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Organizational Deviance: The Case of the Baltimore City Detention Center

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the causes that led to the federal indictment of thirteen female guards, and eventual conviction of forty guards and inmates, at the Baltimore City Detention Center in 2013. The analysis is based on information presented in extensive newspaper coverage during and after the discovery of the events and the behavior at the jail. While popular opinion in the press blamed the guards' gender or their personal morals for their actions, the incident can best be explained through the use of organizational heuristic tools. Application of Diane Vaughan's matrix of routine nonconformity reveals that the guards' actions involved multiple layers of misconduct within an organizational setting and that the failures were not individual but structural.

In 2013, thirteen female correctional officers at the Baltimore City Detention Center were indicted under federal racketeering charges. The charges against these officers spiraled into a minor scandal as over two dozen other officers and inmates were also charged. By 2015, forty people were convicted for their involvement. Speculation rose about how, exactly, the prison could allow the widespread corruption to happen, with theories blaming the gender and moral character of the guards. However, the epidemic of corruption can best be explained through an organizational context. Organizational sociologist Diane Vaughan (1999) typifies organizational deviance in one of three forms: mistake, misconduct, and disaster. Each of these three forms is characterized by routine nonconformity, or regularly-occurring deviances from the organizational norms, but they are differentiated by the intention of the actors involved and the level of resulting widespread harm. Mistakes, misconduct, and disasters are all shaped by the micro, meso, and macro levels of the organization in which they occur. In the case of the Baltimore City Detention Center, the guards' actions were acts of misconduct, and Vaughan's matrix of routine nonconformity is the best fit to explain how that misconduct occurred.

Case Analysis

The officers, along with several inmates at the Baltimore City Detention Center, were accused of helping the criminal gang Black Guerilla Family (BGF) "run their criminal enterprise in jail by smuggling cellphones, prescription pills and other contraband in their underwear, shoes and hair" (Marimow and Wagner 2013). The scheme was led by Tavon White, the gang's leader, who was incarcerated for attempted murder and who at one point boasted on a wiretapped phone call that "this is my jail" (Anderson 2015). White led the BGF in the prison and colluded with the guards, even impregnating five of them. Ultimately, twenty-four officers and sixteen inmates were convicted of involvement, and only three officers were acquitted (Jedra 2015). After the allegations came to light, Maryland state officials attempted to deflect blame: Senator Lisa Gladden said that the female guards were the problem; Secretary of Public Safety Gary D. Maynard called the guards involved "bad actors" (Marimow and Wagner 2013). However, both of these explanations fail to account for the organizational aspect of the situation. The events in the prison were rooted in organized crime and led to the guards participating in White's racketeering scheme. While the acts were intended to conform to White's gang and his standards, the guards' status caused the general public to see them as deviants. Their misconduct led to the entire prison being labeled as deviant and ultimately caused the facility to shut down.

The BGF, a highly structured organized crime gang, was founded in the 1960s in California, but has expanded to operate in major U.S. cities and prisons across the nation (Marimow and Wagner 2013). Tavon White's position within the gang is indicative of internal organization: he is "allegedly a high-ranking 'bushman' in the Black Guerilla Family" (Vargas, Marimow, and Shin 2013). White also organized the internal structure of the prison so that he was on top. He created a money laundering and racketeering

operation, complete with an appointed “minister of finance,” and said at one point that “I make every final call in this jail... everything come[s] to me” (Vargas, et al.:2013). White leveraged his personal charisma and his long stay in the prison to restructure the prison. Rather than existing as a regular inmate, he organized the internal hierarchy and put himself on top.

White’s organized crime operation within the prison provided the backdrop for the misconduct committed by the guards. Misconduct can be defined as “acts of omission or commission by individuals or groups acting in their organizational roles who violate internal rules, laws or administrative regulations on behalf of organizational goals” (Vaughan 1999:287). The case initially charged thirteen guards at the prison, but these charges were later expanded to twenty-seven guards (Jedra 2015). These guards were acting on the behalf of two organizations: the formal prison and the informal gang. They leveraged their roles within the the prison in order to improve their standing with White and the BGF. In essence, they violated the rules of the prison and of their jobs on behalf of the goals of the illicit organization. The guards’ offenses ranged from smuggling contraband into prison to having sexual relations with inmates to warning inmates before their cells were searched (Marimow and Wagner 2013). In return, all of the guards were paid, allowed to drive cars belonging to the gang, and several of them entered relationships with White (Marimow and Wagner 2013). The guards violated the rules of the prison while simultaneously following the rules of the BGF. This combination of conformity and nonconformity resulted ultimately in the guards committing misconduct.

Within Albert Reiss’s (1984) typology of labeling organizational deviance, the actions of the guards resulted in the entire prison being labeled deviant. While the corruption was not universal, it was widespread enough that the guards’ corruption came to symbolize a corrupt prison as a whole. The prison remained open, but several of the guards were transferred to other prisons because they were labeled as “dirty” (Washington Post 2013). After his election in 2015, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan announced that he would be closing the prison, calling the entire incident “one of the biggest failures of leadership in the history of Maryland” (Connelly 2015). Hogan did not acknowledge the guards who were not complicit in the racketeering, stating only that the prisoners would be transferred to other facilities in the state. While the involved guards were convicted individually, the entire facility suffered the consequences of their actions. Hogan demolished the prison in 2016 and has not yet announced plans to build a replacement facility (Cox and George 2017). The complete history and faculty of the prison were tainted by the actions of the guards involved with the BGF. The guards’ misconduct and participation in organized crime led to the Baltimore City Detention Center being labeled as deviant. Forty of the forty-four individuals charged in the case were convicted, and the prison was closed and demolished. The organizational foci on crime led to a more comprehensive understanding of the events that took place within the prison. The context of both of the organizations involved shines a new light on the guards’ and White’s behavior.

Causes

After the indictment was made public, the prison was heavily criticized for allowing women to serve as guards. Senator Lisa Gladden argued that “when you hire and seek women to handle men, you get all sorts of crazy stuff ... you cannot allow women to get involved with these men, or you’re going to get what you’re going to get” (Duncan 2013). However, in 2013, more than 60% of prison guards in Baltimore were women (Dvorak 2013). The problem was not that the guards were women; rather, the problem was the power imbalance. Women have the same capacity as men to wield their power dangerously, and while “there’s an assumption that women won’t [abuse their power], can’t do this, that it’s not in our nature ... but it’s in our nature” (Dvorak 2013). While women statistically commit fewer crimes than men, “the notion that women are more ethical, generous, and caring than men in the public sphere is questionable” (Dodge 2012:92). Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that “societal structures have limited the types of criminal offenses committed by women” (Dodge 2012:86). Because the majority of prison guards in Baltimore were women who did not abuse their power, the gender of the guards at the detention center cannot be definitively linked to their misconduct. Instead, the characteristics of the organization’s structure and environment, and indeed the failure of both of these aspects, are the roots of the misconduct that occurred in the detention center.

One of the key factors in the events at the Baltimore City Detention Center was the failure of regulations. The guards’ misconduct was affected by the environment in which it took place. When the environmental deterrence fails, Vaughan (1999) argues that misconduct becomes significantly easier. Complex systems such as prison hierarchies have failsafes in place: “a safety device, a redundancy” (Perrow 1984:6). These failsafes are part of the external environment and are designed to prevent misconduct and other forms of organizational deviance. The detention center suffered from a failure of these redundancies. For example, the guards were able to sneak contraband into the prison because the external security checkpoints did not perform their checks thoroughly: “[the guards] underwent pat-downs that were cursory at best, and much of the contraband, especially the drugs, did not trigger the metal detectors at the entrance” (Washington Post 2013). It was assumed that the guards would follow their duties, but in the event that they committed acts of misconduct, the security checkpoints existed as a redundancy. However, that regulation failed because of the cursory nature of the pat-downs. The checkpoints became steeped in familiarity and routine. That familiarity can become detrimental because it “means that we are not endlessly alert, ever searching for that extremely rare event [that indicates a system failure]” (Perrow 1984:152). The prison’s gatekeepers became too familiar with the process, and that prevented them from properly regulating the prison guards. This regulatory failure allowed the problem to spiral out of control.

The misconduct was also worsened by the failure of institutional sanctions. Organizational characteristics are another key factor in determining the causes of organizational deviance, and the lack of sanctions is one such characteristic. The guards

involved in the scheme “faced no realistic prospect of punishment” (Washington Post 2013). The majority of the guards involved were not punished, only transferred to other prisons. The failure to institute proper sanctions against the prison guards drew ire from critics, who claimed that “dirty guards should be fired, not transferred” (Washington Post 2013). If the guards knew that they would not be severely punished for their actions, the sanctions became less efficient as deterrents. This is another example of a redundancy failing. The threat of punishment or losing jobs should serve as a deterrent against deviance. Instead, the guards had an excess of autonomy, which allowed them to make decisions with a lessened fear of repercussion. The failure of sanctions, and the excess of organizational autonomy, contributed to the scheme.

Effects

The Baltimore City Detention Center was closed in 2015; two years later, it was evident that there were no plans to replace it (Cox and George 2017). Most of the guards were transferred until their trials began. One inmate died before charges could be pressed; the remaining twenty-four guards and sixteen inmates were convicted in the scheme (Jedra 2015). However, at the time of the indictment, four of the guards had children with Tavon White, and all of the prisoners were transferred to other detention centers within the state. Despite the internalized nature of the crime, the actions of the guards still had victims.

Most of the victims of the events in the detention center were third and fourth party victims. Third-party victims are characterized as “innocent bystanders” with no involvement in the system (Perrow 1984:68). While the prisoners housed at the Baltimore City Detention Center were not innocent, they were affected by the actions of the BGF and everyone involved in it. The inmates that actively participated were convicted, and those that did not were relocated. These uninvolved suffered the consequences of the misconduct of the guards and inmates. The children of the guards and White were fourth-party victims. Their lives were impacted by the actions of their parents, in which they had no say whatsoever. This deviance determined the course of their lives, and the effects of the BGF on them should be acknowledged. The children and the inmates comprise the victim population following the events at the detention center.

Evaluation

The best theoretical fit for the events in the detention center is Vaughan’s matrix of routine nonconformity. Vaughan’s initial typology of mistake, misconduct, and disaster makes it clear that the problems in the prison were misconduct: they could not have occurred without actions taken intentionally by the prison guards. Analyzing the environment and organizational characteristics provides additional context for the misconduct that elucidates the guards’ decisions. Gender-based theories of crime do not fit here because the actions taken by the female guards here are not dissimilar to actions taken by male

guards in similar positions. The administrative failures that led to the misconduct within the prison were criticized by journalists, by the public, and by Maryland Governor Larry Hogan. The lack of regulation was the strongest influence in the case of the Baltimore City Detention Center.

Conclusion

Vaughan's model of routine nonconformity explains not only the actions within the Baltimore City Detention Center, but also how they were able to take place. The excess of autonomy within the prison and failure of regulation created an environment where deviance would not be punished. The racketeering scheme had far-reaching consequences, including the birth of illegitimate children and the relocation of dozens of prisoners. While the deviance may at a glance seem to be because of the women's gender or because of their individual greed, their actions were abetted by structural characteristics that fostered deviance. The ultimate closure of the Baltimore City Detention Center and conviction of forty guards and inmates may have punished the offenders, but a repetition of this situation can only be avoided by examining and learning from these institutional failures. These organizational failures must be analyzed and eliminated in order to prevent another case like this.

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