0	9	9	0
Y2Q2	0	0	0	10	10	0
Y2Q3	0	0	0	4	2	2
Y2Q4	0	0	0	5	5	0
Incidents per year for P Dorm (before RSVP)	24.0					
Incidents per year for P Dorm (after RSVP)	0.8					
Incidents per year for NP Dorm (before RSVP)	16.0					
Incidents per year for NP Dorm (after RSVP)	28.0					



**Figure 1** Comparison of violent incident rates in programme and non-programme dorms.



**Figure 2** Comparison of all incident (both violent and non-violent) rates in programme and non-programme dorms.

individuals access to potential benefits of a programme arises. Additionally, there is the problem of random assignment within the correctional system, which has been abandoned early due to the numerous hurdles preventing placement as assigned: during the pilot phase, institutional protocols for reorganizing inmate assignments were found to be numerous and variable in source, as well as beyond the control of the study. Thus, ex-post facto, before-after design elements were combined with comparisons to an adjoining dormitory, where the housing of waiting-list candidates, separation of gang members and adversaries, and other unmethodical factors allowed for some random assignment. The effort to obtain a high degree of similarity between

the programme and control groups was thought to be successful, given the equivalence in age, race, educational level, lengths of stay, seriousness of crime, types of crime, and other factors that do not distinguish levels of violence. Inevitable were the greater number of inmates with violent proclivity in the programme group, given the contrasting nature of the programme (to use the dorm setting for admitting inmates with violent charges as an entry criterion) from the usual institutional practice of preventing in-house violence (by intermixing charges within a single dorm). Other limitations included the possibility of selection bias in the assignment of inmates to the programme dorm, although conflicts of interest were unlikely, as those running the programme had little influence over the assignments.

Then there is the general difficulty of addressing an issue such as jail culture through a quantitative study, which can only be done piecemeal and hypothetically. The hypothesis in this study, despite these limitations, was that the dormitory in which violence-prevention skills are taught through RSVP would create a cultural environment that would generate fewer violent incidents than the dormitory without such a programme, and this turned out to be the case. Notable is the fact that non-violent incidents, along with violent incidents, have also stopped completely after the first quarter-year of the programme. As RSVP intended to provide a comprehensive, major intervention, addressing violence as a matter not only of individual actions but of multiple factors including the surrounding environment, a shift in culture is thought to have occurred through the means of multiple modalities. In reality, jails and prisons already serve as concentrated microcosms of the larger society, and the usefulness of ethnographic methods in their study has been noted.<sup>19-23</sup> Thus, the controlled but open setting of a jail dormitory was seen as an environment in which a change in mores and values might be possible. Both violent and overall incidents declined permanently in the jail, whereas in the community, violent recidivism over the first year declined but overall recidivism did not,<sup>24</sup> possibly reflecting the return to an unchanged environment despite changes in the individual.

In ordinary jail and prison settings, the control that the guards have over inmate populations is overestimated.<sup>25</sup> Unable to depend on the sense of duty that facilitates most social organizations, acutely aware that brute force is inadequate, and lacking an effective system of legitimate rewards and punishments which might induce prisoners to conform to institutional regulations on the grounds of self-interest, the custodians of correctional settings constantly struggle to achieve even the semblance of dominance.<sup>11</sup> Understaffing, unconscionable overcrowding, the dismantling of educational and rehabilitative programmes, and prison social codes that encourage mean, predatory behaviour and exploitation of the vulnerable have contributed greatly to deviant behaviour and noncompliance. The result is that theft, fraud, sodomy, and murder run rampantly in jails and prisons, and the individual prisoner is acutely aware that sooner or later he will be 'tested' – i.e., someone will

push him to see how far they can go, and he must be prepared to fight for the safety of his person and his possessions. If he should fail, he will thereafter be an object of contempt, constantly in danger of being attacked by other inmates who view him as an obvious victim. And yet if he succeeds, he may well become a target for the prisoner who wishes to prove himself, who seeks to enhance his own prestige by defeating the man with a reputation for toughness. This is only one example of how incarceration might encourage a cycle of many forms of violence, abuse, and disruptive behaviours that render the correctional setting non-corrective.

The seeds of a change in this culture can be seen in some of the principles that characterize the in-house version of RSVP: (1) redefining the male-role image of superiority; (2) holding oneself accountable rather than minimizing or blaming; (3) offering peer-directed guidance and having avenues for promotion; (d) verbalizing rather than acting out; (e) expressing emotions as needs; and (f) offering intimacy rather than offence. An atmosphere is created in the process of learning how to give and receive feedback while acknowledging the self, others, and the issue between them while validating, softening, and taking the time to 'be in the moment' – i.e. allow for reflection and choice. Meanwhile, participation in 12 h per day of intensive programming is mandated and enforced, without opportunity for idleness, inmates' plotting to 'run the joint', and the coddling that is the norm in correctional settings. Spontaneously emerging from these activities is a pattern of beliefs, customs, and behaviours that are socially acquired and transmitted through symbols and shared meanings, providing a means of adaptation to the environment and to one another. It has been informally observed that, as a result of this collective proclivity, new inmates to the dormitory would quickly curb their display of violence, for rather than gaining respect or trepidation, they would protrude negatively 'like a sore thumb'. Finding violence to be not only an ineffectual but counterproductive means of gaining respect in this new culture, the inmates would quickly search for other means, which facilitated their compliance and adaptation. Perhaps then, RSVP was not only able to achieve one of the original goal of the penitentiary system, i.e. to remove an individual from 'corrupting influences,' but also to expose them to positive role modeling.

Despite the fact that many veteran correctional officers making dire predictions that a concentration of violent offenders in an open dormitory would result in mayhem, the creation of a non-violent culture within a dorm full of violent offenders has also had practical advantages. With improved working conditions, the dormitory became a popular assignment among the correctional officers, and medical and legal costs were reduced for both inmates and officers. As of 2000, inmate fights and injuries incurred an average cost of \$182 578 per year for the Sheriff's Department, including medical care for inmates and officers, officer replacement, and inmate claims or lawsuits. This translates into a savings of \$83 682 during the first year of inception of RSVP, or \$732 per inmate per 166-day average

stay. The RSVP in-house programme costs the Sheriff's Department slightly more than \$14 per participant-day; however, the reduction in medical costs saves the Sheriff's Department \$4 per inmate per day almost instantly. This is without counting the great savings from reductions in violent re-arrests or in days spent in incarceration after release.<sup>24</sup> These cost differentials provide some quantitative assessment of the programme's effectiveness, but they still do not fully reveal the constellation of improvements in quality of life or work atmosphere, as well as the underlying culture that results in low levels of fear and suspiciousness among inmates, so that they could advance to activities of greater safety and productivity.

## Conclusion

In the absence of concerted efforts to reduce violence through multi-dimensional, preventive approaches, the prevailing response in the United States has been to build more prisons and jails, and to sentence people to them more readily. However, efforts to expand the use of prisons and jails without making concomitant changes in the conditions in those facilities that encourage violence are inadequate. Rather than achieving desired results, the intimidating method of incarceration or punishment colludes with and reinforces the reasons for which the offender sees the world as a hostile environment in which he must develop his defenses through physical prowess and violence potential. To reverse these trends, we must first replace the 'monster factories' that many prisons and jails have become with therapeutic communities that enable people who are deeply damaged and damaging to recover, or gain for the first time, their humanity. On a larger scale, we as a society must mobilize our political will not only to support programmes that teach individuals to be non-violent, but to invest in the shaping of a culture that reduces shame through social and economic equality, thereby minimizing the desperate need to gain respect from others by means of violence, and to reduce violence where it begins.

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