

Prison Escapes

On any given day in the United States, there are more than 2.2 million adult offenders incarcerated in prison. One of the major responsibilities of prison administrators is to prevent these inmates from escaping from custodial supervision. Correctional policies often consider escape risk to be an important consideration during the inmate classification process. Criminal statutes also provide additional prison terms to those individuals who are convicted of escaping or attempting to escape from custody. Escapes are a popular topic in the media, likely because they invoke fear and intrigue among members of the public. A prison escape can be as simple as walking away from a minimum security institution or as complex as breaking out of a maximum security facility. Escapes can also include failing to return from an authorized release or fleeing during a transport.

Research shows that escapees and non-escapees differ on a number of demographic and criminal history variables. For example, escapees are more likely to be younger and have convictions for property, rather than violent, offenses than non-escapees. When considering race and gender, escapees are more likely to be white and male than non-escapees. Escapees also tend to have more extensive criminal records, past incarcerations, parole violations, institutional violations, and prior escapes compared to non-escapees. Escaping is also linked to several situational variables, including family problems, not receiving mail or visits from family members, being placed in facilities that are a great distance from home, and feeling threatened by correctional officers or other inmates.

There are also facility-level characteristics which make some prisons more susceptible to escapes than others. For example, inmates are more likely to escape from minimum security institutions than maximum security facilities. Escapes are also more likely to occur from older facilities rather than newer institutions. Other aggregate-level correlates of escape include younger overall age of prison population, lower rate of treatment staff to inmates, less supervision of inmates, and fewer resources provided to inmates. There is also some evidence to suggest that inmates may be more likely to escape from prisons that are not accredited by the American Correctional Association (ACA) than those that are accredited by the ACA. Finally, crowded living conditions in prison may also contribute to increases in escapes.

Escapes appear to be driven by both motivation and opportunity. There are several circumstances that could potentially lead an inmate to attempt an escape. Although media accounts of these incidents often depict escapes as complex and sensational acts, many escapes involve little or no planning at all. For example, the most common types of escape involve an inmate simply walking away from a non-secure area and failing to return as instructed from an authorized leave of absence. Time is also an important factor in prison escapes. Research shows that escapes are most likely to occur during the warmer months of the year and on the weekends. Furthermore, escapes are most likely to occur in the early morning or late evening hours of the day when there is less supervision and oversight.

Far fewer escapes actually involve breaking out of a secure area. Secure areas include some type of physical barrier that the inmate must overcome to escape, such as a fence, gate, wall, or locked door. In order to escape from these more secure settings, inmates must cut

through, climb over, tunnel under, or otherwise overcome the physical obstacles. Seldom do escapees use force against correctional staff or other inmates in the commission of an escape. In rare situations, escape attempts involve the assistance of an individual from within or outside the prison walls such as a family member, friend, or staff member. On rare occasions, an escapee may impersonate a correctional officer or hide in a vehicle during an escape.

There is no doubt that escapees pose a potential threat to communities and its members. It is important to note; however, that escapes are a fairly low occurring event in the United States. For example, there were only 611 inmates who were involved in 503 documented escape incidents in 2009. Even when inmates are successful in escaping, justice authorities are often able to recapture and return these individuals to custody within a year of the escape. A common misconception regarding prison escapes is that escapees universally go on to commit heinous criminal acts once in the community. Although some escapees do engage in such criminal behaviors and efforts should certainly be taken to reduce the probability of these events from occurring, the typical escapee infrequently commits any serious or violent offenses while on the run.

One way for prison officials to reduce escapes is to target both inmate opportunities and motivations for escaping. This strategy for better controlling escapes should include improving offender classification protocols, increasing security measures for higher risk inmates, and ensuring proper inmate observation and accountability. This strategy should also include offering more counseling and treatment services to inmates, allowing and even promoting visits with family and friends (both in the prison and in the community), and protecting inmates when they feel their safety is in jeopardy.

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See also misconduct by prisoners; prison riots; treatment in prisons

Further reading

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