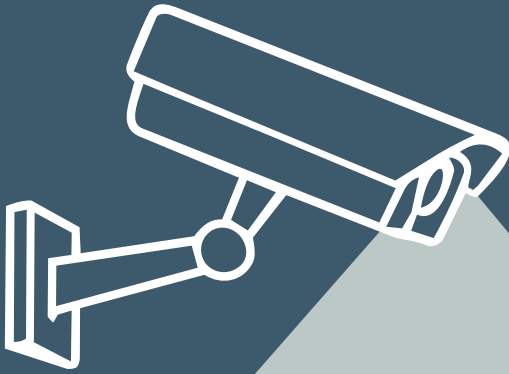




VIDEO-INFORMED VIOLENCE REDUCTION - Using Video Data to Enhance Prison Officer Training

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The last decade, and particularly the past five years, has seen worsening conditions in prisons with overcrowding, poor staff retention, and an increase in violence between prisoners as well as against staff (Scottish Government, 2024).

With the increased levels of violence in Scottish prisons there is a need for immediate intervention strategies that are easy to implement. Building on doctoral research into a video-informed approach by use of Visual Data Analysis (VDA) to understand prison violence, this brief presents a novel methodology with the potential to update and improve prison officer training to meet current needs.

The brief proposes a low-cost, evidence-based method for reducing violence in Scottish prisons by using existing video footage to strengthen prison officer training and post-incident learning.



KEY MESSAGES

- Violence is on the rise in Scottish prisons due to overcrowding, staffing shortage, and outdated architecture. Increased levels of violence negatively impact prisoner and staff safety and well-being, causing more tension and violence.
- The video-informed approach offers insight into interactions and behaviours that either escalate or de-escalate conflict and violence which is vital to understanding how violence happens as well as how it can be reduced.
- Amongst the key findings of the research is that officers who exhibit unwarranted behaviour, such as invading prisoners' personal space, using loud voices, and giving orders, escalate violence/conflict further. Equally, where officers show fear, e.g., struggling to move and speak confidently, prisoners are able to escalate conflict into violence.
- The video-informed approach is highly useful because it employs already existing video data, making it a prompt and cost-efficient solution to run alongside other initiatives.
- To test the potential of video-informed violence reduction and prevention, a trial period is needed in which officers co-view and discuss video data in focus groups, using the insights gained to develop strategies for managing violence.

KEY FINDINGS

The doctoral research drew on video data to analyse patterns of escalation and behaviours that aggravate conflict situations.

It then tested the analysis of the video data in focus groups consisting of previously imprisoned individuals and current prison officers who viewed the videos and discussed their interpretations. The data showed that:

- officers who exhibit fear or struggle to control their bodily behaviour during violent conflict with prisoners, e.g., fumble to open a door or stumble over their own feet, lose momentum which allows prisoners to take control and use violence against officers
- officers who display anger or aggression, e.g., shouting, giving orders, or invading prisoners' personal space, provoke a similar behaviour in prisoners that escalates conflict
- officers need to pay attention to which type of prisoner fight they are facing as different types have different implications for prisoners' perception of the intervention – and subsequently for how situations unfold;
 - fights between prisoners that happen in front of an audience (i.e., other prisoners) can be prolonged by cheering, orders to hit opponents, and by the energy of the crowd, which makes these fights more severe
 - where the mood among prisoners is high and where prisoners are set up to fight each other, violence may be more difficult to de-escalate and attempts at intervention may be met with aggression
- an analysis focusing on conciliation practices is crucial for the development of video-informed prison officer training
 - to aid violence reduction, it is key to teach best practice, including what de-escalation looks like and how to effectively communicate during violent incidents

Importantly, the research demonstrated the utility of video-based analysis for bridging theory and practice in future officer training.



CONTEXT: A CALL FOR ENHANCED TRAINING TO MANAGE PRISON VIOLENCE

The prison population is growing whilst prisons are continuously underfunded, understaffed, and outdated, thus without the necessary capacity for the growing prisoner count amongst whom an increasing number suffer from mental health conditions. The result of this is new levels of unrest, aggression, and violence within the prisons (Scottish Government, 2024).

Overcrowding has prompted a series of mitigating efforts or emergency measures, including early release programmes and a presumption against short sentences. Nonetheless, the population continues to grow and the current working conditions in prison have resulted in a significant rise in staff sick leave and difficulty retaining staff (POAS, 2025). Consequently, newer and less experienced officers are left to deliver core tasks, despite decades of prison literature showing that lack of experience is associated with higher levels of violence (Wilson and Brookes, 2021).

Due to staff shortages, many officers who are new to the job are, due to their inexperience, often left in vulnerable situations (POAS, 2025); new officers have not been acquainted with real-life situations during their training and are thrown into prison reality, once they start work. As such, there is a need for training elements that provide insight into real-life situations of conflict and violence,

including strategies for intervention into violent incidents and control and restraint (C&R) practices. At present, foundation training is 6 weeks for prison officers in Scotland – significantly shorter compared to e.g., Norway, where basic prison officer training is 2 years and covers education and practice (Carrie, 2023), or Denmark, where training is 3 years (Damsa, 2021) – and according to the Prison Officers' Association in Scotland, this level of training is far from adequate and in need of an update which should include those with frontline experience to play a role in the training of new recruits (POAS, 2025). The following proposition responds to exactly that call.

PROPOSED SOLUTION: VDA – A VIDEO-INFORMED APPROACH TO VIOLENCE REDUCTION

VDA makes it possible to study the micro-dynamics of physical violence by using video-footage (Nassauer and Legewie, 2021). In the prison setting, this method can be used to examine interactions and displays of emotion by observing the effects of body postures, gestures, and facial expressions of prisoners and prison officers during violent or potentially violent episodes. CCTV and body worn camera (BWC) footage of violent incidents allow for insights which can aid the understanding of how conflict or actual violence escalates and how it can be defused.

A video-informed approach allows for prison officers' experience to inform best practice training through focus groups with a co-viewing element. Co-viewing, in this context, involves officers viewing video clips of violent and escalating conflict situations that have already been analysed by the researcher using the VDA-framework. The officers' discussions serve to confirm or adjust the researcher's interpretations of dynamics observed as well as to shape and inform suggestions for implementing enhanced practices into actual training material.

WHAT MAKES VIDEO DATA USEFUL

- ✓ It shows escalatory dynamics, illuminating behaviours that escalate conflict and violence
- ✓ It shows incidents that were managed well to define useful/good practices in dealing with violence
- ✓ It shows what theoretical concepts and techniques look like in real-life violent incidents
- ✓ It can be used in combination with co-viewing methods to elicit useful discussions of how to manage violent incidents
- ✓ It can be used to map patterns of violent interaction in specific types of situations/places, e.g., prisoner-on-officer attacks/corridors
- ✓ It can be collected over the span of a few weeks

Video analysis of violent incidents in prison is of great value to the development of strategies for minimising violence as it uses data from the exact settings of the environment where training will be applied. Apart from being useful in prisons for debriefing purposes and for officer evaluation of incidents, it would enhance officer training by bringing a real-life aspect into the training and into one of the most important parts of the curriculum, namely that of violence intervention and prevention.

Finally, use of video footage allows for tailoring interventions to setting-specific routines and risks and may therefore be beneficial across settings with heightened exposure to violence.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Long-term solutions (e.g., updated infrastructure and changes to sentencing) to the violence crisis in Scottish prisons require long-term efforts. While this work is imperative, alternative intervention strategies merit consideration.

A video-informed approach is one such supplementary method which can work to reduce violence. As the only thing required is access to the video data, using video material to develop training elements is a time- and cost-efficient approach which avoids the usual resource requirements associated with traditional methods such as interviews and surveys.

Video-informed insights can be implemented into officer training via focus groups with experienced officers and training staff viewing and reviewing footage to build a foundation of clips that highlight essential real-life situations and practice, showing which behaviours lead to escalation and which lead to conciliation. Teaching best practice for reducing in-the-moment violence can be effectuated through workshops for trainees in which footage is co-viewed and discussed.

The key recommendation of this policy brief is the implementation of a video-informed violence management element into the existing curriculum for prison officer training, and to do so;

- 1. video-informed violence prevention training should be developed through co-viewing with experienced prison officers to inform best practice**
- 2. a pilot project using data from CCTV from relevant institutions combined with co-viewing focus groups with officers should be implemented along with an evaluation of implemented practices to build a foundation for further training**
- 3. a video-informed framework should be used in foundation training to prepare new officers for what real-life violence and intervention look like**
- 4. existing debriefing practices involving video-viewing with prison staff after violent incidents should be supplemented by a clear video-informed and co-viewing framework**

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