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## **ABSTRACT**

**BEVERLY REECE CRANK**

Adapting to Incarceration: Inmate Perceptions of Prison Life and Adjustment  
(Under the direction of TIMOTHY BREZINA)

Despite the importance of offenders' perspectives of the criminal justice system, inmates' perceptions of prison life remain largely unexplored in correctional research. In the current study, data were analyzed from a survey of approximately 700 incarcerated felons, focusing on their perceptions regarding the perceived difficulty or severity of prison. The correlates of these perceptions were examined, as well as the impact of such perceptions on inmates' intentions to avoid crime after release. The findings suggest that, while most inmates perceive prison life as difficult, a sizeable proportion of inmates do not find prison time to be overly difficult or severe. Further, inmates who do not view prison as difficult are less likely to report intentions to avoid crime after release. Implications for deterrence theory and future research are discussed.

**INDEX WORDS:** inmate perceptions, prison difficulty, intentions, deterrence

ADAPTING TO INCACERATION:  
INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF PRISON LIFE AND ADJUSTMENT

by

BEVERLY REECE CRANK  
B.S., KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY

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2010

ADAPTING TO INCACERATION:  
INMATE PERCEPTIONS OF PRISON LIFE AND ADJUSTMENT

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BEVERLY REECE CRANK

Approved:

Dr. Timothy Brezina  
Committee Chair

Dr. Sue Carter Collins  
Committee Member

Dr. Mark Reed  
Committee Member

April 29, 2010  
Date

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Student's Name: Beverly Reece Crank

Street Address: 690 Mayes Road

City, State, and Zip Code: Powder Springs, GA, 30127

The Chair of the committee for this thesis is:

Professor's Name: Dr. Timothy Brezina

Department: Department of Criminal Justice

College: College of Health and Human Services

Georgia State University  
P.O. Box 4018  
Atlanta, Georgia 30302-4018

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## Chapter I - Introduction

The United States has experienced unprecedented growth in the prison population since the early 1970s. Prior to the expansion of prison systems, the rate of imprisonment in the United States remained steady at approximately 110 inmates per 100,000 residents (Petersilia, 2003). However, starting in 1973, the rate of imprisonment began to rapidly increase and by 2008, there were approximately 754 inmates per 100,000 United States residents (Sabol, West, & Cooper, 2009). Recent estimates find that federal and state correctional institutions had jurisdiction over a total of 1,610,446 inmates in 2008 and over 95% of these inmates were sentenced to prison for longer than one year (Sabol et al., 2009). This rapid increase in the prison population has resulted in the United States having the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world compared to any other industrialized democracy (Petersilia, 2003).

This substantial increase in the number of inmates in the United States is largely attributed to the escalating crime rates from 1965 to 1975. In response to this crime increase, many policymakers and public officials demanded “get tough” policies involving mandatory minimum sentences and lengthy determinate sentences. Soon thereafter, incarceration became a dominant crime control strategy, fueled by the public’s desire to punish offenders more severely and deter them from future criminal acts.

Despite rising incarceration rates, some evidence suggests that popular assumptions regarding punishment and deterrence may not be entirely accurate. For example, when examining recidivism rates, it appears that incarceration has a limited deterrent effect. The United States Department of Justice calculates the recidivism rates

of inmates released from prison and reports that 67.5% of the inmates released in 1994 were rearrested within three years (Hughes & Wilson, 2002). Further, it was determined that 51.8% of released inmates returned to prison within three years due to a new criminal conviction or technical parole violation (Hughes & Wilson, 2002). This problem of reoffending suggests that incarceration may not be a sufficient deterrent for some offenders.

The “pains” of imprisonment are many and have been well documented, including loss of freedom, the challenge of dealing with other inmates, the threat of violent victimization, limited contact with family and friends, and so forth (Fleisher 1995; Santos 2003, 2006). Nevertheless, certain data indicate that the experience of incarceration is not perceived as a particularly harsh form of punishment by some offenders. In one study of persistent offenders using narrative data, Laub and Sampson (2003) found that some long-term inmates actually perceive life in prison as being easier than life on the street. Akerstrom (1985) reported similar findings in her qualitative study of 150 male prison inmates, as many of the respondents in the study reported that the idea of living a conventional life was “more terrifying than doing time” (p. 23). Therefore, it can be inferred from these qualitative studies that, for some inmates, incarceration does not serve as a meaningful deterrent.

In addition to these findings, quantitative studies further support the idea that prison does not have a consistent deterrent effect. For example, May, Wood, and Eades (2008) found that offenders with prior prison experience are more likely to prefer prison as a means of punishment than alternative sanctions. Further, it was determined that experienced prison inmates rank boot camp and jail as more punitive punishments than

prison (May et al., 2008). In sum, both qualitative and quantitative findings indicate that, for some offenders, prison is not a particularly effective deterrent.

As a number of recent studies have shown, a disjunction exists between offender perceptions and public perceptions of the severity of sanctions (May, Wood, & Eades, 2008). Contrary to expectations, offenders do not necessarily perceive prison as the most punitive sanction; rather, compared to members of the general public, they may perceive prison as less of a deprivation (May, Wood, & Eades, 2008; Petersilia, 1990). Petersilia (1990) argues that these findings could be attributed to the fact that offenders typically do not abide by the same conventional norms and standards as the public, which is indicated in offenders' deviant and criminal behavior. Also, offenders typically do not have the same standard of living as middle-class individuals, as offenders are frequently of a lower socioeconomic status. Therefore, it is necessary to take into account offenders' perceptions when assessing the deterrent effect or potential of various sanctions. As evidenced in Jack Gibbs' (1975) statement: "No legal action can deter if it is not perceived as punitive by those who are subject to it, and whether or not sanctions deter depends in part on the extent to which they are perceived as severe" (p. 119). Further, relying solely on official or popular assumptions about the deterrent effect of imprisonment may lead to misguided policies (Wood & Grasmick, 1999). Therefore, the deterrent effect that prison may or may not hold for inmates, as well as inmates' perceptions regarding the difficulty of prison life, warrants further investigation.

### *Purpose of the Study*

Despite the importance of offenders' perspectives of the criminal justice system, there has been very little research to date on offenders' perceptions of prison life, including the perceived severity or difficulty of incarceration and how such perceptions affect offenders' desires to commit crime in the future. Moreover, virtually all of the latter research on inmate perceptions and the criminal subculture has been qualitative in nature and based on fairly small samples of inmates (or former inmates). In the current study, data will be analyzed from a large survey of incarcerated felons, with a special focus on their perceptions regarding the perceived severity or difficulty of prison life. The correlates of these perceptions (e.g., age, previous time served, and the degree of commitment to the criminal subculture) will be examined, as well as the impact of such perceptions on inmates' future intentions to avoid crime.

If the results of the quantitative analyses from this study are consistent with previous observations, this fact will increase confidence in the results of earlier qualitative studies and lead to a better understanding of the relationship between inmate perceptions, the experience of incarceration, and future intentions to avoid crime. Also, if the results of this study confirm previous findings and show that prison is not always viewed as a meaningful sanction, then this fact could help us to better understand the reasons behind the high recidivism rates that currently plague our correctional system. Finally, this study may help us to identify the individual characteristics that shape inmates' experience of incarceration, and how these experiences may increase or decrease the deterrent potential of a prison term.

## Chapter II – Literature Review

### *Deterrence Theory and Incarceration Effects*

Classical deterrence theory as developed by Beccaria (1764/1963) and Bentham (1789/1948) asserts that individuals commit criminal acts when the benefits of the acts outweigh the potential costs or consequences of offending. According to deterrence theory, increasing the certainty, severity, and celerity of punishments increases the potential costs of criminal activities and, thus, discourages criminal offending. In order for a particular deterrent to be effective, deterrence theory suggests that the punishment must be punitive. Policymakers and the general public typically view prison as the most punitive punishment (with the exception of capital punishment) and reserve this sanction for only the most serious offenders. However, as suggested by Pogarsky (2002), a disjunction exists between theory and evidence and classical deterrence theory has evolved minimally beyond its original development.

Theoretically, deterrence models assume the idea of rational choice. The individual is viewed as a rational calculator with the goal of maximizing personal gain. This is accomplished through weighing the costs and rewards of certain behaviors. The basic assumptions of deterrence theory and rational calculation suggests that those currently incarcerated will be less likely to reoffend and less likely to prefer prison over other punishments due to its deterrent effect. Contrary to this belief, researchers have determined that offenders often prefer prison over other sanctions due to a number of reasons. The most cited reason identified by researchers is that participating in alternative sanctions “is only prolonging the inevitability of recidivism and incarceration”



(Flory, May, Minor, & Wood, 2006, p. 46) and many offenders often note that they would rather go to prison immediately than return to prison due to technical violations.

As evidence for the preference of prison sentences in comparison to alternative sanctions, Crouch (1993) determined that a majority of inmates preferred prison over probation with the belief that probation was actually a stricter sanction. It was also determined that minorities and older inmates were more likely to prefer prison, while the few inmates who were married were more likely to prefer probation (Crouch, 1993). In further studies regarding the perceived severity of sanctions, the majority of offenders do not view prison as the most punitive sanction in comparison to other alternative sanctions (May, Wood, Mooney, & Minor, 2005; Wood & Grasmick, 1999). In addition, offenders who are male, regardless of race and prior prison experience, all ranked incarceration in jail as the most punitive sanction (May et al., 2005; Wood & Grasmick, 1999; Wood & May, 2003). These additional findings highlight the disjunction that exists between popular belief and evidence, as policymakers and the general public typically assume that prison is viewed by offenders as the most punitive sanction.

Qualitative evidence also has been examined in regards to inmate perceptions of prison in relation to jail. The perception that prison is not as difficult as jail is seen in the following offender statements:

‘Cause in prison, you know, you can probably go outside, you can play basketball, lift weights, smoke cigarettes, whatever. In jail you can’t do none of that (Respondent 3). Prison time would be more easy, because once you get inside, you can work, there’s a lot of activities; plus you can walk around

(Respondent 12). 'Cause prison's just right out easier, you can lay back and you ain't gotta do nothing (Respondent 35). (Williams, May, & Wood, 2008, p. 83)

These statements suggest that prison is not viewed as punitive as the public may believe and that there is little deterrent effect of prison for some inmates, especially when considering the alternative.

Further qualitative research on the prison subculture has examined variations in the experience of crime and the criminal justice system, which may cause offenders to perceive and adapt to the prison environment differently (Crouch, 1993). It is argued that prison may be preferred among some, as it provides offenders with a more comfortable setting than the streets. Offenders may be less likely to be assaulted or killed in prison and serving time generally provides educational opportunities that are typically not afforded to some offenders on the street. Additionally, Wood and Grasmick (1999) find that offenders may view a short prison term as a retreat from the unpredictability of the street, as offenders often report that serving time provides them an opportunity to "chill out" and visit with old friends. For these offenders prison seems to have little to no deterrent effect.

Fleisher (1995) further notes that "prison isn't a risk that worries street hustlers. Things such as limited freedom, loss of privacy, violence, and variant sexual activity, which might frighten lawful citizens, don't frighten them" (p. 164). This also suggests that the pains of imprisonment may not be as severe as the public perceives. In fact, Crouch (1993) argues that "right guys", "thieves," and "convicts," are more aware of the "relative personal costs of various sanctions" and are therefore less frightened by the idea of incarceration than "Square-Johns" (p. 69-70.) This idea suggests that offenders who

are familiar with the criminal subculture may not find it as difficult to adapt to the prison environment as those who come from a conventional background.

It should be noted that some offenders perceive prison as a meaningful deterrent and some of these offenders may be identified as “Square-Johns” (Irwin, 1970). Square-Johns typically do not identify with the convict code or other criminals and for them, prison is perceived as a severe sanction that is best avoided. As one offender noted in Laub and Sampson’s (2003) study, “A prison will either break ya or make ya. And if it breaks ya, you don’t want to do time. And if it makes ya, you don’t care about nobody but yourself” (p. 169). Further, Irwin’s (1970) study involving Square-Johns in prison produced additional qualitative evidence of inmates’ desires to avoid prison in the future:

This time I’ll do anything to make it. I mean it, man. I’ll collect garbage. I’ll do anything the man tells me. He says shit and I squat. Ain’t no way I’m gonna do something that’ll bring me back to this place. Man, I’ve had it. (p. 88)

In general, it is difficult to determine what constitutes “punishment” in the eyes of offenders, as individual values differ and what one may view as punishment others may regard as insignificant. As acknowledged by Crouch (1993), “Theoretically, for prison to have the retributive and deterrent effect on offenders that the public desires, a fundamental assumption must be met: that offenders generally share the state’s punitiveness in the ranking of criminal sanctions” (p. 68). Not only do offender perceptions typically differ from those held by policymakers and the general public, but perceptions regarding sanctions also differ among offenders. Some offenders may, in fact, perceive prison as a very punitive sanction that is best avoided, while other

offenders may view a prison sentence as a tolerable nuisance or acceptable risk associated with a life of crime (Flory et al., 2006; Parker & Grasmick, 1979).

Perhaps incarceration mainly serves as a deterrent for those offenders who view prison time as very difficult or severe. As stated earlier, a legal action can only deter if it is perceived as severe or punitive by those who are subjected to it (Gibbs, 1975). If our prisons are mostly filled with a different type of offender—those who do *not* view the experience of incarceration as difficult or severe—then perhaps this fact may help to account for the failure of prisons to deter, as seen in the high recidivism rates that currently plague the criminal justice system. In the current study, the percentages of both types of offenders within a prison population will be estimated: the percentage who view prison life as difficult and the percentage who do not. I will also examine how perceptions of prison life are correlated with other factors, such as intentions to desist from crime after release from prison.

To better understand these perceptions, extant theoretical literature on the criminal lifestyle may provide a better framework than deterrence theory. In essence, the criminal lifestyle involves a commitment to crime as a “career,” or way of life that offenders pursue as a matter of personal choice (Akerstrom, 1985; Irwin, 1970; Walters, 1990). The lifestyle of the criminal emphasizes pleasure-seeking behaviors, the pursuit of excitement and autonomy, and involves chronic violations of society’s laws and rules (Walters, 1990; Walters & White, 1990). For offenders who are committed to the criminal lifestyle, the idea of living a “straight life” or conventional lifestyle may be more terrifying than the thought of serving time in prison. These offenders simply view the threat of incarceration as an “occupational hazard” or a calculated risk (Akerstrom, 1985;

Irwin, 1970). Therefore, the risk of incarceration is an expected and accepted part of the criminal lifestyle and offenders' commitment to the criminal lifestyle further prepares them for prison (Akerstrom, 1985; Irwin & Austin, 1997; Irwin & Cressey, 1962).

In addition, the existing qualitative literature suggests that offenders who are committed to the criminal lifestyle feel that they are required to "do time like a man" (Shover, 1985, p. 103) and many inmates note that only certain types of people can "take it" (Akerstrom 1985). Further, within the criminal subculture, time spent in prison is often viewed as advantageous, as it enhances offenders' status and provides offenders with more street creditability (Akerstrom, 1985; May et al., 2008; Walters, 1990). Thus, for offenders who are committed to a lifestyle of crime, the positive rewards of status enhancement, pride, and street creditability may allow these offenders to view prison time as something they are willing and able to endure (Akerstrom 1985; Shover, 1985).

Using this criminal lifestyle framework, as well as any relevant ideas from deterrence theory, the current study will examine inmates' level of commitment to the criminal subculture, as it may play a defining role in the development of inmates' perceptions regarding the difficulty or severity of prison life. Demographic variables will also be examined, such as age, race, and prior incarceration experience, as previous research indicates that these variables may also be associated with the perceived difficulty of prison (Crouch, 1993; May et al., 2008; Shover, 1985). A focus on these demographic variables also may be important because many offenders involved in the criminal lifestyle are young, inner-city males (Crouch, 1993; Irwin & Austin, 1997). Further, it has been noted in the existing literature that inmates with experience serving prison terms are less likely to be fearful of prison (Akerstrom 1985; May et al., 2008).

The possibility that age and incarceration experience shape inmates' perceptions of the difficulty of prison life will be explored further in the next section. In subsequent sections, I will examine how racial differences and commitment to the criminal subculture may relate to the perceived difficulty of prison, as well as the impact of perceived prison difficulty on intentions to avoid crime in the future.

#### *Age, Experience, and Prison Adjustment*

Many qualitative and quantitative studies have identified a relationship between prison adjustment and inmate age, as well as experience with incarceration. Older inmates typically have more experience with incarceration, especially those who have been involved in persistent offending throughout their life-course. These older, more experienced inmates seem to have less difficulty coping with the prison environment than younger inmates. Previous research has found support that experienced inmates are able to adjust to prison life with less difficulty than younger inmates, as older inmates have developed and learned systems and means for coping physically and mentally with prison throughout their incarceration experience (Shover, 1985). As one inmate noted in Shover's (1985) study:

I was in there so many years I finally began to – I learned how to manipulate the system, you know. And, like when I went back this last time, you know, when I went in, I got the right cell block, the right job, you know. I manipulated the system to work for me. But most guys don't know how to do that. But it took me years to learn that, too ... Like this last ten years or so I done, it was real easy time... (p. 43-44)

Shover has found through qualitative research that it is much easier for older, experienced inmates to adjust socially and psychologically to the prison environment than it is for younger, less experienced offenders for a number of identified reasons.

One way experienced offenders are able to deal with prison life more effectively than younger inmates is that, throughout their incarceration experience, older inmates have learned to recognize and avoid potential danger in the prison environment (Akerstrom 1985; Shover, 1985). As one inmate commented in Akerstrom's study:

There's a thing you develop in prison that's like a radar antenna – a third eye for danger. You see danger signs all the time, and if you can apply them to yourself, immediately you become in touch with what's going on around you. And especially in prison, you know who dangerous people are, what dangerous situations are, dangerous bulls, dangerous convicts... (p. 123).

Experience with serving time in prison allows inmates to readily identify dangerous situations and avoid potential trouble. It may be that the "third eye for danger" is developed over time and younger inmates with less prison experience may not be able to recognize such danger as easily. In addition to this fact, younger inmates are also more often cited for misconduct than older inmates. Participating in misconduct, due to its defiant nature, makes prison life more difficult for these younger inmates and their rebellious behavior is deemed by older inmates as self-defeating (Shover, 1985).

When examining the punitive effect of prison and alternative sanctions, many studies have affirmed that offenders with prior prison experience are more willing to be sentenced to prison than offenders without such experience (May et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2008; Wood & May, 2003). In fact, previous research has shown that prison is an

environment that many offenders dread before actually experiencing it (Akerstrom, 1985; May et al., 2008); however, as prison becomes less of an unknown, experienced inmates are less fearful of it (May et al., 2008). It may be that after the initial introduction to prison life, many offenders begin to learn how to survive in the prison subculture as they have learned to do within the criminal subculture on the streets. Therefore, inmates that have already been exposed to similar rules and ways of life may adapt to their new environment with relative ease.

The fact that the frequency of incarceration is positively associated with preferring prison over other alternatives also has been noted in the qualitative literature. Michael Santos (2003), a prison inmate writing about his own incarceration experience, notes that after serving five years or so in prison, inmates begin to grow accustomed to the prison experience. Santos further observes that after spending so much time in prison, it no longer feels like punishment. In a sense, prison becomes a way of life, especially for long-term inmates. As Santos explains, “Life becomes normal and predictable, although within a restricted, harsh, and sometimes inhumane closed society” (p. 216). Interestingly, these qualitative findings are inconsistent with the deterrence theory assumption that is often applied to prison sentences. Instead of prison being viewed as a severe deterrent, some experienced inmates find that prison eventually does not feel like punishment and instead becomes a way of life. Further, it is believed that prison would have little deterrent effect on these inmates’ future criminal behavior.

McClelland and Alpert (1985) affirm in their study that inmates with multiple previous convictions “tend to see imprisonment as relatively trivial” (p. 317). Inmates with multiple convictions tend to be older and are less willing to serve alternative



sanctions than younger offenders (May et al., 2005; Williams et al., 2008; Wood & Grasmick, 1999; Wood & May, 2003). Related to this, it is suggested that alternative sanctions may carry a form of stigma for some offenders and this may be particularly true for older, more experienced inmates. May et al. (2005) found support in their study for the assertion that offenders with prison experience often view other offenders who volunteer for intermediate sanctions as “punks” and “institutionalized embarrassment[s]” because they are “afraid” to serve time in the general population of prison. This willingness to participate in alternative sanctions is seen by older offenders and those with more experience as a “copout” and this stigma is typically reserved for younger and weaker offenders (May et al., 2005). This may explain why alternative sanctions are typically avoided by those who have already adapted to prison life. Therefore, prior prison experience has a significant impact on the perceptions of the severity of prison and alternative sanctions (May et al., 2005).

In addition to the stigma that is associated with an inmates’ unwillingness to serve a term in prison, Shover (1985) notes that time also plays an important role in serving prison sentences. Specifically, many older inmates often commented that time passed much more quickly as they have aged than it did when they were younger (Shover, 1985). Serving prison time may be more difficult for younger inmates, as time seems to “drag” due to the fact that much of young men’s thoughts are devoted to people outside of prison, such as significant others and family. At the same time, Shover acknowledges that time may have the opposite effect on older inmates due to a changed conception of time. Older inmates may begin to view prison as a waste of their remaining years and these inmates may further value the remaining years of their life more highly than before.

They may begin to realize that in order to avoid future prison terms, significant lifestyle changes have to be made. These findings suggest that a non-linear relationship exists between age and prison adaptation. Younger inmates may find prison to be more difficult than older inmates with more prison experience; however, once offenders reach a certain age, they may once again perceive the prison experience as difficult, due to a changed conception of time.

A growing sense of tiredness is further observed in qualitative literature, as older offenders become more fearful of the threat of arrest and long-term confinement (Akerstrom, 1985; Shover, 1985). These offenders report becoming weary of the physical dangers involved in committing crimes and some offenders note how they are “tired of being tough” (Shover, 1985, p. 90). In addition, Akerstrom (1985) finds that many interviewed thieves report that towards the end of their “careers” they become weary of criminal activities, as they feel that they will be apprehended too easily and that their prison sentence will be too lengthy due to their extensive criminal records. As criminals age, they report viewing their lives as just one long prison term that was interrupted by a few escapes, which leads them to the decision to desist in crime (Akerstrom, 1985; Shover, 1985).

In summary, age and experience with incarceration appear to have unambiguous links to inmates’ ability to adapt to their prison environment. It can be inferred that, in comparison to inmates who have difficulty adapting to prison life, inmates who adapt more successfully will tend to perceive the experience as less difficult or severe. The current study will use quantitative data to examine the relationships between inmates’ age, incarceration experience, and perceptions of prison life. If findings in the current

study are significant, then this will increase confidence in the results of earlier quantitative and qualitative research.

As previously noted, perceptions regarding the punitiveness of prison vary among offenders; therefore, it is important to consider a wide range of demographic characteristics that may account for such differences. In addition to age and experience with incarceration, race is a common variable that is often explored by researchers, especially when examining prison populations. Therefore, it is important to examine this variable to see if racial differences may account for varying perceptions of prison life.

#### *Racial Differences and Prison Adjustment*

An incongruity in the racial composition of general society and the prison population has long been observed by researchers and this discrepancy may account for many differences found in prisons, including inmate perceptions. In 2008, African-Americans made up only 12.8% of the United States population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), while at the same time, African-Americans consisted of 39% of the overall sentenced male population (West & Sabol, 2008). This percentage comprises the largest group of all sentenced populations. It also has been determined that the lifetime chance for African-Americans to be sentenced to federal or state prison is 18.6%, while there is only a 3.4% chance for white males to be sentenced to prison (Hughes & Wilson, 2002). This discrepancy in incarceration population warrants further examination of its effect on inmate perceptions of the difficulty in prison.

Although few studies have examined race and perceptions of prison, the most current findings suggest that African-Americans prefer prison over whites in comparison to alternative sanctions (Crouch, 1993; May et al., 2005; Wood & May, 2003). Attitudes

towards the criminal justice system and punishment vary depending on inmates' demographics and it is noted that many African-Americans view the criminal justice system as biased, while Whites are more likely to report equal treatment (Wood & May, 2003). This finding may provide one explanation as to why African-Americans may be more likely to prefer prison over alternative sanctions.

May et al., (2005) further argue that a different risk assessment of prison may exist for African-Americans and note three possible dynamics: (1) African-Americans perceive prison as less punitive than Whites and, thus, African-Americans are more likely to choose prison over alternative sanctions, (2) African-Americans perceive alternative sanctions as more of a hassle than compared to prison due to abusive program officers and strict regulations that are difficult to comply with, and (3) African-Americans perceive a higher risk of program revocation than do Whites (p. 389). Thus, it is possible that compared to Whites, African-Americans perceive prison as less uncertain than alternative sanctions, which may be viewed as more of a gamble that they are unwilling to chance. Therefore, it is uncertain that prison is preferred due to the perceived low difficulty of the prison environment or simply due to the fact that alternative sanctions are considered more of a gamble than a prison sentence (May et al., 2005).

In addition, researchers in the field have developed other possible explanations for racial differences in prison adjustment. Some observers find that these differences may be due to the fact that so many inner-city males are imprisoned and that they are often incarcerated with friends or relatives who can provide protection, aid, information, and material goods (Rettig, Torres, and Garrett, 1977). It is further argued that prison has become an increasingly common experience for young, African-American males in many

urban neighborhoods and that the “threat of going to prison or jail is no threat at all but rather an expected or accepted part of life” (Irwin & Austin, 1997, p. 156). Other explanations provided for racial differences include the “ghetto experience” that may allow violence and deprivation of prison to seem less harsh to African-Americans (Carroll, 1982). Ghettos are often characterized as being unpredictable and dangerous environments, and individuals that come from the ghetto environment may already be accustomed to relying on self-protection and developing the necessary mental strength required for threatening situations (Carroll, 1982; Crouch, 1993). It is argued that this strength and self-reliance for protection may allow African-Americans to easily dominate others in prison. Whites are often targeted as it is believed that they lack the “toughness” that African-Americans have (Carroll, 1982) and also because “they represent the society responsible for disadvantages African-Americans have experienced” (Crouch, 1993, p. 71). It is noted, however, that the latter argument has not been significantly supported by research. In fact, researchers have argued that prison adjustment for African-Americans may be more correlated with economic marginality than race (Wright, 1989).

A number of ideas regarding the possible causes of racial differences in perceptions of sanctions have been explored but few have been empirically tested. Because there is a lack of empirical research exploring racial differences in the adjustment to prison life, the current study will examine the impact of race on inmate perceptions of the difficulty of incarceration.

As previously noted, a number of identified works have cited age and experience as a reason that some inmates prefer prison over alternative sanctions (May et al., 2005; Shover, 1985; Williams et al., 2008; Wood & May, 2003), while other studies have

largely focused on racial differences that may lead some inmates to prefer prison (Crouch, 1993; May et al., 2005; Wood & May, 2003). These indigenous demographics may very well provide convincing evidence that these characteristics play a major role in shaping offenders' perceptions of the prison experience; however, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of offenders' perceptions on crime and punishment, it is also important to consider the environment from which many offenders come. In particular, in order to identify offenders' ability to adapt to the prison environment, it is important to consider their level of commitment to the criminal subculture. As described below, commitment to the criminal subculture appears to be another important factor shaping inmates' perceptions of prison life.

#### *The Criminal Subculture and Prison Adjustment*

In an effort to determine if the criminal subculture plays a role in prison adjustment, a description of those offenders who are committed to the criminal lifestyle and its values must be established. Those offenders who are most committed to this lifestyle of crime and delinquency may be the least likely to be deterred by prison and these offenders may also be the least likely to perceive prison as difficult or severe.

#### *Committed Offenders*

Committed offenders are described as individuals who are most likely to believe in and abide by the criminal subculture and view the decision to be involved in crime as a personal choice (Akerstrom, 1985; Irwin, 1970). Shover (1985) provides typologies of offenders based on the degree of criminal success and identification with crime as a means of livelihood. The degree of criminal success is measured by the amount of money an individual has obtained either through stealing or hustling, as well as the number of

years an individual has been incarcerated. The degree of identification with crime as a means of livelihood is described as the degree to which one may view crime as an attractive lifestyle, as well as a potentially lucrative way to gain income.

The first typology noted by Shover (1985) is that of successful offenders. These offenders have a high degree of criminal success and a high degree of identification with the criminal lifestyle. Successful offenders view crime as a way of life and are relatively accomplished at committing crimes. These offenders are generally incarcerated at least once in their lifetime, although they may commit many crimes. However, successful offenders typically spend less time in prison overall than unsuccessful offenders, as they are more proficient at committing crimes and avoiding capture (Shover, 1985). These offenders fall into the general category of committed offenders due to their high degree of identification with the criminal subculture.

The unsuccessful offender is another typology described by Shover (1985) and this group also has a high degree of commitment to crime but a low degree of success. Unsuccessful offenders view criminals as role models and see crime as a way to achieve income. These offenders commit a large number of various crimes but due to personal deficiencies or other obstacles, they typically do not produce a large financial return (Shover, 1985). These offenders may be as committed to the criminal lifestyle as successful offenders; however, they are simply not as proficient at committing crimes. These offenders also fall into the category of committed offenders due to their strong commitment to the criminal world.

The last typology noted by Shover (1985) is uncommitted offenders who have a low degree of success in their criminal activities and do not identify as strongly with the

criminal subculture. Typically, crimes committed by these offenders are infrequent, poorly planned, and usually do not involve a large amount of monetary gain (Shover, 1985). These offenders are usually placed on probation and are rarely incarcerated more than once. These offenders may have a largely conventional background and do not identify themselves as criminals.

Laub and Sampson (2003) further examine offenders and the criminal subculture by using a qualitative approach to explore the lives of persistent offenders. These offenders have been arrested at multiple points during their life course and are described as “enduring, repetitious, and tenacious” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 150). In fact, it is estimated that throughout their life course, persistent offenders are incarcerated approximately 75 days each year (Laub & Sampson, 2003). These offenders may best represent committed offenders, as these individuals do not “age out” of crime as quickly as the majority of offenders. These individuals continue to persist in their criminal activities throughout much of their life course, posing a serious problem for the criminal justice system.

As noted above, successful, unsuccessful, and persistent offenders share the commonality of commitment to the criminal subculture. These committed offenders are believed to perceive the prison experience very differently than uncommitted offenders. In fact, when examining perceptions of committed offenders it was found that these offenders view prison as a mere occupational hazard to their career; therefore, prison is a less dramatic experience for these types of offenders (Akerstrom, 1985). Committed offenders have been found to convey this undramatic attitude towards prison in qualitative interviews:



If you're a criminal, what's the alternative to the risk of going to prison? Coal-miners don't spend their time worrying about the fact that they might get killed by a fall at the coal-face either. Prison's an occupational risk, that's all. (Parker & Allerton, 1962, p. 88)

This "occupational risk" is simply viewed as a part of the criminal lifestyle. Acceptance of prison time, along with other risks associated with the criminal lifestyle, is considered the norm among committed offenders (Akerstrom, 1985).

It has been determined that the majority of committed offenders view their lifestyle as a choice and are willing to pay for their lifestyle as a criminal. As evidence of this, Akerstrom (1985) determined that the majority of committed offenders she interviewed agreed with the following statement, "If you live as a criminal, it's only fair that you pay by being in prison a while" (p. 75). Akerstrom also interviewed thieves about the right or wrongness of prisons and many respondents asked, "What should we have instead?" (p. 75). Therefore, it was determined that many committed offenders view laws and punishment as a necessary component for society; however, society's laws are also taken for granted by these offenders (Akerstrom, 1985).

It is further argued that serving time in prison may actually increase commitment to crime due to the crime-school effect noted in most prison environments, which is the adoption of criminal attitudes and values that are apparent in the prison system (Wood & Grasmick, 1999). It is noted in the qualitative literature that committed offenders may even view the prison experience in a positive way, as prison provides regular meals, interaction with old friends, and offers a retreat from the unpredictability of the streets (Akerstrom 1985; May et al., 2008). Therefore, not only does prison fail to always serve

as a strong deterrent (as it may actually increase one's commitment to crime), but it may also be viewed in a positive way by some offenders.

When examining committed offenders and the potential relationship between the level of commitment with the criminal subculture and prison adjustment, it is important to consider that former internalized values and norms, and former identities and statuses are not voided when entering prison (Irwin, 1970). Irwin and Cressey (1962) note that many offenders enter prison with a commitment to the criminal subculture and this further prepares them for life in prison, as prison is viewed by offenders simply as a part of the larger criminal world. Furthermore, it is suggested that "the convict system of norms... are to a greater extent a version of age-old criminal norms and values" (Irwin, 1970, p. 63). Therefore, it is argued that the criminal subculture is not necessarily a separate system of norms and values from the prison subculture. This fact may allow committed offenders to adapt much more successfully to the prison environment in comparison to non-committed offenders.

#### *Prison as an Alternative*

Committed offenders typically identify strongly with the criminal subculture and prefer this lifestyle over a conventional one. Irwin (1980) notes that the criminal life is viewed as more rewarding by offenders due to the lack of acceptable alternatives. Thus, crime is viewed as an attractive alternative to conformity. In addition, many offenders note that crime is relatively easy and provides a simple way to gain income (Laub & Sampson, 2003). It is argued that resisting authority plays a major role in the attraction to crime and many offenders, in fact, view themselves as superior to those who choose not to commit to the criminal enterprise. Shover (1985) notes that offenders may even gain a

psychological reward from comparing themselves with those from a conventional background.

An excellent example of the perception that crime is the only acceptable alternative to the conventional lifestyle is found in Akerstrom's (1985) research. Akerstrom notes that offenders gain a sense of identity by comparing themselves to others and offenders often compare themselves to those of a conventional lifestyle. Those living a conventional life are typically described as "Square-Johns" and are viewed by offenders in a negative light. Indicative of this, half of the inmates in Akerstrom's study answered "No" when asked, "If you could choose now, would you prefer to live a square type of life?" (Akerstrom, 1985, p. 155). Square-Johns' activities are often noted by offenders as boring and they are described as having a very narrow perspective and experiencing little in life. Offenders often compare themselves to Square-Johns and note that their criminal lifestyle is far more desirable. In fact, for some offenders the thought of living a conventional life is more intimidating than the thought of serving a prison sentence, as illustrated in this narrative:

The alternative – the prospect of vegetating the rest of my life in a steady job, catching the 8.13 to work in the morning, and the 5.50 back again at night, all for ten or fifteen quid a week – now that really terrify (sic) me, far more than the thought of a few years in the nick. (Parker & Allerton, 1962, p. 88)

Thus, the "no thrills" lifestyle of the squares produces little excitement for offenders and is viewed as an unwanted alternative to the criminal lifestyle. In fact, 61% of the inmates in Akerstrom's (1985) study identify boredom and lack of excitement as the primary disadvantages associated with a square lifestyle. Interestingly, many of these same

offenders note that the criminal world itself eventually becomes boring with age, which then becomes a primary reason listed for desisting from crime later in life.

In addition to offenders viewing squares' lives as unexciting, inmates in Akerstrom's (1985) study also note that many squares are "prisoners" of conventional life and formal rules. This idea of being a prisoner of conventional life is found in statements such as, "They care so much about what others think of them" and that squares themselves are trapped in the "system" (Akerstrom, 1985, p. 158). Thus, committed offenders would rather be prisoners in reality than trapped in the boring, conventional lifestyle of Square-Johns.

Interestingly, one of the only positive aspects noted about living the square life in Akerstrom's (1985) study was that squares "don't have to spend time in prison" (p. 168). At the same time, this was not enough to keep most committed offenders from pursuing criminal activities. As one offender noted, "I'll willingly gamble away a third of my life in prison, so long as I can live the way I want for the other two thirds" (Akerstrom, 1985, p. 74). This illustrates the committed offender's desire for independence and adventure, as these offenders would rather risk incarceration than be forced to live a conventional life outside of prison. This idea further calls into question the deterrent effect of prison and how it may affect future intentions to avoid crime.

It is important to acknowledge that committed offenders may comprise the majority of the prison population but are not the only individuals serving time. Unsuccessful offenders or Square-Johns also are sometimes forced to endure the pains of imprisonment and their perceptions of the prison environment are quite different than those of committed offenders. Square-Johns have been found to be a minority group in

prison and comprise approximately 16% of the total population (Irwin, 1970). It is noted that when Square-Johns come into contact with committed offenders in jails or prison – Square-Johns immediately recognize that they are different and identify themselves as non-criminals, regardless of their felony conviction (Irwin, 1970). It is further noted that Square-Johns serve time differently than committed offenders, as these uncommitted offenders despise life in prison and isolate themselves. This isolation potentially makes prison life more difficult for these inmates, as this may lead them to be targeted by committed offenders (Irwin, 1970). However, it is noted that although these offenders do not subscribe to the convict code, they may at times display some commitment for safety purposes (Irwin, 1970). For example, one Square-John described this forced subscription to the convict code:

Several times I saw things going on that I didn't like. One time a couple of guys were working over another guy and I wanted to step in, but I couldn't. Had to just keep moving as if I didn't see it. (Irwin, 1970, p. 72)

Typically, uncommitted offenders spend a very short term in prison and tend to form friendships with other uncommitted offenders. These uncommitted offenders go to great lengths to avoid committed offenders while serving time in prison, just as they typically avoid such criminals outside of prison (Irwin, 1970). These offenders are more likely to find prison as a deterrent and are more likely to perceive prison as difficult due to their unfamiliarity with the criminal subculture. These ideas will be further examined in the current study, as it is believed that committed offenders are able to adapt to the prison environment much easier than uncommitted offenders.

*Prison as an Investment*

Qualitative interviews with offenders have determined that many refer to prison as a “crime-school” (Akerstrom, 1985; Laub & Sampson, 2003). As one persistent offender noted, “All they did in state prison was teach you how to be a better thief...” (Laub & Sampson, 2003, p. 188). Prison operating as a crime-school may further reinforce inmates’ commitment to crime, as Wood and Grasmick (1999) acknowledge that many offenders may be imprisoned longer than necessary in order to be deterred from future crimes. This increased duration of prison terms may increase offenders’ adoption of values and skills that favor crime.

Many believe that prison typically destroys an individual’s social skills. While it is noted that this is true for many inmates, prison can also be a social training ground for crime (Akerstrom, 1985; May et al., 2008). Prison provides an environment in which inmates learn how to get along with other inmates and it also teaches inmates how to adapt to unfamiliar environments. As one inmate noted of prison adjustment:

I think those in here have a real good adjustment ability... ability to adjust to different situations. You gotta have it if you’re gonna make it, otherwise you’ll break down. Most in here can deal with all kinds of environments, you’ll learn that in here, ‘cause otherwise you won’t make it. (Akerstrom, 1985, p. 139)

Therefore, in order to survive the prison term, it is essential that inmates adapt to the existing subculture and learn how to successfully interact with others.

Prison terms also serve as a status enhancement for many in the criminal world, and time spent in prison is typically viewed as a positive merit among criminal peers (Akerstrom, 1985; May et al., 2008; Shover, 1985). Shover (1985) notes that younger

men in particular may feel that they have to demonstrate that they are able to deal with the prison experience in the “subculturally required fashion” and that they “can do time like a man” (p. 103). Offenders are also typically very proud of their time served in prison, as one inmate in Akerstrom’s (1985) study noted: “You know, it’s not everybody who can take it. It’s just certain kinds of people” (p. 76). Further, different prisons also develop different reputations as far as the level of difficulty and having served a sentence in a “tough” prison further enhances one’s status in the criminal world (Akerstrom, 1985; May et al., 2008).

Researchers further note that serving time in prison is a “status booster” particularly for those in the inner cities. Petersilia and Turner (1990) found support in their research that inmates often steal the state-issued prison clothing, so that they can wear the clothing outside of prison, as it lets others know that they have served a prison term. Not only is prison a non-deterrent for these individuals, but it may actually have the opposite effect for some young offenders who find serving a prison sentence as a necessary rite of passage into adulthood (Petersilia & Turner, 1990).

Prison as a status booster and rite of passage is often noted among researchers and this may further affect committed offenders’ future intentions to avoid crime. Santos (2006) provides an excellent narrative of the prison experience and enhancement of status:

He was arrested for participating in the drug rackets, and he expected to return to the drug rackets upon his release from his four-year term. Ronald knew that his initial prison term would enhance his status, that it would show he could take the punishment and survive a stint in even the toughest of conditions. He would

emerge from prison with more power and street credibility than he had when he went in, enabling him to expand his criminal enterprise... Influenced by twenty years of living in an urban ghetto, with family members, acquaintances, and role models all having served time, Ronald was committed to a life of crime and what he considered easy money. For Ronald, a stretch in confinement was an obligation incidental to the choices he made. As a young black thug who quit school in the ninth grade, being locked up was something he knew he would face more than once in his life. (p. 15-16)

This narrative emphasizes the importance of prison status in the criminal world, as well as the acknowledgement of prison as a gamble or occupational hazard. In addition, this narrative suggests that knowledge of the potential rewards that follow a completed prison term (e.g., pride, status enhancement, and future criminal success) may lead such inmates to judge and experience their time in prison as “doable” or less arduous. This narrative further supports that prison does not serve as a deterrent for many committed offenders; therefore, prison does not influence these offenders’ intentions to avoid crime after release. Inmates’ future intentions to avoid crime will be further explored to examine the relationship between these intentions and inmates’ perceptions of the perceived difficulty of prison.

#### *Future Criminal Intentions and Prison Adjustment*

It can be inferred that those who do not perceive prison as a strong deterrent may be less likely to “go straight” or pursue a legitimate lifestyle following release. These offenders are more likely to view prison simply as an occupational hazard or gamble and prison may hold no deterrent effect for these inmates. Persistent offenders can especially



be described as offenders who do not perceive prison as a deterrent. In general, these offenders have served multiple prison sentences and tend to persist in their offending throughout their life course; therefore, these offenders have little intention of going straight in the future. This is problematic for the criminal justice system as these offenders typically have high rates of offending throughout their life course and are unable to be deterred from crime.

According to deterrence theory, when faced with the prospects of serving a prison term, or after having served a prison term, it is believed that the rational individual would choose to no longer engage in further criminal activities (Gendreau, Goggin, & Cullen, 1999). However, based on 1994 recidivism findings, 67.5% of offenders released from state prisons are rearrested within three years and 25.4% return to prison with a new sentence within three years (Langan & Levin, 2002). These findings suggest that prison has little deterrent effect on most inmates or, if there is some deterrent effect, it is not strong enough or of sufficient duration to withstand countervailing criminogenic forces.

Further, the continual increase in the number of prison facilities and inmates in the United States is well-known among the general public and researchers. Nagin (1998) suggests that if this rate of imprisonment continues to increase, then prisons may be perceived as less stigmatizing by society, which would reduce any possible deterrent effect that prison holds. It is believed that the less stigmatizing prison becomes, the less likely offenders will be deterred from serving a sentence and committing future criminal acts.

Qualitative literature also examines inmates' criminal intentions after release, which often does not include a desire to "go straight" or lead a legitimate lifestyle

(Akerstrom, 1985). In fact, many offenders often displayed a willingness to “pay” for being a criminal, as they reported that after their prison sentences they would be free again to pursue whatever criminal activities they wish (Akerstrom, 1985). These findings suggest that inmates who do not perceive prison as particularly difficult or severe will be even less likely to express a desire to “go straight” in the future.

It is widely believed that inmates who are less successful at adjusting to their prison environment are more likely to have difficulties when released. In contrast to this belief, Goodstein (1979) found that inmates who are more successful at adjusting to prison actually have more difficulty transitioning back to society. Goodstein found support that institutionalized inmates characterize themselves as adjusted to the prison environment and are not particularly upset about serving time. In contrast, rebellious inmates, who have a higher number of disciplinary infractions and report themselves as not adjusting well to prison, appear to be less adjusted to prison life. The results of Goodstein’s study found that inmates who appeared to adjust well to prison life actually experienced the most difficulty in the transition from prison to general society. It further appears that the rebellious inmates, or those who did not adequately adjust to prison life, made the smoothest transition from prison to society.

Goodstein (1979) argues that one reason that institutionalized inmates had more difficulty adjusting to the outside world is because these inmates occupied higher status positions through institutional jobs while in prison. It is argued that upon release, these inmates may find jobs in general society as boring or menial work (Goodstein, 1979). It is further believed that since institutionalized inmates were well adjusted to prison life, which involves rules and routines, this group of inmates may lack the flexibility to adjust

to the world outside of prison. It is possible that rebellious inmates transitioned more smoothly to general society because they were able to maintain their autonomy and decision-making skills during their prison term (Goodstein, 1979). It is acknowledged that an argument could be made that rebellious inmates, who are more hostile to authority figures, will eventually continue in their antisocial behaviors and result in higher recidivism rates in the long run (Goodstein, 1979). However, Goodstein's findings suggest that at least for the short-term, rebellious inmates have lower recidivism rates.

Gendreau et al. (1999) argue that prisons should not be used with the expectation of reducing future criminal activity, as it has been determined that time in prison actually increases offender recidivism. These findings suggest support for the belief that prisons are "schools of crime" and, in particular, it is believed that "the inmate who has served a longer amount of time, becoming more prisonised in the process, has had his tendencies toward criminality strengthened and is therefore more likely to recidivate than the inmate who has served a lesser amount of time" (Jaman, Dickover, & Bennett, 1972, p. 7). This may be especially true for inmates who do not perceive prison as overly difficult to begin with.

Gendreau et al (1999) further suggest that correctional institutions should include assessments of inmates' attitudes, values, and behaviors while in prison, in order to determine which inmates are most adversely affected by prison life. It is argued that mediating factors, such as inmate turnover, may have a potentially negative impact on inmates' adjustment, which may lead to a lasting effect on recidivism (Gendreau et al., 1999). It is further argued that "little is known about what goes on inside the 'black box' of prisons and how this relates to recidivism" (Gendreau et al., 1999, p. 12). Very few

studies have focused on this issue; therefore, it is crucial for future research to examine the effects of prison on recidivism and, in particular, how inmates' perceptions may relate to their future criminality.

Inmates' future criminal intentions are important to consider, as the incarceration rate continues to rise in the United States and an increasing number of offenders are being rearrested and returned to prison due to new criminal convictions or technical violations of their parole. Most studies that examine predictors of adult recidivism consider static factors, such as adult criminal history, race, age, gender, and so forth. To my knowledge, however, researchers have yet to consider the impact of inmates' perceptions of prison on recidivism or on future criminal intentions. Further research in this area may help us to better understand the impact of incarceration and why it so often fails to deter repeat offending. Additional research in this area also may enhance our ability to predict and, perhaps, control offender recidivism.

### *Hypotheses*

In order to further examine inmates' perceptions of the difficulty of prison, the following hypotheses have been developed:

*Hypothesis 1.* A curvilinear relationship exists between offenders' age and the perceived difficulty of prison. Younger inmates are more likely to view prison as difficult, while older inmates are less likely to view prison as difficult. However, much older offenders (e.g., age 40 and up), who have largely "aged out" of crime, are more likely to perceive prison life as once again difficult.

*Hypothesis 2.* A curvilinear relationship exists between prison experience (e.g., amount of time served) and the perceived difficulty of prison. Inmates with little prison experience are more likely to view prison as difficult, while inmates with more prison experience are more likely to perceive prison as less difficult.

However, it is suggested that inmates who have served an increasing number of prison terms (e.g., three or more terms) begin to perceive prison life as once again difficult.

*Hypothesis 3.* In comparison to white males, African-American males tend to have less difficulty adapting to prison life. Therefore, African-American males are less likely to perceive the experience of incarceration as difficult or severe.

*Hypothesis 4.* A strong commitment to the criminal subculture is negatively associated with the perceived difficulty of prison life. Because the prison inmate subculture represents an extension of the criminal subculture, offenders who are already committed to the criminal subculture will have less difficulty adapting to prison life than their non-committed or less-familiar counterparts.

*Hypothesis 5.* A positive relationship exists between the perceived difficulty of prison life and intentions to avoid crime or “go straight” after release. All else equal, offenders who perceive prison time as difficult or severe will be motivated to avoid future crime after release, while offenders who view the experience as tolerable will be less inclined to desist.

## Chapter III – Methods and Procedures

### *Data*

Data used to test the study's hypotheses are drawn from a large survey of convicted felons conducted by Horney and Marshall (1993). The survey (hereafter referred to as the Nebraska Inmate Survey) is based on personal interviews of 700 prison inmates who were admitted to the Diagnostic and Evaluation Unit of the Nebraska Department of Corrections during a nine month period, from 1989 to 1990.

To reduce the occurrence of ambiguous and missing responses, the Nebraska Inmate Survey was based on personal interviews instead of self-administered surveys. Seven-hundred-forty-six inmates were asked to participate, while 700 inmates agreed to participate (94% participation rate). A cohort sample of inmates was used in the Nebraska Inmate Survey, in order to provide a representative sample of felony convicted offenders.

The respondents were interviewed within a week of arriving at the Nebraska Department of Corrections Diagnostic and Evaluation Unit. The only inmates excluded from the personal interviews were inmates who transferred out of the Diagnostic and Evaluation Unit before interviewing began, those who did not speak the English language, and inmates who were deemed too mentally unstable to complete the interviews. The study collected information on inmate demographics, such as age, race, marital status, and education level. Other topics included in the questionnaire relevant to the current study were incarceration and arrest history, drug problems, as well as inmate perceptions of crime, prison, and future intentions to avoid crime.

It is important to note that the Nebraska Inmate Survey has been used successfully in past research to explore various issues. In a 1992 study using these data, Horney and Marshall examined the relationships between perceived risk of sanctions, crime participation, and experience with formal sanctions. The study found support for the tendency of serious offenders to follow a rational choice model where their perceptions were formed based on experience with crime. The findings were consistent with previous studies, based on general population samples, which showed an inverse relationship between experience with crime and perceived risk of sanctions. Thus, the study indicates that this inverse relationship can be generalized to serious offenders (Horney & Marshall, 1992).

Another study that successfully used the Nebraska Inmate Survey was conducted by Horney, Osgood, and Marshall (1995). This study analyzed monthly variations in criminal offending and life circumstances and found support that meaningful, short-term change in criminal involvement is associated to variations in life circumstances (Horney et al., 1995). The use of these data in previous research, which yielded significant findings, illustrates that the Nebraska Inmate Survey can be productively utilized for research on felony offenders. The measures used from the Nebraska Inmate Survey for the current study will be discussed below.

### *Measures*

#### *Perceived Difficulty of Prison*

Inmate perceptions of the difficulty of prison will be examined by utilizing the survey questionnaire statement, “When you’ve figured it out, doing prison time is not too hard” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 5), where inmates identified their answers using a



Likert scale where “Strongly Agree” is coded as 1, “Agree” is coded as 2, “Disagree” is coded as 3, and “Strongly Disagree” is coded as 4. For the purposes of logistic regression analyses (see below), the “perceived prison difficulty” item will be recoded into a dichotomous (dummy) variable where 0 = “prison is not difficult” (for respondents who agree or strongly agree with the above statement) and 1 = “prison is difficult” (for respondents who disagree or strongly disagree with the above statement).

It should be noted that, unfortunately, the Nebraska Inmate Survey does not contain additional items indexing the perceived difficulty of prison life. Thus, I am limited to this single-item measure. Although the reliability of this measure is unknown, it will be possible to conduct a “validity check” by examining the correlations between this measure and other items in the survey. If the “perceived prison difficulty” item is measuring inmate perceptions accurately, then we should find that this item is correlated in the expected direction with other items in the survey. For example, it would be expected that the “perceived prison difficulty” item is negatively correlated with the belief that “crime is the easiest way to get what you want”, and positively correlated with intentions to “go straight” after release.

Although the dependent variable used in this study is a single-item measure and this could be considered as a potential limitation, it has been argued that “some of the best-known instruments in social science are effectively single-item ones” (Heath & Martin, 1997, p. 1). In fact, there has been a long history of success with certain single-item measures in the social sciences. For example, Klingemann’s (1972) measure of the left-right political dimension is an effective single-item measure of a theoretical concept. Further, studies of teacher efficacy (Raudenbush, Rowan, & Cheong, 1992; Ross,

Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996), pain intensity among cancer patients (Jensen, 2003), and customer satisfaction (Wirtz & Lee, 2003) also have used single-item measures with success. It is important to note that the studies listed here are only a few examples of a number of studies that have effectively utilized single-item measures.

In addition to historical success using single-item measures, Heath and Martin (1997) argue that when attempting to measure respondents' subjective perceptions it may be that the conventional psychometric model of multiple-item measures is not necessary, particularly in situations where concepts are well understood by the respondents. This is the case for the current study, where inmates' subjective perceptions are being measured and it is believed that the concept of the difficulty of prison time is clearly understood by the respondents.

In addition to the potential limitation of using a single-item measure, it also is important to note that inmates were interviewed within a week of arriving at the Nebraska Department of Corrections Diagnostic and Evaluation Unit. Therefore, if some inmates do not have previous experience with prison, then these particular inmates may not be able to adequately answer the question regarding their perceptions of the difficulty of prison. In order to address this potential issue, data analyses will initially be conducted using the full sample of prisoners. The analyses will then be repeated, using only those inmates who have served a previous term in prison. If a similar pattern of results is observed across these two sets of analyses, this should increase confidence in the validity of the "perceived prison difficulty" measure. The independent variables used in the current study will be discussed below.

### *Independent Variables*

In the current study, age will be examined as an interval level variable, measured in years, where the minimum age of the inmates studied is 16 and the maximum age of the inmates is 67. The average age of inmates in this study is 28 with a standard deviation of 9. For the purposes of logistic regression analyses (see below), age will also be examined according to different categories. The category “Young” will include inmates who are 21 years of age and younger. The category “Older” will include inmates who are 40 years of age and above. Those who are in the middle age category (inmates who are 22 years of age or older but less than 40 years of age) are omitted from the analyses and will serve as the reference category.

Race is another independent variable used in this study and will be analyzed as a nominal variable and include the following categories: Black, Hispanic, Caucasian, Native American, and Other. The survey questionnaire proposes the question, “What is your race?” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 48), and the responses are coded as follows: “Black” is coded as 1, “Hispanic/Mexican or Spanish-American” is coded as 2, “Caucasian” is coded as 3, “Native American” is coded as 4, and “Other” is coded 5. For the purposes of logistic regression analyses, these racial categories were transformed into a series of dichotomous variables, with separate variables representing each racial category (e.g., African American [black = 1], Native American = 1). The racial category “Caucasian” will be omitted from the analyses and serves as the reference category.

Experience with incarceration also will be examined in this study as a ratio variable and will include previous jail and prison terms. In measuring the number of jail terms, respondents are asked how many different terms they have served in local or

county jails without including pre-trial detention terms. The responses to this item are as follows: “none” is coded as 0, “1-2 terms” is coded as 1, “3-5 terms” is coded as 2, “6-10 terms” is coded as 3, “11-15 terms” is coded as 4, “6-25 terms” is coded as 5, and “more than 25 terms” is coded as 6.

In measuring the number of prison terms, respondents are asked how many different terms they have served in adult prison including the present term. Parole revocations are not counted as a different term. The responses to this item are coded as follows: “1 term” is coded as 1, “2 terms” is coded as 2, “3 terms” is coded as 3, “4 terms” is coded as 4, “5 terms” is coded as 5, and “6 or more terms” is coded as 6.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of logistic regression analyses, two categories were created from this item. The category “little prison experience” indicates respondents who have served only one prison term and “increased prison experience” indicates respondents who have served three or more prison terms. Those who have served two prison terms are used as a reference category and are omitted from the analyses.

The item “crime is the easiest way to get what you want” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 5), will be used when examining correlations of the “perceived prison difficulty” item. Respondents identified their answers using a Likert scale. For the purposes of the current analyses, this item was reverse coded where “Strongly Disagree” is coded as 1, “Disagree” is coded as 2, “Agree” is coded as 3, and “Strongly Agree” is coded as 4.

Inmates’ identification with the criminal subculture will be examined based on two separate single-item measures. The first item will measure commitment to the

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<sup>1</sup> The original survey includes “none” as an answer option to the question regarding number of prison terms; however, “none” would be an inaccurate answer, as the respondents are required to include their present term in their answer. When examining the data, it was determined that the response “none” was used only by one respondent. Therefore, this response was treated as a missing variable for the purposes of this study.

criminal subculture utilizing the survey questionnaire statement, “committing crime is pretty much a permanent way of life” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 5). Respondents identified their answers using a Likert scale. For the purposes of the current analyses, this item was reverse coded where “Strongly Disagree” is coded as 1, “Disagree” is coded as 2, “Agree” is coded as 3, and “Strongly Agree” is coded as 4.

The second item will measure commitment to the straight/noncriminal identity using the survey question, “During the street months on the calendar, which of the following best describe the way you thought of yourself?” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 12). Inmates were asked to indicate yes or no for each “identity”. The identity of interest in this study is “straight/non-criminal”. For the purposes of this study, the response “No” is coded as 0 and the response “Yes” is coded as 1.

#### *Future Intentions to Avoid Crime*

Inmates’ intentions to avoid crime or “go straight” after release will also be examined in the current study as a dependent variable and will be measured using the survey item, “What do you think the chances are that you will try to make it going straight when you get out?” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 7). The original coding of this variable asks respondents to indicate the percent chance that they will try to make it going straight. The percentages range from 0% (which corresponds to “No Chance”) to 100% (which corresponds to “Completely Certain”). For the purpose of this study, the “intentions to ‘go straight’” item will be recoded into a dichotomous (dummy) variable, as there is limited variation found in this item. Most inmates reported a 100% chance of trying to go straight (approximately 68.4%); therefore, the item will be recoded so that

“100% chance of attempting to go straight” is coded as 1 and “less than 100% chance of attempting to go straight” is coded as 0.

It is important to examine inmates’ future intentions to avoid crime along with the “perceived prison difficulty” item, as previous research indicates that criminal intentions are correlated with actual recidivism. For example, Visher and Courtney (2007) determined that inmates who believed it would be relatively easy to stay out of prison in the future were less likely to be reincarcerated within one year of their release. In addition, the inmates in the study who admitted that they intended to participate in future criminal activities were more likely to recidivate after release.

Furthermore, in their study of serious and violent youth offenders, Corrado, Cohen, Glackman, and Odgers (2003) determined that there is a “statistically significant association between intent and recidivism” (p. 198). In particular, the study showed that youth who believed that their current detention sentence would play a positive role in reducing their future criminal behavior were less likely to recidivate (Corrado et al., 2003). These findings point to a definite link between inmates’ stated beliefs/intentions and actual recidivism.

When examining future intentions, it is important to control for certain variables that are potential predictors of reoffending (Klein & Caggiano, 1986). Because recidivism rates and inmates’ future criminal intentions are strongly associated, the current study will control for a range of relevant variables to help isolate the effect of perceived prison difficulty on the dependent variable. The control variables used for the current study will be discussed further below.

*Control Variables.*

Previous research has determined that potential predictors of recidivism include variables such as number of previous arrests, number of incarcerations, age at first arrest, and history of substance use (Klein and Caggiano, 1986). For the purposes of this study, the following variables will be used as control variables when analyzing “intentions to ‘go straight’”: age, education, marital status, race, age at first arrest, number of times arrested, number of prison terms served, length of current prison term, drug problems, commitment to the criminal subculture, and commitment to the straight/noncriminal identity.

The control variable “education” will be measured using the survey question, “What is the highest grade that you finished in school?” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 48). The responses are then coded as follows: “no schooling” = 0, “6<sup>th</sup> grade or less” = 1, “7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> grade” = 2, “10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> grade” = 3, “High School Graduate/GED” = 4, “Some College” = 5, “College Graduate” = 6, and “Post Graduate Study” = 7.

Marriage will also be used as a control variable and will be measured using the survey question, “At the present time, you are: (Check one)” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 48). The responses are then coded as follows: “married” = 1, “widowed” = 2, “divorced” = 3, “separated” = 4, and “never married” = 5. For the purposes of this study, the responses will be recoded where “Not Married” (combine responses 2, 3, 4, and 5) will be coded as 0 and “Married” will be coded as 1.

“Age at first arrest” will be measured for the purposes of this study using the survey question, “how old were you when you were first arrested – that is, officially charged by the police (an adult or juvenile arrest, other than a traffic violation)?” (Horney

& Marshall, 1993, p. 1). The respondents then indicate their age, in years, at the time of their first arrest.

“Number of times arrested” also will be used as a control variable and will be measured using the survey question, “altogether in your life, how many times have you been arrested? (Don’t count traffic violations.)” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 3). The responses are then coded as follows: “once” = 1, “2-3 times” = 2, “4-6 times” = 3, “7-10 times” = 4, “11-25 times” = 5, “16-25 times” = 6, and “more than 25 times” = 7.

The variable “length of current prison term” will be used as a control variable in this study and will be measured by the “length of the maximum term of imprisonment (in months)” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, Conviction Offense section, ¶ 9).

The control variable “drug problems” will be measured using the survey question, “Have you ever been committed to a drug or alcohol treatment program?” where the respondents are asked to indicate “Yes” or “No” (Horney & Marshall, 1993, p. 4). For the purposes of this study, the response “No” will be coded as 0 and the response “Yes” will be coded as 1.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables. In addition, Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the control variables used in the current study. The specific analyses that will be conducted are discussed below.



### *Statistical Analyses*

Data will be examined using logistic regression, correlations, and percentages from frequency distributions. The dataset will be examined by using the computer software program PASW Statistics Version 18.0 (formerly SPSS).

Multivariate analyses will be used in this study to control for the effects of other variables and to help isolate the effect of key independent variables on the dependent variable. Logistic regression will be used for the multivariate analyses, as logistic regression is an appropriate technique for a number of reasons. First, logistic regression is better suited for dependent variables with limited variation. Because the dependent variable in this study (perceived difficulty of prison time) is a single-item measure with limited variation, logistic regression is an appropriate method. In addition, the other dependent variable in this study (future intentions to avoid crime) also has limited variation. In previous studies, researchers have dealt with this limited variation by recoding the variable into a dichotomous measure and using logistic regression. Finally, logistic regression has an advantage over ordinary-least-squares (OLS) regression, as it does not require the independent variables of a study to be normally distributed. The results of the statistical analyses for the current study will be discussed below.

## Chapter IV – Results

### *Descriptive Statistics*

As indicated above, Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the dependent and independent variables in the current study. This table includes each variable's minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation, in order to provide an overview of the data that have been collected. As seen in Table 1, the average age of the inmates in the Nebraska Inmate Survey is 28 years and the majority of inmates are Caucasian (approximately 57%). In addition, Blacks comprise approximately 30% of the total inmates in the Nebraska Inmate Survey, while Hispanics account for approximately 6% of the sample. Further, Native Americans account for 4% of the inmate sample and only 1% of the inmates in this study indicated "Other" for race. In addition to these demographic characteristics of the sample, 59% of inmates identified themselves as being a "straight/noncriminal", despite their felony convictions. Other variables of interest included in Table 1 are number of jail and prison terms served, degree of commitment to the criminal subculture, and future intentions to "go straight" after release.

Table 1.

*Descriptive statistics for the independent and dependent variables*

Study Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Perceived prison difficulty	1	4	2.84	.748
Age (in years)	16	67	28.05	8.949
Race				
Black	0	1	.30	.45859
Hispanic	0	1	.0657	.24796
Caucasian	0	1	.5729	.49502
Native American	0	1	.0457	.20901
Other	0	1	.0157	.12446
Number of jail terms served	0	6	1.30	1.334
Number of prison terms served	1	6	1.49	.943
Commitment to criminal subculture	1	4	2.052	.60644
Commitment to straight/noncriminal identity (1 = straight)	0	1	.59	.492
Crime is the easiest way to get what you want	1	4	2.0550	.66148
Intention to "go straight" (1 = 100%)	0	1	.6839	.46528

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the control variables used in the current study. As indicated previously, these variables are used as controls when examining future intentions to “go straight” after release. As seen in this table, the average age of inmates at their first arrest is approximately 18 years. In addition, the average length of the inmates’ current prison sentence is approximately 67.55 months. Other significant demographic characteristics included in Table 2 are that 20% of inmates are currently married and 25% of inmates in the Nebraska Inmate Survey indicated “drug problems”. Other variables of interest included are education and number of times arrested.

Table 2.

*Descriptive statistics for the control variables*

Control Variables	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Education	0	7	3.69	1.095
Married (1 = married)	0	1	.2014	.40135
Age at first arrest	5	65	17.70	7.132
Number of times arrested	0	7	3.47	1.856
Length of current prison term (months)	12	992	67.55	110.819
Drug problems (1 = drug/alcohol treatment)	0	1	.2554	.43639

Table 3 presents the distribution of responses to the “perceived prison difficulty” item, in order to provide an overview of the percentage of inmates who describe prison as difficult or not. As seen in Table 3, approximately 1.8% of the respondents indicated that they “strongly agree” that prison time is not difficult, while 31.7% “agree” with this statement. Forty-seven percent “strongly disagree” that prison time is not difficult, while 19.6% “disagree” with this statement. These findings can be further combined to indicate that, overall, 33.5% of inmates agree or strongly agree that prison is not difficult, while the remaining 66.6% of inmates disagree or strongly disagree that prison is not difficult. Thus, while the majority of inmates disagree, a sizable percentage of inmates in the Nebraska sample—approximately one-third of the sample—agree or even strongly agree with the statement that, “When you’ve figured it out, doing prison time is not too hard.” It is possible that, for these inmates, incarceration does not function as a meaningful deterrent.

Table 3.

*Frequency Distribution of the “Perceived Prison Difficulty” Item.*

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“When you’ve figured it out, doing prison time is not too hard.”

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Response (%)	
Strongly Agree	1.8
Agree	31.7
Disagree	19.6
Strongly Disagree	47

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*Correlations between Perceived Prison Difficulty and other Inmate Perceptions*

Table 4 presents the correlations between the “perceived prison difficulty” item and other related items in the survey. The items that were examined include “crime is the easiest way to get what you want” and “future intentions to avoid crime after release”. As indicated previously, the purpose of examining these correlations is to conduct a validity check in order to confirm that the “perceived prison difficulty” item is measuring inmate perceptions in a meaningful way.

As seen in Table 4, the “perceived prison difficulty” item exhibits a statistically significant association with the two items included in the table. As expected, inmates who report that prison is difficult tend to disagree with the statement that “crime is the easiest way to get what you want”. Further, inmates who find prison to be difficult also tend to indicate future intentions to avoid crime after release. These associations are in the expected direction and it appears that the “perceived prison difficulty” item is indexing attitudes that were overall meaningful for the respondents. These findings also suggest that the deterrent effect of prison may vary according to the perceived difficulty of prison time. When individuals perceive prison as difficult, it may strengthen their intentions to “go straight” after release. This possibility will be further explored below using binary logistic regression, with controls for other variables.

Table 4.

*Correlations between the "Perceived Prison Difficulty" item and other variables*

	Perceived Difficulty of Prison
<b>Other prison related attitudes:</b>	
Crime is the easiest way to get what you want	-.237*
Intention to "go straight" after release	.245*

\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)

*Multivariate Analyses: The Effects of the Study Variables on the  
Perceived Difficulty of Prison*

Table 5 presents the results of the logistic regression analyses, showing the effects of the study variables on the “perceived prison difficulty” item while controlling for education and marital status.

Several findings in Table 5 are noteworthy. First, the odds of perceiving prison as difficult are lower among “young” inmates (those 21 years of age and younger) and higher among “older” inmates (those who are 40 years of age or older). These findings are in comparison to the reference category, which includes inmates who are between the ages of 21 and 40. The exponentiated coefficients (Exp[B]) in Table 5 provide the odd ratios. The odds ratio for “young” inmates (.652) indicates that, for inmates under 22 years of age, the odds of perceiving prison as difficult decrease by 34.8% ( $p < .05$ ) in comparison to the reference category.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the odds ratio for “older” inmates (2.026) indicates that, for inmates 40 years of age and older, the odds of perceiving prison as difficult increase by 2.026 times, or 102.6% ( $p < .05$ ) in comparison to the reference category. This finding is inconsistent with Hypothesis 1, which states that a curvilinear relationship exists between perceiving prison as difficult and inmates’ age. Instead, the findings in the current study suggest that a basic linear relationship exists between perceived prison difficulty and age. Generally speaking, as age increases, the odds of perceiving prison as difficult also increase.

In addition to the findings regarding age, the control variable “education” had a surprising effect on the perceived difficulty of prison. Interestingly, the findings indicate

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<sup>2</sup> The formula used to calculate percent decrease is  $(1 - \text{Exp}(B)) * 100 = \text{percent decrease}$ . Thus, the formula used to find percent decrease for “Young” inmates is  $(1 - .652) * 100 = 34.8$ .



Table 5.

*Logistic regression results showing the effects of the study variables on the perceived difficulty of prison item*

Independent variables	Dependent Variable: Perceived difficulty of prison time			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp ( <i>B</i> )
Young inmates	-.428	.215	3.958*	.652
Older inmates	.706	.353	3.999*	2.026
Education	-.234	.086	7.416*	.792
Married	.167	.238	.494	1.182
Race:				
Black	.208	.198	1.103	1.231
Hispanic	.189	.373	.257	1.208
Native American	.296	.412	.518	1.345
Other Race	.313	.674	.216	1.367
Little prison experience	.395	.226	3.056	1.484
Increased prison experience	.638	.334	3.645	1.893
Number of jail terms served	-.105	.069	2.321	.900
Commitment to criminal subculture	-.619	.145	18.356*	.538
Commitment to straight/noncriminal identity	-.043	.184	.054	.958

\*p < .05

that for every one unit increase in education, the odds of perceiving prison as difficult *decrease* by 20.8% ( $p < .05$ ). Thus, inmates with higher levels of education appear to perceive prison as *less* difficult.

Finally, commitment to the criminal subculture also has a significant effect on the perceived difficulty of prison time as expected (Hypothesis 4). The finding indicates that for every unit increase in the level of commitment to the criminal subculture, the odds of perceiving prison as difficult decrease by 46.2% ( $p < .05$ ). This finding was consistent with the study's hypothesis that inmates' who are more committed to the criminal subculture are less likely to view prison as difficult.

In addition to these significant findings it should be noted that having an increased level of prison experience approached (but did not reach) the level of significance ( $p < .05$ ). Therefore, Hypotheses 2 was found to be inconsistent with the findings in the current study. Race also did not have a significant effect on the perceived difficulty of prison; therefore, Hypothesis 3 was also inconsistent with the findings.<sup>3</sup> Further, marriage, number of jail terms served, and commitment to the straight/noncriminal identity did not have a significant effect on the perceived difficulty of prison.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A separate analysis was performed using an alternative coding scheme for the dichotomous variable "Race," where 0 = Caucasian and 1 = all other races. The use of this alternative coding scheme produced an identical pattern of results.

<sup>4</sup> A separate analysis was conducted using an alternative coding scheme for the dichotomous variable "Married". For this separate analysis, dichotomous variables were created for the following categories: widowed, divorced, separated, and never married. The "Married" category served as the reference category in the analysis. The use of this alternative coding scheme produced an identical pattern of results.

*Multivariate Analyses: The Effects of the Perceived Difficulty of Prison on  
Future Intentions to Avoid Crime*

Logistic regression was also used, as seen in Table 6, to show the effects of the “perceived prison difficulty” item on intentions to “go straight” in the future. It is noted that in this analysis the independent variable is now the “perceived prison difficulty” item and the dependent variable is the “future intentions to avoid crime” item. Equation 1 presents the results without controls for other variables, while Equation 2 shows the results while controlling for relevant variables.

The first significant finding in Table 6 is that the odds of intending to “go straight” after release are higher for those who perceive prison as difficult with and without the control variables. Specifically, the odds ratio for “perceived prison difficulty” when controlling for other variables indicates that perceiving prison as difficult increases the odds of intending to “go straight” after release by 3.008 times, or 200% ( $p < .05$ ). Therefore, inmates who perceive prison as difficult tend to have stronger intentions to lead a crime-free life after release, as predicted (Hypothesis 5). This particular finding, based on logistic regression, increases confidence in the previously reported correlation between perceived difficulty of prison and intentions to “go straight” after release from Table 4.

Another interesting finding in Table 6 is that the odds of intending to “go straight” after release are higher for those who indicate a “straight/noncriminal identity”. The odds ratio for a “straight/noncriminal identity” (3.23) indicates that identifying oneself as a “straight/noncriminal” increases the odds of having intentions to “go straight” after

Table 6.

*Logistic regression results showing the effects of “perceived prison difficulty” on intentions to “go straight” after release*

Independent variable	Dependent variable: Intentions to “go straight” after release							
	Equation 1: no controls				Equation 2: with control variables			
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp ( <i>B</i> )	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	Wald	Exp ( <i>B</i> )
Perceived prison difficulty	1.091	.173	39.913*	2.977	1.101	.200	30.167*	3.008
<i>Control variables:</i>								
Age					.002	.015	.026	1.002
Education					.072	.094	.586	1.075
Married					.385	.266	2.105	1.470
Race:								
Black					.186	.222	.704	1.205
Hispanic					.419	.429	.953	1.520
Native American					-.861	.420	4.198*	.423
Other Race					-.642	.715	.808	.526
Age at first arrest					.010	.021	.231	1.010
Number of times arrested					-.119	.062	3.688	.888
Number of prison terms served					-.222	.119	3.464	.801
Length of current prison term					.001	.001	.583	1.001
Drug problems					-.209	.217	.928	.812
Commitment to the criminal subculture					-.091	.160	.318	.913
Commitment to straight/noncriminal identity					1.174	.198	35.142*	3.234

\* $p < .05$

release by 3.23 times, or 223% ( $p < .05$ ). Therefore, how inmates identify or label themselves may have significant implications for their future criminal intentions.

Interestingly, this analysis found that indicating the race “Native American” decreases the odds of intending to “go straight” by 58% ( $p < .05$ ). This finding is somewhat surprising, as other racial categories did not exhibit a significant effect on intentions of “going straight” after release; however, this finding should be interpreted with caution due to the small number of Native Americans in the Nebraska inmate sample ( $n = 32$ ).

In addition to these significant findings it should be noted that the variables “increased level of prison experience” and “number of times arrested” approached (but did not reach) the level of significance ( $p < .05$ ). The additional control variables used in the current study did not have a significant effect on the perceived difficulty of prison.

#### *Repeat Analyses with Experienced Inmates*

As indicated previously, the inmates in this study were interviewed within a week of arriving at the Nebraska Department of Corrections Diagnostic and Evaluation Unit. Therefore, if some inmates do not have previous experience with prison, then these particular inmates may not be able to adequately answer the question regarding their perceptions of the difficulty of prison. In order to address this potential issue, data analyses were repeated using only those inmates who have served at least one previous term in prison. The key findings were very similar to the initial analyses with the exception of commitment to the criminal subculture.<sup>5</sup> In the repeat analyses, the effect of commitment to the criminal subculture on the perceived difficulty of prison was no longer found to be statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). However, it should be noted that in

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<sup>5</sup> The full set of results are available upon request.

the repeat analyses, this subgroup has less variation in their commitment to crime, which may account for the difference.

## Chapter V – Discussion and Conclusion

The primary goal of the current study was to gain a better understanding of the relationship between inmates' perceptions of the difficulty of prison and future intentions to avoid crime. As indicated previously, there has only been a small amount of research focusing on offenders' perceptions of prison life. Most research related to this topic focuses on inmates' adjustment to prison through psychological measures and reliance on official measurements, such as the number of disciplinary infractions inmates receive. Thus, inmates may actually perceive themselves as adapting well to prison life, while correctional officials may regard these same inmates as adapting poorly due to disciplinary and behavioral problems. Therefore, it is important to examine inmate perceptions of the difficulty of prison life, in order to develop a more complete understanding of inmates' adjustment to prison.

The first significant finding in the current study is that approximately 33.5% of inmates agree or strongly agree that serving time in prison is not difficult. This may indicate that for some inmates, prison may not serve as a meaningful deterrent. Therefore, it is important to further examine characteristics that may influence these inmates' perceptions of the difficulty of prison life.

The current study's first hypothesis regarding age and the perceived difficulty of prison was examined and produced significant findings. As noted previously, the findings were inconsistent with the hypothesis that a curvilinear relationship exists between inmates' age and the perceived difficulty of prison. Instead, it appears that as inmates' age, the perceived difficulty of prison increases. Therefore, younger inmates are less

likely to view prison as difficult, while older inmates are more likely to view serving time as difficult. This finding relates to previous qualitative research which indicates that serving prison time functions as a “status enhancer” within the criminal subculture and is seen as a “badge of honor” by criminal peers (Akerstrom, 1985). This may be especially true for young male inmates who have yet to mature and age out of crime. This finding also is consistent with the idea that younger men in particular feel that they have to demonstrate that they are able to deal with the prison experience in the “subculturally required fashion” and that they “can do time like a man” (Shover, 1985, p. 103).

The finding that older inmates are more likely to perceive prison life as difficult may be explained by the “changed conception of time” that some older offenders experience, as Shover (1985) noted in his qualitative findings. In particular, older inmates’ may begin to grow “tired of being tough” and weary of the threat of arrest and lengthy prison sentences (Akerstrom, 1985; Shover, 1985). The observed relationship between age and the perceived difficulty of prison may, in turn, help to explain the process of desistance. If prison becomes more difficult for older offenders, then the threat of reincarceration may actually persuade these older, persistent offenders to abstain from future criminal offending.

The second hypothesis regarding prior experience with prison and perceptions of the difficulty of prison was not supported in the analyses. Having an increased level of prison experience approached the level of significance; however, the result was not considered statistically significant. This is somewhat surprising due to qualitative findings that show that inmates’ increased experience with serving time allows for prison to be considered less of an “unknown” and a more familiar environment (Akerstrom,



1985). However, the findings in the current study suggest that the perceived difficulty of prison may actually be more related to inmates' age than prior prison experience.

The third hypothesis regarding racial differences in perceptions of prison difficulty was also not supported in the analyses. Prior research indicates that Blacks are more likely than Whites to prefer prison over other sanctions (Crouch, 1993; May et al., 2005; Wood & May, 2003). Therefore, the hypothesis in the current study tested if Blacks are less likely than Whites to perceive prison as difficult due to the findings regarding the preference of sanctions. However, the racial findings in the current study were not significant. Therefore, race does not seem to play a role in the perceptions of the difficulty of prison life (at least not after controlling for education and other important variables). In fact, previous research indicates that observed racial differences in prison adaptation may be more correlated with economic marginality than race (Wright, 1989); however, this idea could not be tested in the current study, as the Nebraska Inmate Survey does not include information that would allow economic marginality to be measured.

The fourth hypothesis of the current study was supported by the analyses, as commitment to the criminal subculture had a significant effect on the perceived difficulty of prison. Therefore, offenders who are more committed to the criminal lifestyle are less likely to view prison as difficult. Those offenders who are more committed may simply perceive prison as an occupational hazard or acceptable risk associated with a life of crime, as noted in the qualitative literature (Akerstrom, 1985; Parker & Allerton, 1962). As a result, these committed offenders may be more willing to accept the consequence of prison and view their sentence with less resentment than uncommitted offenders. This is a

significant and troubling finding as it suggests that *the offenders who are most committed to the criminal lifestyle are also less likely to be deterred.*

The final hypothesis of the current study was also supported by the analyses, as it was found that those who perceive prison as difficult are more likely to report intentions of “going straight” after release. This is a potentially important finding as it may signify that perceiving prison as difficult influences future recidivism. As stated earlier, previous research indicates that intentions to “go straight” are associated with actual recidivism (Corrado et al., 2003; Visher & Courtney, 2007). Additionally, the analyses in the current study indicate that inmates who identify themselves as “straight/noncriminal” are more likely to intend to “go straight” after release. This is an expected association, as perceiving oneself as being a “straight/noncriminal” should have implications for avoiding criminal behavior.

In addition to the findings that relate directly to the hypotheses, a surprising result is that education influences perceptions of the difficulty of prison. In particular, the analysis revealed that inmates with higher levels of education are less likely to perceive prison as difficult, compared to inmates with lower levels of education. The direction of this effect is counterintuitive to previous findings that show that education actually increases the difficulty of adapting to the prison environment, as it is argued that inmates with lower levels of education tend to have fewer physical problems in prison (e.g., being hurt by other inmates) than inmates with a high school education or beyond (Wright, 1989). Previous research argues that individuals who went beyond high school are less likely to have experience with institutions and the “streets” and may be targeted in the prison setting (Wright, 1989); however, the association in the current study does not

support these previous findings. In fact, the findings in the current study may support the idea that inmates' with higher levels of education tend to be involved in fewer disciplinary infractions and these individuals have been found to cope better with anxiety and depression than inmates with less education (Porporino & Zamble, 1984).

An additional unexpected result of the current study is that Native Americans in the survey were less likely to indicate intentions of "going straight" after release compared to other races. As noted previously, this finding should be viewed with caution due to the small number of Native Americans in the Nebraska inmate sample. In order to substantiate this finding, additional research with a larger sample of Native Americans is suggested.

Overall, the key findings of this study indicate that prison time is not always viewed as a severe or highly punitive sanction, as suggested by previous (mostly qualitative) research. This seems especially true for offenders who have a high level of commitment to the criminal subculture. For such offenders, a prison sentence may not function as a meaningful deterrent.

These key findings may indicate that committed offenders, who have learned to survive within the criminal subculture on the streets, also learn how to successfully survive in the prison subculture. As indicated in previous research, inmates who are strongly committed to the criminal subculture have already been exposed to similar rules and ways of life and adapt to the prison environment with relative ease (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). The idea that committed offenders are less likely to perceive prison as difficult and are, therefore, less likely to be deterred from offending, may further help us understand the reasons behind the high recidivism rates found in the United States.

While not all inmates are deterred by the threat of imprisonment, this study finds that prison may serve as an effective deterrent for certain inmates, namely, those inmates who *do* perceive prison time as difficult. In the current study, the latter inmates expressed stronger intentions to “go straight” after release. These findings suggest the possibility that if more young people were prevented from becoming involved in the criminal lifestyle, then the threat of imprisonment may serve as a deterrent for a larger number of people. This could potentially be accomplished through prevention programs that encourage youth to become involved in a more conventional lifestyle and reduce the likelihood of youth becoming attracted to the criminal lifestyle in the first place. Examples of such programs include the Social Development Model and the Mobilization for Youth project (Akers, & Sellars, 2009, p. 145; p. 206). The goals of these preventative programs are to redirect youth and gang members away from delinquent attitudes and values and influence participation in conventional activities such as jobs, sports, and community service (Akers & Sellars, 2009).

Because the current study indicates that some inmates do not view prison as an overly difficult experience, the argument could be made that prisons are too easy for inmates and that the prison environment needs to be reconfigured into a more difficult and harsh setting, in order to provide a sufficient deterrent effect. However, this argument could be countered by the fact that many persistent, committed offenders report that prisons are “terrible” (Laub & Sampson, 2003). In particular, one offender in Laub and Sampson’s (2003) study noted, “...prisons are horrible places. I have seen more people get killed in prison than on the street. I think prisons toughen you up to a point that you don’t care...” (p. 168). Other literature notes that prisons are violent environments

characterized by riots, stabbings, and rapes and prisons usually require inmates to “remain alert to the constant threat and inescapable presence of predators, sexual, and otherwise...” (Santos, 2006, p. 2). Thus, it is argued that the prison environment itself is not “easy” but the perceived difficulty of prison relates more to the overall attitudes of crime as a lifestyle choice. Offenders involved in the criminal lifestyle may view those who find prison life to be difficult as “weak”, as previous research has determined that these offenders believe inmates should serve prison terms in the “subculturally required fashion” and “do time like a man” (Shover, 1985).

Further, within the criminal subculture, a completed prison sentence may serve as a “badge of honor” precisely *because* the prison environment is harsh and is something offenders have managed to endure. Reconfiguring the prison environment to be even harsher may only increase the status-enhancing value of a prison term. For this reason, committed offenders might still view prison time as something they are able and willing to endure, even if such time was to become harsher in objective terms.

In addition to the implications discussed, the key findings in the study provide quantitative support consistent with previous observations. This increases confidence in the results of earlier qualitative findings and allows for a better understanding of the relationship between inmate perceptions and adaptation to the prison environment. Future studies are suggested to further investigate the implications behind the current findings and to provide additional support for these results.

Ideally, future investigations will address the potential limitations of the current study. One limitation noted was that the study’s dependent variables were single-item measures. Future studies may address this issue by utilizing multiple-items to measure

perceived difficulty of prison and future intentions to “go straight” after release. If the findings are similar, then this will provide additional support for the use of the single-item measures in the current study.

Another potential limitation is that it may not be possible to generalize the findings from the current study (involving male inmates in Nebraska’s state penitentiary system) to inmates in other correctional institutions, such as juvenile detention centers, county jails, female prison units, and federal prisons. Various characteristics fluctuate in different correctional systems, such as age, race, gender, education, offense, and criminal history. Future studies of inmates’ perceptions of prison life in other correctional settings may increase the generalizability of the current study’s findings.

In addition to the limitations discussed, the current study utilized data from a cross-sectional design. Adaptations and attitudes change throughout stages of confinement; therefore, it may be useful to conduct a longitudinal study that explores how perceptions of prison difficulty develop or change over time.

Lastly, it would also be important for future research to explore why serving time is considered difficult for some inmates. Specifically, are there any particular aspects of prison life that may lead some inmates to view prison as difficult? For example, many inmates within the prison system suffer from a range of mental illnesses and these inmates may have increased difficulty adapting to the prison environment. This may be due to ineffective coping abilities related to the illness or other factors caused by mental problems. In addition to mental disorders affecting successful adaptation to the prison environment, other factors may also be important to examine. Specifically, it is possible that violent offenders may adapt to the prison environment with relative ease in

comparison to nonviolent offenders. Violent offenders may easily dominate others within the prison environment and may be targeted less frequently than nonviolent or “weak” offenders. Therefore, inmates’ propensity for violence and their criminal history may prove relevant when examining prison adjustment. Future investigations exploring these possibilities are suggested.

By examining prison adaptation and inmates’ perceptions, it is hoped that inefficiencies in current prison management will be identified and corrected in effort to reconfigure inmates’ experiences while imprisoned. This would potentially allow inmates to become better adjusted to prison life and provide for a smoother transition into society, which may aid in reducing recidivism (Wright, 1989). Further, identifying the reasons behind inmate perceptions of prison allows researchers and correctional agencies to further understand and evaluate goals of confinement.

Imprisonment as a method of crime control is a widely used correctional policy in the United States’ criminal justice system. The goal of imprisonment is to confine criminal offenders, administer retribution in effort to deter offenders, and, ideally, rehabilitate criminal offenders to prevent recidivism. Nevertheless, imprisonment does little to reduce recidivism rates in the United States and as illustrated in the current study, incapacitation holds little deterrent effect for some inmates. In addition to the lack of deterrent effect that prison may have, this study supports the idea that the criminal lifestyle framework may provide for a more comprehensive understanding of criminal perspectives and future research focusing on the criminal lifestyle and its effect on behavior should be pursued.

It is further argued that instead of relying solely on public and official perceptions of prison life, which may lead to misguided correctional policies, it is equally important to rely on research findings and offenders' perceptions of the criminal justice system. Although it is unreasonable to conclude that all inmates view prison life as easy, it is important to consider those inmates who are not easily deterred, in order to better understand how prison affects those for whom it was designed. Although this study does not address all issues regarding inmate perceptions of prison life, it is hoped that the information discovered in the current study will contribute to the overall literature regarding the importance of offenders' perspectives and how the perceived difficulty of prison life relates to future intentions to avoid criminal behavior.



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