

**A Look Behind Bars:
A Case-Study of Baldwin State Prison**

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**Honors 493: Honors Program Independent Study Project
Birmingham-Southern College**

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Conducted Fall 2006 – Spring 2007

An Introductory Presentation of the Intended Final Project

Presented at the Southern Regional Honors Council 35th Annual Conference

Charlotte Center City Hilton Hotel, Charlotte, NC—29 March 2007

(Final project to be presented to the BSC Honors Program Committee April 2007)

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Prison inmates are human beings within a unique and vulnerable population that is well worth our time and study. A person's experiences behind bars will undoubtedly affect that person for the rest of his or her life, and according to Lerner's 1985 study and the 2004 research of Stanko, Gillespie, and Crews, over ninety percent of all current inmates will eventually walk the streets once more. In 1999, Matthews reported the American prison population at a size of over 1.6 million. He also reported that the population had tripled in size during the previous fifteen years. It has been eight years since that study and the growth has continued.

It is all too easy to think of the prison population as one that will forever be separate from the rest of society, but eventually, these people will once again join the rest of the world. During their time in prison, however, this population lives a life completely different from our own. Hayner and Akers, Man and Cronan, Matthews, and Stanko all conducted thorough studies confirming the existence of this subculture in 1978, 2001, 1999, and 2004, respectively. Prison inmates maintain a subculture of social norms and value systems unique to the prison population in reaction to the deprivations of prison life.

A thorough and current knowledge of the prison subculture is valuable in that it is the study of a unique subset of humanity and that it increases our knowledge of people's life-altering experiences behind bars, experiences that will continue to affect them even after their release, and thus affect the rest of society as well.

I began this study with the belief that drug use was prevalent within prison and formed a significant part of the inmate subculture along with receiving attention, either negative or positive, from members of the prison staff. In order to test this hypothesis and study the prison

subculture and its norms, I plan to spend a day visiting and observing life at Baldwin State Prison as well as administering questionnaires to prison inmates and members of the prison staff.

Baldwin State Prison is located in Hardwick, Georgia, just outside of Milledgeville. It is a medium-security prison, currently holding seven hundred and forty-two inmates, and these inmates are divided into three groups: diagnostics or recently arrived inmates, the permanent or general population, and the mental health population. Inmates lacking experience within prison or inmates with severe mental disorders might skew the trend in responses, so the focus of this study will be the general population.

The first page of your handout is an exact duplicate of the questionnaire that will be given to the inmates participating in the study. As you can see, inmates will be asked to report simple demographic information along with their current conviction and prison sentence as well as any previous convictions and prison sentences. They will also be asked to respond to twenty-two statements, labeling their agreement, indifference, or disagreement with each statement. On the second page of the handout, you can see that members of the prison staff will be asked to report the same demographic information: age, race, and social class as well as their current job title and duties. Staff members will then be given the exact same twenty-two statements as the inmate sample. Finally, all participants will be given a second sheet of paper which has six open-ended questions.

From the pool of inmate volunteers, Baldwin's Chief Counselor will select a suitable number of appropriate participants. All inmate participants will have to be members of the general population in order to avoid possibly skewed answers. For my own safety, no inmate with recent disciplinary referrals will be allowed to participate. I will ask these inmates to complete both the questionnaire and the page of open-ended questions, and I hope that this group

will form a diverse group according to age, race, experience in prison, and criminal history. Furthermore, I hope that my inmate sample, according to their self-reported demographics, will match up well with the demographics of the entire inmate population at Baldwin (<http://www.dcor.state.ga.us/GDC/OffenderStatistics/jsp/OffStatsSelect.jsp>) and indicate that my inmate sample is a fairly representative sample of Baldwin's total general inmate population.

I will require quite a variety among the staff participants as well, and I will ask all members of the staff sample to complete both the questionnaire and the page of open-ended questions. As part of my staff sample, I hope to include the warden, any educational specialists at the prison, and any of the inmate counselors. However, my primary target for the staff sample will be correctional officers. Although the officers will probably form a large majority of my sample of staff members, I am highly interested in their responses to my questions since the guards deal with the inmates on the most intimate level day in and day out. I hope to get a large proportion of total employees as well as a variety of position, age, and race within my sample, which would ensure that my sample of the staff members is representative of the total staff at Baldwin State Prison.

I believe that participants will list drugs as one of the leading causes for the crimes of Baldwin's inmates since drug use seems to lead to a criminal lifestyle and a total loss of control, physically, emotionally, mentally, and financially. Furthermore, I believe that illegal drugs are relatively accessible within the prison and that the use of illegal drugs will be widespread, forming a vital part of the inmate subculture. I believe that inmates rely on illegal drugs as a way to achieve a kind of psychological escape from prison or to defy the institution's control over them and their actions. Extensive research has supported this aspect of my hypothesis, including that of Matthews in 1999.

Furthermore, my entire study is based upon the assumption that life within a prison is completely different from that outside a prison. In order to test this basic assumption, as you can see on the handout, I have two questions on the questionnaire that ask for the participant's opinion on the similarity or difference between life inside and outside a prison. These two questions basically ask for the same information, but they do so in opposite terms. The purpose of these questions is also to act as a kind of test of the validity of an individual participant's answers. Since these two statements are worded in opposite terms but ask for the same information, it can be expected that an individual participant's response to these two questions should be exact opposites. Across a sample, the total responses to these two questions should be inverse version of each other. If this is the case, then I can feel assured that participants are not answering randomly but are actually engaging with the questionnaire and answering according to their true opinions.

I will also be curious to find out the type of relationships that inmates and staff members report with the staff and with the inmate population and whether or not participants generally feel safe at the institution. A vital part of this study, especially concerning relations between inmates and staff members, will be whether or not inmates share their true attitudes and opinions with the staff.

This leads to another aspect of my hypothesis, that among the list of things valued by inmates, one of the most important is drug use, and another is receiving attention—either positive *or* negative—from members of the prison staff. During preliminary discussions with various staff members as I have worked to get access to complete my study at Baldwin State, one counselor remarked that, unlike most work environments, Fridays are always the worst days at the prison and Mondays are always the best. During the weekends, most counselors and

administrators are gone, and inmates know this. Thus, they never look forward to the weekends since they will have less time with the staff members, less attention, fewer distractions. On Fridays, they are in a bad mood and always strive to get the last bit of attention before the weekend: “They always ask me if I’ll be here tomorrow [Saturday], and I always tell them, ‘No, I never work Saturdays,’ and they always get pissed off about that.” On Mondays, apparently, the inmates are overjoyed to see the regular staff members return and are much more agreeable.

The list of other possibilities for things strongly valued by inmates includes visitations from friends and family, exercise time, free time or alone time, personal possession, phone calls or mail, personal pride or respect, educational opportunities, and church. However, I believe that drug use and attention from staff members will be the two most important to the inmate population.

As a slight tangent to this study, I will question inmates and staff members concerning the congruency between their own value systems or moral standards and those of the outside world, the prison staff as a whole, and the inmate population as a whole. This can be valuable information and is one of the major issues that originally inspired my study in September of last year. According to Benaquisto and Freed’s 1996 research, *individual* inmates do not always subscribe to the prison subculture even though such a subculture does generally exist, and such inmates might subscribe to it within a *group dynamic*. Thus, individual inmates might be likely to not identify their own morals with that of the inmate population but will probably identify most strongly with the outside world, despite the fact that an obvious incongruence exists.

Some of the most interesting responses, however, will probably come in the form of answer to the open-ended questions on the second page of your handout. I will ask inmates to describe life in prison, specifically referring to interesting differences or similarities between life

inside and outside of prison. Furthermore, I will ask them to describe some routines, cliques, or philosophies that exist inside the prison and not outside. Such cliques and routines will be evidence of the unique prison subculture itself.

Stanko's research in 2004 suggests that prison experiences can distort or even eradicate one's individual identity as a result from the total control the institution has over one's daily activities and decision, and I feel that as part of this loss of individual identity, inmates may be forced to adopt new roles as part of a clique in order to survive or maintain some sense of self or self-worth. The formation of cliques or sociological niches is inevitable within almost any human population. People flock together, forming groups based on almost any commonality. The one thing that all inmates have in common is that they are presumably guilty of a crime. It is possible that the negative aspects of society are simply more concentrated within a prison and because of the numerous limitations imposed upon the inmate population, such characteristics become further intensified.

I would guess that cliques, friendships, and alliances within prison tend to form based upon the following list of commonalities: race, religion, socio-economic background, particular tastes or common interests, place of origin, strong versus weak, sexual orientation, intellectual functioning, and criminal history. The 2001 research of Man and Cronan determined that race was usually the most significant determinant in forming a clique and especially in forming a prison gang, and racial identity reportedly overcame other major differences during a gang's formation.

The distinction between the strong and the weak, however, might also be a significant one in the formation of cliques and the distinction between the victims and the victimizers. According to Abbott, Man and Cronan, and Samenow in their studies during 1985, 2001, and

1985 respectively, any inmate who displays a weakness will be seen as an easy target for rape, theft, or bullying. The lack of sufficiently aggressive or manly behavior is often seen as this kind of weakness, and even the inmates who victimize others are struggling to disprove their own weaknesses and avoid being victimized themselves, causing a cycle of violent behavior within the prison.

Despite the old adage, “There is no honor among thieves,” these groups maintain a serious sense of proper behavior according to their own codes. Stanko noted the resentment for “snitches” as well as a few other significant values in his 2004 research: “In particular, the inmate code revolves around the maxim ‘Never rat on a con.’ Other important tenets are ‘Be tough’ as well as ‘Have a connection.’ The values that underlie the inmate code involved violence, strength, and sexual proclivity” (p. 66).

For an outsider, the intensification of seemingly trivial items is a concept that is hard to comprehend, but in a world where no one has anything, the smallest item becomes as valuable as gold. Stanko’s 2004 study vividly put prison life into perspective for any outsider: “Over the years, I had seen men beaten, almost to death, over a piece of chicken or a pack of cigarettes” (p. 146).

I will also be interested in studying the views of inmates toward staff members and society in general. Again, during my conversations with prison personnel as I have explained my study and worked to get access to Baldwin, one counselor shared an interesting observation with me, noting that many inmates feel that they are no different from the rest of society, that *everyone* breaks the law. These inmates see themselves as the unfortunate few who were caught and see the rest of society as hypocrites.

I have created a formal project proposal which has been officially approved by the Honors Project Committee of Birmingham-Southern College as well as by my project sponsor, Doctor Guy Dalto, a professor of sociology at BSC. My study has also been approved by the BSC Institutional Review Board in order to assure that my methods are both objectively scientific and humane toward my subjects. I have received verbal approval from the warden of Baldwin State Prison, Vanessa O'Donnell, and I have sent my formal proposal to the Georgia Department of Corrections' Legal Office for final approval. I have been forced to revise minor aspects of my study several times, but once the Legal Office for the GDC approve me, I will visit Baldwin State Prison to conduct this study, compile my data, and present my findings at Honors Day on Thursday April 26, 2007 at Birmingham-Southern College as part of my final grade for the Honors Program Independent Study Project. I hope to receive both inmate and staff samples that are representative of the total inmate and total staff populations at Baldwin State Prison, and I think that their responses will confirm the assumption that the world within a prison is completely different from the world outside. Furthermore, I believe that their responses will support my belief that illegal drug use is prevalent within this prison as a major value among inmates. Also, I think that the responses will confirm that inmates strongly value receiving interaction or attention from the prison staff along with the use of drugs.

This study will focus on a male inmate population at a state prison. I will exclude female and co-ed prisons as well as juvenile facilities, privately-operated prisons, federal penitentiaries, and local jails. However, according to the 2006 statistics bulletin by Harrison and Beck at the Department of Justice, the male inmate population makes up ninety-three percent of the inmate population across the country, and the inmates at state prisons form fifty-seven percent of the

national inmate population. While other inmate populations are certainly worthy of study, the study of male inmates at state prisons includes a massive majority of all inmates in this country.

There is a slight possibility that many of the basic demographics of my sample will match not only the demographics of this individual prison, but with all of the state prisons in Georgia as well as the total inmate population among state prisons across the country. If this is the case, I still would not be able to claim that this study was representative of those larger populations, but it would be worth noting since some parallels surely exist.

Life within prison is based on structure and routine. Inmates have almost no control over their daily activities. They exist within a world of limits we can hardly imagine, where similarities and differences are intensified, causing the creation of cliques and social norms that would not exist in the same way on the outside. It is undeniable that an inmate's life is completely different than our daily lives on the outside, but I hope that today, I have helped us better understand this unique subculture, and soon, I will be visiting Baldwin State Prison to test my beliefs. I guarantee you that it will be a once-in-a-lifetime learning experience.

Thank you.

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