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Collective Action Behind Bars:

Examining the Conditions Under Which Incarcerated Individuals Strike

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ABSTRACT

Dating back to the early prisoners’ rights movement in the 1970s, there has been a nearly cyclical occurrence of unrest behind bars alongside limited coverage by media organizations. From an academic standpoint, such unrest and other prison disturbances have slowly become the subject of scholarly study. Most research has fallen into the category of “social movements in prison,” investigating the reasoning behind the occurrence of riots, violent uprisings, and general disturbances, but few have included other forms of protests such as labor strikes, hunger strikes, and sit-ins. Utilizing *LexisNexis* to generate a database of coverage by five of the largest newspapers across the United States, this research examines the conditions under which incarcerated persons act collectively and when they do, what kind of collective action occurs. Rooted in data derived from newspaper coverage, this study ultimately finds hunger strikes, riots, and quests for improved conditions and higher wages as leading factors of prison unrest. The results of this research better explain collective resistance and social action within prisons. Considered generalizable on a larger scale, this thesis provides an updated analysis of collective action and makes a case in support of news media publications as a conduit to tangible change.

**Keywords:** collective action, resistance, prison strikes, prison unrest, disturbance behind bars

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Said time and time again by activist Angela Davis, “freedom is a constant struggle.” I’ve relied on the words of Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, community activists, and countless other organizers as I worked to finish my thesis. The road was, at times, unbearably long, but I’m delighted to have reached a finished product. I am indebted to my family, advisor Dr. Adam Reich, the Institute for the Study of Human Rights, friendships formed in my graduate cohort, and my kind professors, both past and present. Most notably; however, I am thankful for the conversations had with formerly and currently incarcerated persons — near and far— for sharing their narratives, perspectives, and encouraging this project from the very beginning.

Over the course of three decades, the United States has come face to with a problem she, herself, created. In my opinion, mass incarceration is the biggest civil and human rights crisis of our time. Our nation incarcerates youth in adult-facilities, women are shackled during childbirth, able-bodied incarcerated individuals are forced to produce labor for little (if any) pay, and acts of resistance are commonly met with solitary confinement and heinous abuse. This thesis is dedicated to the incarcerated individuals who remain hopeful, those who’ve risked their lives to draw attention to the gruesome conditions within “correctional” facilities, those who will be freed, and sadly, those whose lives have been or will be tragically taken away at the hands of the state. The subsequent research and findings were made possible by the critical acts of resistance and displays of unity by the individuals most impacted by the criminal legal system. In the quest to stop the rapid growth of the Prison Industrial Complex, I stand in solidarity.

***A Luta Continua****.* ***The Struggle Continues.***

# Introduction

*“We the people of the convicted class, locked in a cycle of poverty, failure, discrimination and servitude: do hereby declare, before the world, our situation to be unjust and inhumane. Basic human rights are systematically withheld from our class. We have been historically stereotyped as less than human, while in reality, we possess the same needs, frailties, ambitions and dignity indigenous to all humans…We are the first to be accused and the last to be recognized. In that spirit, we demand the restoration of our constitutional and human rights.”*

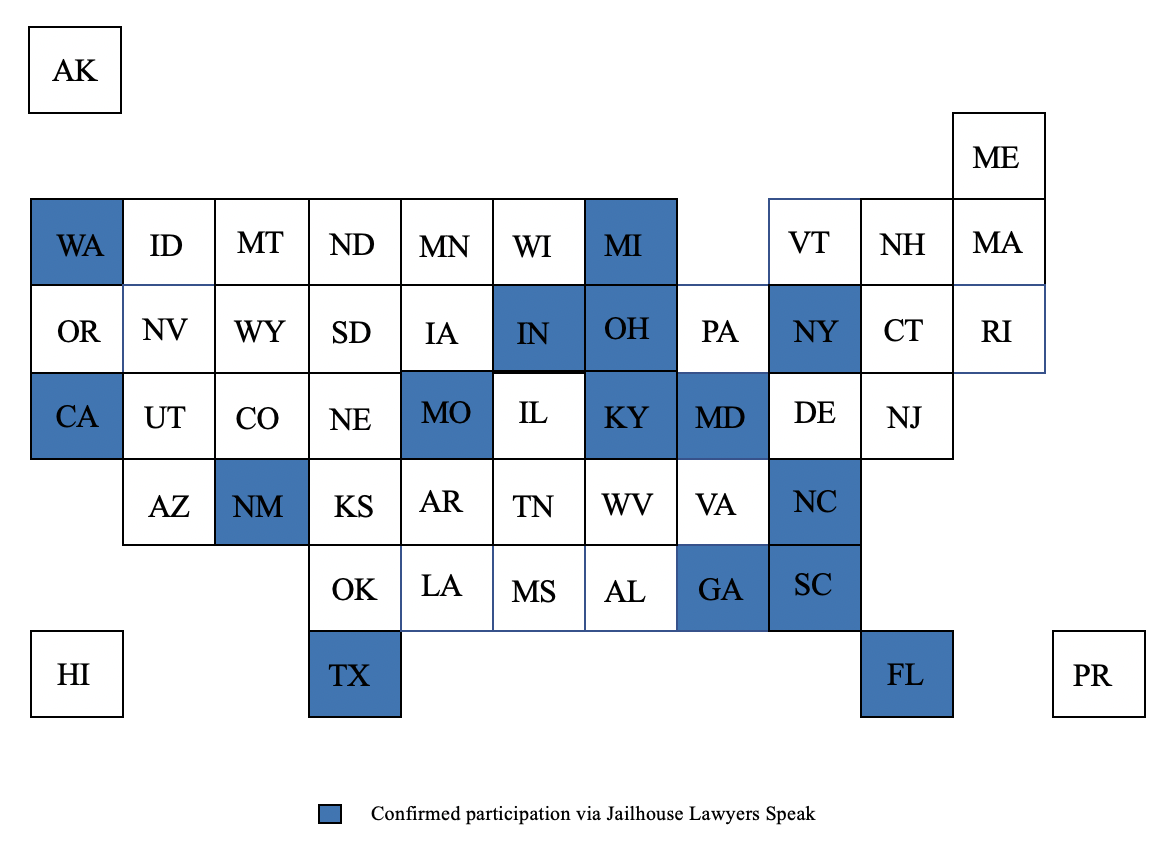
* The United States Prisoners Union Bill of Rights, 1973

In the early afternoon of April 15, 2018, a riot sparked in South Carolina’s Lee Correctional Institution, leaving seven incarcerated men slashed to death and marking the riot as the deadliest in a quarter century.[[1]](#footnote-1) The uprising proceeded for nearly seven hours as those incarcerated recorded videos, cried for help, and begged for medical supplies. In the weeks following the riot, Lee County Coroner’s office released the various individual’s causes of death, citing exsanguination or, “severe blood loss caused by multiple sharp-force injuries.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Though official reports from the 117th Governor of South Carolina, Henry McMaster, and the state’s prison director placed blame on gang violence and contraband, incarcerated individuals around the nation thought otherwise. “Seven comrades lost their lives during a senseless uprising that could have been avoided had the prison not been so overcrowded from the greed wrought by mass incarceration, and a lack of respect for human life that is embedded in our nation’s penal ideology,” said a spokesperson from Jailhouse Lawyers Speak, an anonymous group of incarcerated individuals across the nation. The Lee County Riots were just the tip of the iceberg, paving a way for massive strikes across the nation.[[3]](#footnote-3) These strikes led to further momentum for collective activity and produced a larger agenda for social justice organizing. Ultimately, the goal became raising awareness about human rights abuses behind bars and the systematic marginalization and denial of rights. These strikes (also referred to as prison disturbances) not only detail the conditions under which incarcerated individuals form solidarity groups and take action, but also further explains the means by which collective action and solidarity is formed.

On August 21, 2018, the 47-year anniversary of the death of Black Panther and activist, George Jackson, incarcerated men and women across the nation began a three-week prison strike.[[4]](#footnote-4) Displaying solidarity to the seven slain in South Carolina while standing against poor prison conditions and unfair wages, incarcerated persons throughout the country vowed to, “stage sit-ins, demand prison reform,” and conduct hunger strikes until their demands were met.[[5]](#footnote-5) Persisting for over 24-days, incarcerated individuals relied on secret, contraband cell phones, loved ones, and outside volunteers to spread the word, ultimately publishing demands through Twitter, Facebook, myriad social media platforms, and both major and local newspaper organizations. The incarcerated individuals who engaged in these strikes used these mediums because it was the most accessible means by which to reach large audiences, and in such, had the bandwidth to engage communities who would otherwise not have known about the injustices within the carceral state. Utilizing these mediums is a means by which incarcerated individuals worked to expand the bounds of solidarity and mobilize large audiences to become allies. By doing so, incarcerated individuals who strike engage in collective action at the nexus of social justice orientations and communal empowerment. Individuals strike in a variety of ways to reach or accomplish set agendas, and such activities have been done across the nation.

Figure 1 Confirmed Participation in the National Prison Strike (2018)



In what the New York University’s Brennan Center for Justice deemed the largest strike U.S. prisons have seen, incarcerated individuals in at least 17 confirmed states went without food or drink, staged peaceful sit-ins, and failed to appear for required work duties.[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps the greatest example of incarcerated collective action in recent history, their actions highlight the need for mass incarceration, particularly its impacts and subsequent effects, to be viewed through a critical resistance and human rights lens. It is imperative to view the means by which incarcerated individuals strike as a human rights issue because the imprisoned have been systematically disenfranchised and excluded from being seen as individuals with rights. In such, incarcerated individuals have been rendered right less and effectively non-human. This thesis project and subsequent research proves that incarcerated individuals face a blatant disregard for access to basic human rights and dignity, such as proper wage compensation for produced labor, heinous living and working conditions, and abusive treatment by those who hold power within “correctional” facilities across the United States.

## Framing the Problem

At present, there are over 2.3 million people confined within the nation’s prisons and jails, making the United States the world leader in incarceration.[[7]](#footnote-7) As reported by the Sentencing Project, despite making up nearly five percent of the global population, the nation holds 25 percent of the world’s prisoners, a rate surpassing that of Cuba, China, and Russia.[[8]](#footnote-8) With an increased prison population by nearly five hundred percent within the last 40 years, the mass movement of ‘bodies’ in and out of the system have brought with it, social and moral costs.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC) sits at an intersection of big business, private corporations, politics, economics, and disenfranchisement.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is often thought of as a machine — one functioning with hundreds of gears and gadgets. These bilateral functioning power subscriptions of the complex are rooted in and include, but are not limited to, major themes of incapacitation, deterrence, retribution, and — though rarely addressed — rehabilitation.[[11]](#footnote-11) These themes, alongside court systems, policing, and theories of punishment, function as the gears and gadgets to a system of oppression that again renders incarcerated individuals right less, non-human, and valued only for what they are capable of producing.

Take for example, the incarcerated labor crisis. Across the country, incarcerated individuals are exploited in a variety of labor-intensive industries. Such labor extends to the private sector and can often include arduous work like firefighting on the frontlines of California’s wildfires, producing farm-work under the hot sun, sewing the uniforms worn by fast food employees who will inevitably make three times that of their hourly wage, and catching the fish that is packaged and sold in both local and franchised supermarkets.[[12]](#footnote-12) There are numerous states that require the incarcerated to produce physical labor, often awarding less than a three-dollar wage each day. There are also states that do not pay workers for their labor at all, a disturbing practice that is technically legal.[[13]](#footnote-13) These poor working conditions and low wages, coupled with a lack of resources, violence behind bars, and the prevalence of racial injustice on a national scale, have led incarcerated individuals and activists to form unions, conduct strikes, and take much-needed action. The subject of this research project, exploring the reasons to which incarcerated persons strike, relates directly to the aforementioned gears and gadgets of the PIC and its forceful and atrocious treatment of those she has imprisoned.

## What Constitutes Collective Action? Expanding the Concept of a ‘Strike’

Incarcerated protests, strikes, uprisings, and riots, have often been separated in the field of academic research. In order to construct a comprehensive analysis, there exists a need for all four activities to be examined under the broader category of collective action and more specifically, categorized as varying forms of strikes. More generally, the concept of collective action refers to any movement taken by a group of individuals (at least three or more persons) in pursuit of a common objective. Indicated in a recent Harvard Law Review journal (2019), the term “prison strike” is said to encompass a, “range of collective action that challenges the rule or order of prison administration.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Most notably in the past, prison strikes have been considered to differ from other forms of collective action, particularly that ofrebellions in that they are most commonly, “peaceful forms of resistance” and *typically* do not involve violent threats or use of force.[[15]](#footnote-15) This research, however, makes the case that violence should not be a factor in whether something is or is not considered a strike. This is due to the understanding that violence should not be a determinant of whether an action is a form of collective struggle or collective engagement. Collective action stems from mobilization of solidarity networks toward a larger goal that impacts, or hopes to proport, a change in the conditions that otherwise oppress. With this opinion in context, strikes are said to be a form of collective action in that they are often greater than individual incarcerated protests that would otherwise fail to disrupt prison activity or control. Contrary to past social movement and legal scholars, this present project concludes that riots and rebellions, though often holding elements of violence, are still considered collective action and thus, should be included in the ideals of prison strikes (as seen in the research question). Proposed by a variety of leading scholars in the fields of both criminology and sociology, the carceral state has expanded and evolved, and with it, so too have forms and generally accepted definitions of collective resistance.[[16]](#footnote-16) The changing nature of the carceral state has imposed fluctuating definitions of what it means to resist, how to begin to mobilize toward social justice, and to demand dignity and self-respect with the prison industrial complex.

Since the early 1970s, an era credited with introducing the early prisoners’ rights movement, there appears to be a rise and fall in the occurrences of strikes and other forms of unrest within institutions deemed “correctional.”[[17]](#footnote-17) This occurrence matches a review of news media reports which also appear to surface within public record in a cyclical timeframe. Seeing as though each correctional facility is operated differently with varying rules and regulations, there exists a need to understand what factors lead incarcerated populations to openly strike in one region or facility as opposed to another.[[18]](#footnote-18)

## Research Questions and Significance

From statewide labor strikes and uprisings to the most recent national prison strike of 2018, incarcerated individuals have relied on organizations, advocates, local organizers, persons directly impacted by the criminal legal system, and more recently, scholars, to highlight their struggles and advocate for justice. Drawing from sociological theories of collective action and using media coverage as a data source to collect information on disturbances while incorporating a human rights framework, this research and findings seek to analyze the role of collective action in incarcerated social movements by answering the questions below:

1. What are the conditions under which incarcerated individuals strike? and
2. When such action does occur, what kind of strikes do incarcerated individuals engage in? (hunger strikes, labor/wage-related strikes, riots, boycotts, sit-ins etc.)

## Hypotheses

Based on the existing literature, as reviewed in the following section, I hypothesize that current labor laws and reliance on incarcerated workers serve as the major contributions to the prevalence of prison disturbances and strikes. Incarcerated labor standards differ across different types of facilities, regions, and political affiliations; therefore, I believe the lack of consistency, the types of labor expected of incarcerated individuals, as well as evolving attitudes regarding worker’s rights will contribute to the occurrence of a prison disturbance behind bars. As seen in **Figure 2**, other components may include the behavior of prison authority, living and working conditions, as well as incarcerated employment options. Relying on media organizations and coverage as a central data source, this research project focuses on prison disturbances as presented in newspapers — including both local and national coverage — in efforts to offer further analysis. Mass incarceration, more particularly, the narratives of the incarcerated and other directly impacted groups, are often been historically left out of general human rights conversations. In viewing these critical issues in context, academics, activists, and policymakers may be better able to dismantle what many incarcerated individuals refer to as “modern day slavery.”[[19]](#footnote-19) With these academic statements and following review of literature in mind, I, the researcher, hypothesize the following in relation to the research questions:

**Hypothesis one:** Labor exploitationand poor conditions within prison facilities are the primary

factors leading incarcerated individuals to strike.

**Hypothesis two:** Labor/wage related strikes (incarcerated persons purposeful failure to report for

work as an act of resistance or striving to bring attention to oneself) occur most often within prison facilities.

# Review of Literature

The present literature regarding collective activity, solidarity, and social movements behind bars is perhaps best explained in four sections: the role of resistance in and outside of prison facilities, the historical context of incarcerated labor, the use of case studies and surveys in previous research and academic study, as well as the theoretical frameworks presented to describe why such prison disturbances may occur. These four avenues bring together the existing studies in the academy, further explain the subject’s importance, highlight existing gaps in academic knowledge, and help formulate the hypothesis described in the present research project. It is only after the review of literature that additional research can be performed, thus contributing to the growing body of academic knowledge.

## Collective Action and Resistance in Incarcerated Communities

The history of mobilization and social movements have often been framed as opportunities to create unity among those involved. Though past research is not always presented within the context of incarcerated individuals, drawing from general theories of mobilization prove beneficial within the framework of the present research topic. Academic arguments have been made for the prisoners’ rights movement to be viewed as “sociopolitical,” likening the events to that of the modern civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter, the environmental justice movement, or various women’s movements throughout history.[[20]](#footnote-20) If that framework is to be accepted, academics must recognize the role of mobilization and resistance of incarcerated individuals in relation to obtaining common goals.

It is perhaps most important to note the near cyclical occurrence of disturbances, collective action, and other uprisings behind bars. As displayed in a breadth of historical articles and literature, the relatively frequent occurrence of prison uprisings, strikes, and other tactics have provided the otherwise silenced group of incarcerated individuals with a platform to share their experiences, narratives, and needs. Such occurrences have ultimately given a much-needed voice to the voiceless, laying the groundwork for the reformation of the criminal legal system. In order to understand the importance of such action, additional context of collective action behind bars is required.

According to Goldstone and Useem (1999), two leading researchers in the interdisciplinary of social movements in and outside of correctional facilities, prisons have long been used as testing grounds for social theory.[[21]](#footnote-21) Once incarcerated, persons are placed in locked cages with little personal space and are immediately under the direction of those in position of authority. Spending each waking and sleeping hour, under the direction and guise of another individual, including fellow incarcerated persons, a prison facility is perhaps the perfect testing grounds to watch collective movements find their genesis. Incarcerated social movement scholars, Berger and Losier (2017) described the mere existence of prisons as a central tool for social control.[[22]](#footnote-22) Researchers within the social sciences have long followed disturbances and causes of riots within prison facilities.[[23]](#footnote-23) Some have even sought to explain prisoners’ movements as acts of resistance, preformed out of desperation when seeking better living and working conditions.[[24]](#footnote-24) Just as Berger viewed incarcerated women and men as prone to riot and protest due to their marginalized identity, Haslam and Reicher offer similar sentiment (2011).[[25]](#footnote-25) Making the argument that social psychologists and researchers often shift their focus from oppression to that of resistance, they suggest, “members of low-status groups are bound together by a sense of shared identity,” and thus create effective leaderships and organizations that can promote social change, even in the most extreme situations.[[26]](#footnote-26) In combination with theories as mentioned below, researchers have sought to analyze the notion of prison disturbances as they relate to social movements and the creation of tangible change.

With growing scholarly interests in how organizers, both within and outside of prisons, coordinate and, only in some cases, successfully bring about revolutionary change, it becomes necessary to include that of social movements within mass incarceration. We must also address the demographics and make up of who the nation chooses to incarcerate and why. In a piece on political movements and their relationships with prison, Berger (2013) highlighted the incarcerated and other historically marginalized communities as a main target due to the fact that they are, “the most likely to resist, and have, in fact resisted.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Though no present calculation exists in which one can examine incarcerated labor by racial makeup, it is important to note the disproportionate presence of Black and brown women and men within the carceral system at large.[[28]](#footnote-28)

In putting together the puzzle, it is important to acknowledge the racial makeup of individuals behind bars. A recent Pew Research study indicated a gap between Black and white persons in prison as shrinking; however, disparities and disproportionate sentencing still persists.[[29]](#footnote-29) Updating statistics in January 2020, the United States Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) indicated that at present, Black individuals make up 38.0% of the incarcerated compared to white persons, taking a slight majority of 58.2%.[[30]](#footnote-30) When placed in comparison to federal census data, persons of color make-up a large proportion of the incarcerated community despite being a relatively small proportion of the general population.[[31]](#footnote-31) A significant number of justice-centered organizations including the Prison Policy Initiative find Black individuals, particularly Black men, are incarcerated five times more than white individuals and Latinx persons are two times more likely than white persons to be incarcerated.[[32]](#footnote-32) An abundance of social scientists have also relied on identity-based dynamics as possible explanations for collective action within and outside of prison facilities.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Just as Berger viewed incarcerated men and women as prone to riot and protest due to their marginalized identity, Haslam and Reicher offer similar sentiment (2011).[[34]](#footnote-34) Making the argument that social psychologists and researchers often shift their focus from oppression to that of resistance, they suggest “members of low-status groups are bound together by a sense of shared identity,” and thus create effective leaderships and organizations that can promote social change, even in the most extreme situations.[[35]](#footnote-35) Stott and Drury (2017) offer “structural determinism” and the importance of “social psychological perspectives” as additional explanations.[[36]](#footnote-36) Coupled with theories as mentioned below, researchers seek to analyze the notion of prison disturbances as they relate to tangible change.

Present literature is abundant, examining the experiences of incarcerated people during *riots* and analyzing institutions where uprisings have occurred; however, questions remain regarding the relationship between strikes, resistance, and social movements.[[37]](#footnote-37) Goldstone and Useem (1999) have compared prison riots to that of revolutions, an idea in which Useem then furthered alongside researcher Reisig (2006) by comparing and contrasting prisons in which riots had and had not occurred.[[38]](#footnote-38) As this research project seeks to deviate from examining solely riots and rebellions, moving instead adding the inclusion of strikes and general prison disturbances, a clear need for additional research exists. Among studies conducted thus far, most rely on case study analysis, inmate and correctional officer (CO) survey research, and sociological approaches to why certain groups succeed in launching mass movements. Evaluating the ways in which researchers of the past have approached this topic will ultimately influence the future of the research at hand.

## Incarcerated Labor in Context

Considered a major contributing factor to prison disturbances and prevalent in a variety of academic studies, this review must include the examination of prison labor more generally. Outside of the larger carceral state, labor movements and worker’s rights advocates have garnered the attention of the public through protests and televised marches. Looking into the prison and made apparent in the framing portion of this project, incarcerated labor may play a larger role. According to Flanagan (1989), hard labor has consistently been one of the, “defining characteristics of incarceration throughout the history of American prisons.”[[39]](#footnote-39) First resulting from a tactic to combat the idleness of incarcerated individuals and dating back to 1859, the use of incarcerated labor has transcended through time.[[40]](#footnote-40) From the reliance on chain gangs and galley slaves, most of whom were sent to hard labor as a result of their commission of crimes, to modern examples of furniture building, staffing call centers, and producing farm work, the work of incarcerated individuals has not gone unnoticed.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Much conversation persists around the use of penal servitude. In fact, Hawkins (1983) narrowed down the reasons for which the United States has relied on such service, citing: idleness and inertia, economic forces, and changing policies as leading factors.[[42]](#footnote-42) Researcher Jaron Browne (2007) made the argument that the twenty-first century has brought with it, a return to the systems of labor exploitation.[[43]](#footnote-43) Performing a comparison between private use of prison labor and instances of servitude within state and federal prisons, Kang (2009) found the U.S. to play a prominent role in promoting labor rights and standards abroad, while failing to address the nation’s own instances of rights violations. Adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly in 1990, the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR) supported the Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners. From this document arose a rather controversial take on employment and generalized prison labor:

“Conditions shall be created, enabling prisoners to undertake meaningful remunerated employment which will facilitate their reintegration in to the country’s labour market and permit them to contribute to their own financial support and that of their families.”[[44]](#footnote-44) (Resolution 45/111)

Despite opinions that labor should be meaningful (though some argue against its existence), issues of prison labor remain unphased, constantly used and relied upon to continue the economic system.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Though research in the past has been performed, especially that seeking to connect labor with disturbances behind bars, there appears to be a gap within recent research focusing on such issues. This idea is subsequently amplified when looking at the demands of the most recent national prison strike of 2018, a major event that created space for this project. Social action and social change within the framework of criminology and human rights have been present in academic theses and dissertations; however, within recent years, very few updated academic journals highlight the pressing concern. When brought within the context of collective action and social movements behind bars, past strikes, riots, and other prison disturbances were in large, a response to poor working conditions and low wages, thus establishing the need to perform additional research.

## Case Studies and Survey Research

Gresham Sykes’ (1958) study of New Jersey prison riots lead researchers to believe that prison officials imposed strict security measures, thus leading to unrest within facilities.[[46]](#footnote-46) The researcher continued, positing the idea that in many prisons, there presents a unique opportunity in which there is a perfect level of disorder and leniency that ultimately results in the formation of collective action.[[47]](#footnote-47) Barak-Glanz (1981) identified “inmate control” as one of the “main models of prison management,” emphasizing the importance of an incarcerated individual’s collective identity.[[48]](#footnote-48) Examining over 15 prison riots occurring between 1971 to 1989, Kimball (1989), Useem et al. (1996) found that it was the actions of prison administrators that tended to sow the seeds of uprisings and unrest.[[49]](#footnote-49) Additional cases of political prisoners and the power dynamics of those behind bars have been discussed in a myriad of research.[[50]](#footnote-50) Among each study and critical analyses of the present prison system, a hierarchy is present in which administrative actions appear to promote disturbances and unrest within the facilities.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Survey research appears to be the main method of analysis when assessing action within correctional facilities.[[52]](#footnote-52) More specifically, prominent incarcerated ethnographers and social science researchers have often created and supplied incarcerated individuals with a series of survey questions in hopes of gaining broader understanding of their experiences within correctional institutions. Periodically, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) performs mass data collections, issuing surveys to a variety of security-level correctional facilities. Seeking to gage the incarcerated community’s opinions on issues of capital punishment, correctional officer authority, parole, and jail conditions among a variety of other topics, such surveys are often a great beginning points in assessing opinion. As mentioned in the work of Useem and Reisig (1999), Wilsnack (1976) conducted a study after mailing surveys to the largest prisons in each state.[[53]](#footnote-53) Though Wilsnack was unable to generate a random sample, his findings indicated that “neither tightening security nor potentially disorganizing reforms” were associated with prison riots. Two decades later, McCorkle et al. utilized generated data obtained from the Census Bureau and the BJS, measuring the impact of prison management on individual and collective violence. Following the two major studies, Useem and Reisig (1999) returned to collective action research and distributed surveys to a population sample of adults within maximum security facilities assessing theories of prison management, conditions and their relationship to riots, uprisings, and general disturbances behind bars. Though much of the study finds focus around riots as opposed to strikes, the work of past researchers can still be applied to present research. Much of the survey-based literature fails to include strikes as a variable, thus providing an opportunity for additional research to fill the existing gap.

## Theoretical Framework

Evaluating current peer reviewed journals and scholarly articles, much of the present research conducts study on the basis of both inmate balance and administrative control theory. Examining collective action using data from a survey of adults within maximum and minimum-security prisons, Useem and Reisig (1999) cited both theories as potential explanations for the frequent uprisings within the nation.[[54]](#footnote-54) Under the model of *inmate-balance theory*, collective action occurs when prison officials, “go too far when asserting their authority.”[[55]](#footnote-55) This theory also hypothesizes that when asserting their power, prison officials offset the balance of shared authority, angering incarcerated persons and creating a breeding ground for rebellion. Examples of asserting authority commonly include abusing power, singling out certain incarcerated persons for reasons unrelated to conduct, limiting one’s free time (which is already rarely afforded and often cut-short in facilities due to danger risks), and enacting disciplinary violations in instances deemed unnecessary or otherwise irrelevant. In contrast, *administrative-control theory* was described as a rationale in which violence and disturbances within prisons were a direct response to unstable, “divided, or otherwise weak management.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Administrative control theory further posits that collective forms of violence, particularly riots and rebellions, are in part, a result of inmate balance problems, making them, “complimentary rather than competing approaches.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Though these two theories have been used to explain violence behind bars, specifically, the claims may help describe other forms of incarcerated collective action in prisons.

Establishing an additional theoretical framework, Haslam and Reicher (2006; 2011) explained the tactics and methods of the incarcerated to *social identity theory*.[[58]](#footnote-58) The theory, the researchers explain, “examine the ways in which prisoners could come together through their mutual identification to challenge the authority of guards rather than succumb to it.”[[59]](#footnote-59) Social identity theory seeks to examine how group membership allows people to exercise collective agency and change their own personal circumstances, an explanation seeming likely to those incarcerated within state and local correctional facilities.[[60]](#footnote-60) Additionally, researchers have provided examples in which prison officials lose control over their facilities, similar to what happened during the Attica Rebellion and again in other, smaller prison riots as explanations of unrest. Whereas those theories have rooted their conversation and academic argument in violence, this thesis topic and subsequent project did not.

In addition to the more traditionally accepted sociological theories and themes that have emerged (particularly criminological and varying social sciences within fields of law and society), it is important to include theories rooted in human rights and other interdisciplinary studies. Italian philosopher, Georgio Agamben, coined the concept of “bare life,” conceiving of human life in terms of privilege. Though often presented in a context in which militia implement dehumanizing techniques to turn captive people into “bare life” or otherwise, less than human, Agamben’s argument makes the case that when people are caged or even enslaved, victimization by those in power and references to being “less than” are utilized to defeat and keep persons from revolting. In his work, “Homo Sacer: Soverign Power and Bare Life” (1995), Agamben describes a protagonist whose life is considered unworthy.[[61]](#footnote-61) Linking the theory to ideas of sovereignty, the author ultimately argued that people may be motivated to join unions or other collective organizations in hopes of avoiding “bareness” and being stripped of one’s identity. Though primarily researching women, feminist scholar Patricia Owens rooted additional scholarship in bare life, arguing that narratives in resistance and peace networks should be viewed as stories and demands for justice.[[62]](#footnote-62) The same can be said about the movement behind prison walls and within acknowledged incarcerated collective action. This idea transcends disciplines and can be presented in the context of incarcerated persons nationwide. For instance, during the early prisoners’ rights movements of the 1970s, incarcerated individuals came together and crafted a bill of rights cited in the introduction of this research project. Opening their document with a declaration of a situation to be, “unjust and inhuman,” the authors chronicle nine articles, most of which make reference to the concept of bareless-ness, lack of individual identity, continued abuses, and blatant violations of human rights:

“Our class has been unconstitutionally denied equal treatment under the law. We are the first to be accused and the last to be recognized. We hereby assert before the tribunal of mankind that our class ought not to be subject to one whit more restraint, nor one ounce more deprivation than is essential to implementing the constructive purposes of the criminal law. Prisons should no longer be dim, gray garrisons designed to isolate human waste. Rather, they must mirror the outside world if we are to harbor any hope that its residents will ever rejoin it. In that spirit, we demand the restoration of our constitutional rights.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

With this in context, the relationship between incarcerated collective action, social justice, individual identities, as well as the mere experience of being imprisoned, are categorically linked as a means of mobilizing for dignity, acknowledgement, and rights.

Most of the present academic publications seek to explain what causes uprisings and riots; however, very little literature strives to combine riots with general strikes or incorporate newspapers and rhetoric in assessing disturbances behind bars. In fact, at present, no academic research has used ‘the media’ or recorded journal articles (nonacademic) as the main source of analysis to studying unrest within facilities. This kind of work should be performed in that it expands a social science understanding and can better explain the movements and experiences of incarcerated persons across the nation. As previous contributions to bodies of literature have been performed primarily by sociologists and criminologists, this research project presented a unique opportunity to bring a human rights approach, alongside subsequent theories and ideas, to the questions at hand. The results of previous studies, as well as the questions researchers have posed upon completion of their academic projects, suggest both practical and theoretical importance, establishing a framework for new research and additional analysis.

# Data and Methods

## Dataset

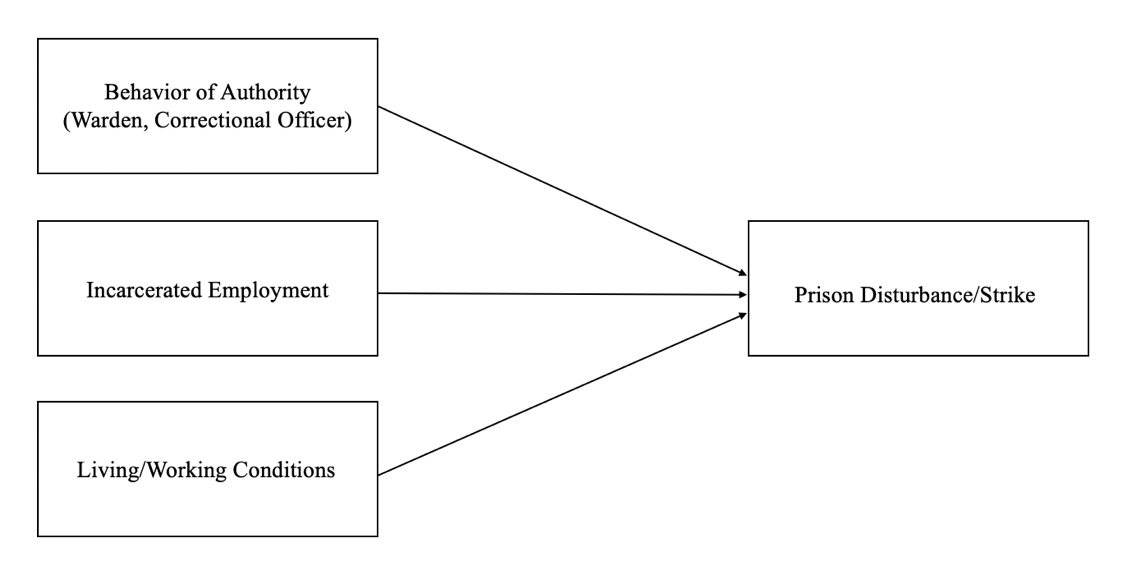
Seeking to answer the question, “what are the conditions under which incarcerated persons strike” the researcher was posited with obtaining information regarding collective action that has occurred within prisons. In order to collect data of utmost relevance, this thesis research relied upon a document analysis and took a mixed methods approach. The main body of work began by examining newspaper content as well as the narratives presented within headlines and the inclusion, or lack of, specific voices within the media. To do this properly, the researcher relied on some of the largest media-producers across the country, specifically focusing on newspaper coverage. For the purposes of this project, the newspaper organizations were chosen and divided as follows: *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and the *Tribune Business News*, a combination of Tribune-based coverage throughout the nation. Chosen in part due to their credibility, publicly accessible archives, and ability to highlight not just local news, but events at a national scale, the four newspapers make for an all-encompassing approach to examining narratives of incarcerated collective action. Reviewing newspaper headlines as well as the content within, the researcher also utilized the *Associated Press* (AP) to capture potential missing coverage. Unlike the other newspapers mentioned and utilized in this project, the AP is a not-for-profit agency with significantly more employees and a greater international audience reach. As the oldest newspaper among those cited, its inclusion in the project is essential to ensuring proper coverage and maintaining adequate records.

According to All Slides, a national, multi-partisan media bias rating service, The New York Times and Washington Post are considered to produce left-leaning content while USA Today and the Associated Press radiate within a central rating.[[64]](#footnote-64) Due to the Tribune’s wide array of coverage and varying businesses across the nation, All Slides was unable to identify a specific affiliation. Strategically choosing the top-rated news media organizations, the researcher ensured coverage accounted for political affiliations and most importantly, represented perspectives from various regions across the United States.

The newspaper data was collected solely by the author of this research project and was obtained from archival databases within *LexisNexis*. A primarily academic, legal, and business focused online database, *LexisNexis* holds electronic access to legal and journalistic documents dating back to the early 1960s. Providing a digital archive of most major newspaper headlines and stories, researchers are able to input specified search parameters and filter results in a variety of ways. Upon indicating specified search terms, *LexisNexis* reveals newspaper articles, displaying the headline, article lede, publishing date, and body of the article. Results can then be saved to an online folder or downloaded to individual harddrives for further review. As of 2006, the company holds the largest database for public records, legal documents, and other related archival information.[[65]](#footnote-65) For disclosure purposes, the researcher relied solely on *LexisNexis* to generate a database of newspaper coverage from the above media organizations. The database results were further organized in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and is subsequently explained in the method of analysis portion of this project. Within the newspaper content, special attention was paid to the dates, incarcerated person’s demands, and both the city and state in which the disturbances took place. Again, the newspaper content and dataset are presented in additional detail in the methodology portion of this paper.

## Dependent and Independent Variables

Figure 2 Conceptual Model, Independent and Dependent Variables



The singular dependent variable in this study is the occurrence of a general prison disturbance or strike within a correctional facility. This occurrence is indicated by the newspaper coverage of an event and can include a protest, hunger strike, labor strike, sit-in, uprising, or riot. Each of these events display a form of collective action lead by incarcerated participants and are impacted by the independent variables within the conceptual model above.

The three independent variables (behavior of authority, incarcerated employment, living/working conditions) presented in **Figure 2** represent the factors that may influence or otherwise spark prison unrest. Linking primarily to early criminological theories of “administrative control,” the behavior of authority includes the treatment and subsequent abuse of persons deemed to have power. Authority figures include directors, facility wardens, correctional officers (CO), medical personnel, and other professional staff that can actively choose to enter and exit facilities on their own accord. Another factor of authority is the receipt of a paycheck for interacting with the imprisoned. This can include, but is not limited to resource officers, visiting teachers, librarians, government officials, and others. Incarcerated employment encompasses the labor positions and job duties in which incarcerated persons choose or, in most cases, are required to perform. On a federal prison scale, 100% of able-bodied sentenced incarcerated persons are required to work in prisons.[[66]](#footnote-66) Job positions vary by facility but can often include conducting electrical work, washing clothing, cutting hair in facility-based barber shops, working in the kitchen, and performing custodial work. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, prison labor is, “good for a company’s bottom line” and is considered a “cost effective labor pool.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Drawing from a 2006 study by the Vera Institute of Justice, conditions of confinement often include a prevalence of violence, a lack of medical care, and administrative segregation or solitary confinement.[[68]](#footnote-68) Accounting for such experiences, the living/working conditions variable are included within the conditions of the prison facility.

According to this setup, one or all of the dependent variables have the ability to impact or bring about a prison disturbance. These variables, alongside others found within the generated database, were coded methodologically in the researcher’s excel spreadsheet and are further explained in the method of analysis section below.

## Method of Analysis

The qualitative dataset was created and conducted for the primary purpose of collecting coverage regarding varying instances surrounding prison protests, strikes, uprisings, and generalized disturbances in the United States. Working with a relatively large dataset for the general scope of analysis and thesis time constraints, the researcher limited data collection to encompass publicly available articles written between January 1, 1970 through December 31, 2018. *LexisNexis* search parameters were limited to news, the indicated timeframe, and included the separation of keywords (with use of ‘and’ and ‘or’): “prison protest” “prison strike” “uprising” and “riot.” Each news media organization was added to the search separately. For example, the search parameters utilized keywords and were filtered to search for The Washington Post. Upon reviewing those results, the search was inputted again, but looking at articles for the New York Times. This strategy was also conducted to review Tribune-based coverage, USA Today, and the Associated Press. Once *LexisNexis* generated initial results, the researcher introduced additional filters to ensure coverage focused on the United States and U.S. owned territories and screened for specifically prisons, rather than both prisons and jails.[[69]](#footnote-69) It is important to note the unit of analysis is the disturbance or event itself, rather than the quantity in which certain events were covered by media outlets.

Subsequent searches and filters ultimately resulted in 127 authentic news media results between January 1, 1970 through December 31, 2018. These results were then transferred to the researcher-owned excel spreadsheet and were organized to include the article title, location of events, context of the coverage, demands made by the incarcerated persons and the type of unrest indicated in the article. These categories were divided into columns and rows.

Table 1 *LexisNexis* Data Collection

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | | |
| Article Date | Article Title | Newspaper | Date(s) of Disturbance |
| Year | State(s) | City(ies) | Type of Unrest |
| Context | Demands | Number Involved | Injuries(?) |
| Deaths(?) | Hostages(?) | Concession | Voices Present |
| Researcher Notes |  | | |

Following the initial collection of raw data, newspapers that repeated the same event or coverage were saved in a separate document for classification and record keeping and then removed from the database. The researcher also removed coverage that failed to provide enough context or additional relevant information surrounding the period of unrest as well as any article that failed to include the city or state in which the disturbance took place. In order to verify such eligibility for inclusion or exclusion in the final dataset, the content of each newspaper article was read by the researcher twice and the spreadsheet was reviewed by another Master of Arts degree candidate in the Institute for the Study of Human Rights. Based on a review of data, the researcher concluded with a database of **107** authentic instances in which prison disturbances served as the main focus of the newspaper article within the selected timeframe. The content within this sample number (**Table 1**) included the year and timeframe of the event, specified demands, a contextual account of what occurred during the event(s), and full quotations from one or more affiliated persons. For disclosure purposes, the researcher-generated database was only accessed by the researcher, the faculty advisor, and on one occasion, an additional Master of Arts degree candidate in the Institute for the Study of Human Rights.

Upon organizing and reviewing the sample, the researcher created a coding scheme to begin analysis of the dataset. The incarcerated individuals’ demands (**Table 2**) were categorized and coded using identifiable numbers ranging from one through five. These demands were found in direct quotations or derived from the specific wording and rhetoric in the body of the newspaper articles. The numbers were assigned in no particular order. Labor and wage related demands (coded 1) most aligned with coverage that surrounded collective action concerning prison-sponsored employment. A theme overwhelmingly present in previous research on incarcerated collective action, particularly riots, solitary confinement (coded 2) accounts for news articles in which incarcerated persons expressed concern over administrative segregation and facility lockdowns. As noted in the dependent and independent variable conceptual model, solitary confinement differs from general prison conditions (coded 3), which place emphasis on the facility and opportunities within “correctional” space. Authority (coded 4) was indicated in articles citing concern over correctional officers and poor treatment by those with power. A code for ‘other’ (coded 5) was used to account for demands that were either unspecified or outside the scope of more generalizable categories.

Table 2 Coding Scheme, Demands

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Demands Code; n=107 | |
| **1** | Labor, Wage-Related |
| **2** | Solitary Confinement Concerns |
| **3** | Generalized Prison Conditions |
| **4** | Authority |
| **5** | Other |

A similar coding scheme was designated for the type of prison strike or unrest that occurred within the facility (**Table 3**). Categorized and coded using numbers ranging one through five, again, in no particular order, the codes accounted for hunger strikes, labor strikes, sit-ins, uprisings, and riots. In efforts to maintain consistency, the variables are defined as follows and classification was either indicated in the newspaper article or assigned by the researcher:

* **Hunger strike:** the act of refusing to eat in order to make a protest; a period when someone (such as a prisoner) refuses to eat, usually to show strong opposition to something.[[70]](#footnote-70)
* **Labor Strike:** an intentional refusal to report to work duties; from the perspective of incarceration, labor strikes may include individuals remaining in cells or other portions of the correctional facility rather than completing assignments or obeying commands from authority figures.
* **Sit-in:** an event, often public, in which a person or group enters a [public] place and refuses to leave until certain demands have been agreed upon.[[71]](#footnote-71)
* **Uprising: words:** an act of opposition by many people in one area against those who are in power.[[72]](#footnote-72)
* **Riot\*:** An act (often sporadic) of defiance or disorder, often marked by violence, by a group of incarcerated individuals, often against prison administrators, correctional officers, or other prisoners.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Table 3 Coding Scheme, Type of Prison Strike/Unrest

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Unrest Code; n=107 | |
| **1** | Hunger Strike |
| **2** | Labor Strike |
| **3** | Sit-in; Generalized Protest |
| **4** | Uprising |
| **5** | Riot |

Additionally, binary codes were assigned to further understand whether or not incarcerated voices were present within each newspaper article. Though difficult to measure, the voices of those most impacted by unrest and collective action should be amplified and always considered in interdisciplinary studies and other social science research. A code of 0 was assigned to articles that failed to include an incarcerated voice and a code of 1 was provided during incidents in which directly impacted incarcerated persons were included.

Table 4 Coding Scheme, Incarcerated Voices

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Incarcerated Voices Code; n=107 | |
| **0** | No incarcerated Voice Present in Article |
| **1** | Incarcerated Voice Present in Article |

The coding decisions derived from the original research questions, the themes presented within the newspaper articles, and previous scholarly literature. Based on researcher curiosity, additional codes (**Appendix A**) were generated for the different newspapers that were relied upon to generate the overall dataset as well as the regional breakdown of coverage. Following the coding process, the researcher performed a general quantitative analysis, generating pie graphs that are further detailed in **Appendix B**.

# Findings and Discussion

In order to determine the statistical significance of data, one-way tables and crosstabulations were performed for all of the coded dependent and independent variables (**Appendix A**). These tables help to further summarize data from both *LexisNexis* as well as Microsoft Excel into a concise format for further analysis and allow for the generation of visual pie charts and graphics as seen in **Appendix B**. Based on the type of calculations performed, analysis, one-way tables, and the overall sample number (n=107), the tests in this research rendered myriad statistically significant results. A variety of information can be obtained from the tables below, including, but not limited to the types of demands made by incarcerated persons, the most prevalent and documented forms of unrest within prison facilities, the regional make-up of where unrest most commonly occurs, news media organization producing the most coverage surrounding incarcerated-lead movements, and their subsequent percentages.

Overall, the utilized newspaper coverage (**Table 9**) produced 107 authentic instances of collective action and unrest within facilities across the nation. As mentioned throughout this research, the 107 instances of collective action were utilized as the main dataset for the subsequent analysis detailed below. The Associated Press provided the most coverage, though not the majority, producing 27.1% of the sample.[[74]](#footnote-74) The Washington Post, a significantly smaller media organization based in the District of Columbia, produced the least coverage with 15.9% of the sample (**Appendix A**). The New York Times (17.8%), USA Today (18.7%), and Tribune-based coverage (20.6%) each indicated similar percentages of coverage osculating around 20% within the sample.

The data results in **Table 5**, seeking to understand the demands made by the incarcerated, indicate generalized prison conditions (35.5%) and concerns over solitary confinement (17.8%) as the biggest factors that lead incarcerated persons to strike. For instance, in 1983, incarcerated individuals in a Delaware Correctional Center collectively organized a labor strike in response to poor living conditions.[[75]](#footnote-75) Lasting for *at least* 13 days, incarcerated individuals purposefully failed to report to work and expressed concerns over overcrowding, cramped conditions, and put-forth a desire for expanded visitation hours.[[76]](#footnote-76)

“The approximately 1,000 [inmates] were allowed out of their cells Tuesday night, but were not allowed off their floors and have not been given any fresh air since the strike began Monday, said the spokesman, David Cross… The warden and his staff met with 23 [inmates] for about half an hour Tuesday afternoon, according to Cross, who would not comment on the progress of the talks. The striking prisoners presented the warden with a list of 40 demands that prison officials say they are studying, Cross said. The strike began Monday over the issue of tighter restrictions imposed on the inmates in the wake of the June 26 escapes of four prisoners. The demands include a request that visiting hours be expanded; that telephone rights of [inmates] again be unlimited; that overcrowded conditions be relieved, and that higher wages be paid for work assignments.”

According to the article, originally reported by the Associated Press, the participating striking incarcerated persons presented the warden with a list of over 40 demands, including requests for expanded visitation hours, unlimited access to telephones, and a reduction to the facility’s recent overcrowding. Considered an outlier among the other labor-related strikes in the researcher’s database, in this instance, the warden noticed the strike and actively brought incarcerated leaders together in hopes of remedying problems and encouraging the incarcerated participants to return to work. There were no additional details regarding concession or solutions to concerns.

In Crescent City, California, over 1,000 incarcerated persons in Pelican Bay State Prison, constructed a hunger strike noting a desire for improved conditions and an end to the “SHU,” a segregated housing unit more commonly known as solitary confinement or “the hole”.[[77]](#footnote-77) Quoting incarcerated person, Ronnie Yandell, the Tribune-affiliated article captured the shared experiences of Yandell and other individuals living in segregated housing units where they spend approximately 23 hours in “concrete, bathroom sized cells.”[[78]](#footnote-78) The incarcerated individuals within the SHU silently organized, spreading their message by way of note passing and word of mouth, and ultimately began a hunger strike that would later spread across the state of California. As opposed to the above instance at the Delaware Correctional Facility, the Pelican Bay incarcerated demands, particularly their quest for life without solitary confinement, went seemingly unmet (no action was taken), an unfortunate theme among many of the recorded incidents within the researcher’s database and in the prisoner’s rights movement more historically.[[79]](#footnote-79) The article failed to indicate how the strike ended; however, subsequent research and additional review indicated their 3-week action as ‘unsuccessful.’[[80]](#footnote-80)

Contrary to the researcher’s initial belief, incarcerated labor and wage-related demands as well as the behavior of those holding positions of power made up a relatively small percentage of demands, holding 9.3% and 8.4% of all 107 authentic articles respectively. Though occurring less frequently, labor related strikes have and continue to occur. In Stormville, New York, at least 40 incarcerated persons were transferred away from their maximum-security prison after correctional officers allegedly discovered their plans to organize a facility-wide work stoppage.[[81]](#footnote-81) According to the New York Times, the incarcerated persons claimed concern over “low” and “inadequate wages,” and were removed shortly before they could engage collectively.[[82]](#footnote-82)

“Forty [inmates] were transferred out of a maximum-security prison in upstate New York yesterday because correction officials said they had discovered that the [inmates] were planning a strike. The discovery added to widespread worries among prison officials that [inmates] statewide were planning a work stoppage or protest that could begin on New Year's Day. Over the last few months, [inmate] advocates, prisoners' relatives and prison guards have reported widespread organizing of [inmates] in at least three state prisons in preparation for a work stoppage. The transfers from the Green Haven Correctional Facility in Stormville yesterday was the most recent evidence that a strike was imminent.”

Just days later, all 2,100 incarcerated persons at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York, were confined to their cells after an unspecified number refused to report to their work duties.[[83]](#footnote-83) It is assumed that this action was either in solidarity with or in response to the earlier Stormville labor strike attempt.

The results in **Table 6** further explain the common types of unrest most likely to occur within prison facilities around the nation. Examining the percentages in the one-way table, riots and hunger strikes were the most common forms of collective action, totaling 29.9% each. Labor strikes (11.2%) and sit-ins (9.3%) appear to occur infrequently; however, when they have occurred, it was typically the result of numerous persons, not just a handful of individuals, acting in pursuit of change. Between September 1980 and January 1981, incarcerated persons in Marion, Illinois, staged, “one of the longest work stoppages in the history of the federal prison system.”[[84]](#footnote-84) Responding to rumors that vocational training would be subsequently removed from the facility, over 549 incarcerated participants stopped reporting for work, causing the prison facility to lose Bureau of Prison-funded contracts.[[85]](#footnote-85) Contrary to the two instances of collective action mentioned earlier, in Illinois, the Warden and government officials conceded to demands, ultimately expanding vocational training, education courses, and introduces crafting equipment into the facility. Further overlaying results in **Tables 5** and **6** and producing a crosstabulation graphic (**Appendix B**), the researcher concludes hunger strikes and riots to be direct results of quests for improved prison conditions.

The percentages presented in **Table 7** indicate the disproportionate make-up of newspaper coverage that included incarcerated voices compared to those that did not. Coding based on the presence of direct quotes from incarcerated individuals, an overwhelming majority (85.0%) of coverage cited a directly impacted person within the facility. Aside from the 15.0% of articles that cited incarcerated persons (usually by way of letter submissions, telephone calls, or through indirect contact with an incarcerated person’s family member or loved one) articles primarily cited spokespersons for prison facilities such as, but not limited to, the Department of Correction’s public relations team, staff associates, and correctional officers that may or may not have been present during the period of unrest. There was not enough information to determine if a certain news organization was more or less likely to cite incarcerated individuals. Additionally, there was not enough information to significantly review whether or not incarcerated voices were cited more during particular kinds of unrest as opposed to others.

## One-way Tables

Table 5 Results, Incarcerated Demands (One-Way Table)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Demands; n=107 |  | |
| Labor, Wage-Related | 10 | 9.3% |
| Solitary Confinement Concerns | 19 | 17.8% |
| Generalized Prison Conditions | 38 | 35.5% |
| Authority | 9 | 8.4% |
| Other | 31 | 29.0% |

Table 6 Results, Type of Unrest (One-Way Table)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Unrest; n=107 | | |
| Hunger Strike | 32 | 29.9% |
| Labor Strike | 12 | 11.2% |
| Sit-in; Generalized Protest | 10 | 9.3% |
| Uprising | 21 | 19.6% |
| Riot | 32 | 29.9% |

Table 7 Results, Incarcerated Voices (One-Way Table)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Incarcerated Voices; n=107 | | |
| No Incarcerated Voice(s) Present | 91 | 85.0% |
| Incarcerated Voice(s) Present | 16 | 15.0% |

Table 8 Results, Coverage by Region (One-Way Table)

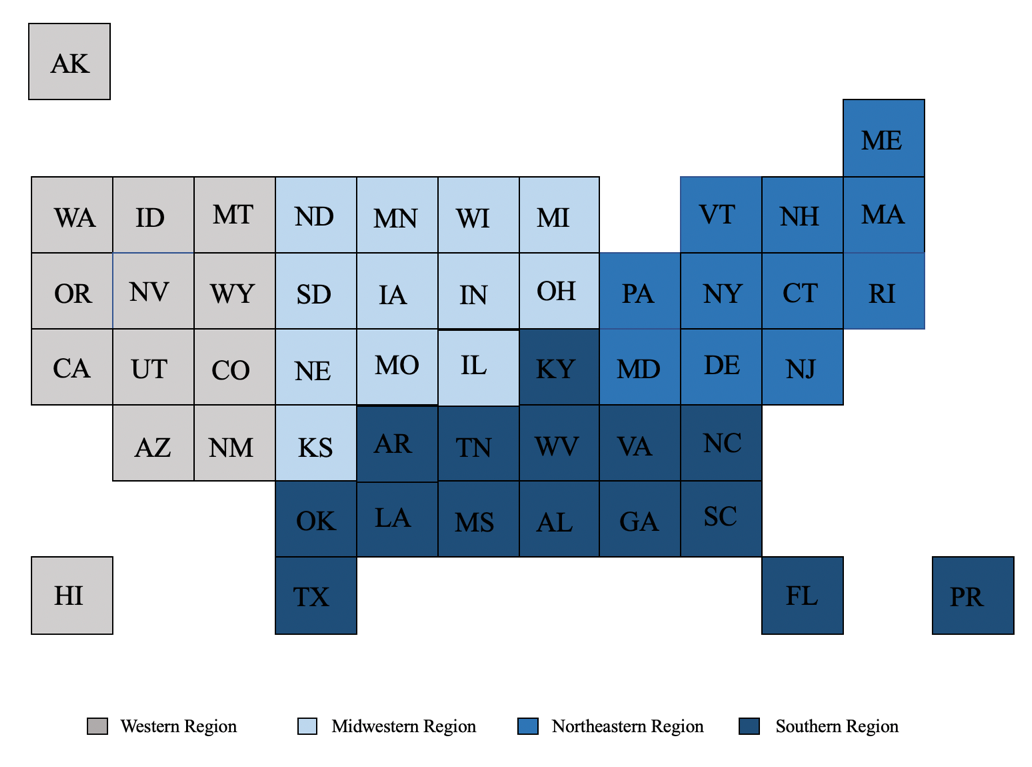
|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Regional Breakdown; n=107 |  |  |
| Western Region | 37 | 34.6% |
| Midwestern Region | 16 | 15.0% |
| Northeastern Region | 19 | 17.8% |
| Southern Region | 25 | 32.7% |

Table 9 Results, Newspaper Coverage (One-Way Table)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Newspaper Coverage; n=107 |  |  |
| Associated Press (AP) | 29 | 27.1% |
| Washington Post | 17 | 15.9% |
| New York Times | 19 | 17.8% |
| USA Today | 20 | 18.7% |
| Tribune Business & Affiliates | 22 | 20.6% |

## Additional Findings

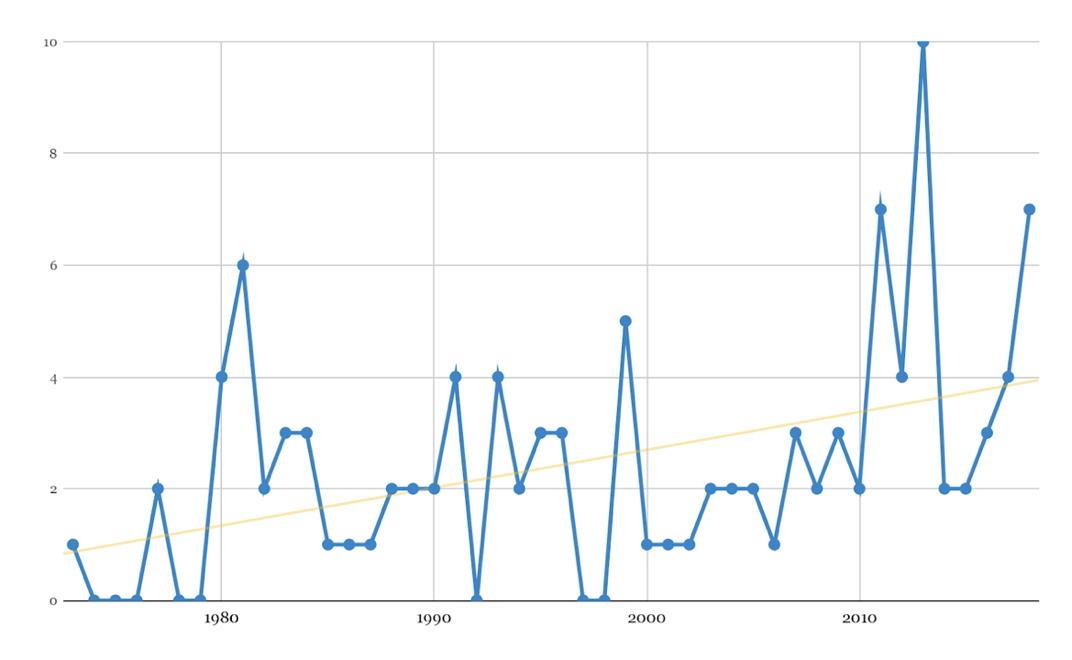
Figure 3 Conceptual Model, Regional Map of the United States



Conducting further analysis based on regional location in Table 8, the researcher coded and analyzed the general locations in which prison unrest took place. These regions are identified not just by geographic location, but also by, more broadly, cultures of incarceration. Based on the review of literature and general understanding of the labyrinth structure of the criminal legal system, scholars understand differences in prison experiences based on the state, type of facility, and even the culture of incarceration. States considered among those in the eastern region and those alongside the west coast tend to have lax labor policies, often providing options to incarcerated individuals regarding what type of labor they wish to perform, whereas, states identified within the southern regions often require incarcerated labor with no additional consideration. This same concept can be applied to the living conditions in facilities. States encompassed within the southern region have recently been identified as dangerous and inhumane with incarcerated individuals recently pleading with the Department of Justice to address what they deemed cruel and unusual.,[[86]](#footnote-86) As the sample used to complete the research is not inclusive of one particular state, but to the nation as a whole; generalizability is likely. With this in mind, the researcher divided the United States and territories into four sections (Figure 3): the Western, Midwestern, Southern, and Northeastern regions.

The one-way tables and analytical results (Table 8) indicated that the Western region (34.6%) as having the most covered incidents of collective action and unrest. The Southern region was not far behind, totaling 32.7% covered prison disturbances. Fewer instances of social action took place in the Midwestern and Northeastern regions with covered incidents totaling 15.0% and 17.8% respectively. To understand the significance of these results, the researcher reviewed the percentage of the incarcerated population in each region compared to the coverage. Of the 107 analyzed incidents, 25 separate incidents of unrest took place in California, a state holding an incarceration rate of 581 per 100,000 persons (including prison, jail, immigration detention, and juvenile programs).[[87]](#footnote-87) This, in part, explains the large percentages of disturbances taking place in the western regions of the United States. The smaller number of disturbances in the mid-western region are likely attributed to the fewer prison facilities and subsequently smaller incarcerated population.

Figure 4 Incarcerated Collective Action by Year (1970-2018)



Examining the timeframe in which prisons strikes and other forms of unrest occur, a graph and overlaid trend line (**Figure 4**) display the number of collective events obtained via newspaper articles per year. In additional review, the researcher confirmed what was proposed in the introduction and review of literature sections. There is a relatively cyclical rise and fall of prison disturbances with sharp increases in incarcerated collective action approximately every ten years. What is, however, less explained and likely to be explored in future research, significantly more strikes took place during certain years as opposed to others. This concept further falls in line if one is to break down periods of incarceration into three distinct categories: the rise in radicalism and the early prisoners’ rights movement of the 1970s, rise of mass incarceration between the 1980s-90s and the present-day prison industrial complex beginning in the early 2000s and continuing through the present day. In 1999, there were five instances of unrest within facilities. In 2013, there were 10 reported strikes within the same sample of 107. Most recently, the year 2018 warranted seven instances of unrest, one of which was the largest national prisons strike, garnering the support of facilities in at least 17 confirmed states (as seen in the introduction of this thesis research). Though the present project’s results reveal truths in the idea of three historical categories creating the additional context of collective action behind bars, further analysis, likely exploring population fluctuations, policy changes, and political or government turmoil may paint a firmer and clearer image. Further research is suggested to assess what additional factors may play a role in the timeframe in which collective action occurs. Regardless, presently, collective action, particularly activities led by incarcerated persons, is on the rise and is expected to continue upon the completion of this research project.

# Conclusion

*“In the widening class struggle in America, we prisoners are the lowest of the low…If the courts, the legislature, and many of the people refuse to recognize our humanity, what recourse do we have? Behind the dream is the twisted and broken bodies of literally thousands of our brothers and sisters who have been killed trying to deal with the system…Let us put the petty differences aside that the system has created for us, and come together with a strong and righteous union. Let us make sure that it remains true and strong and real to the needs of the Convicted Class”*

* The United States Prisoners Union Bill of Rights, 1973

This thesis research was initially constructed to analyze incarcerated social movements and examine the conditions that ultimately lead incarcerated individuals to act collectively. Centered on broadening the idea of prison strikes, the researcher included broad forms of collective action and hoped to provide a new approach within the academic study of social movements. Much of the existing research surrounding that of the prisoners’ rights movement and other social action placing focus on incarcerated populations was conducted decades ago; additionally, no projects at the time of this study utilized newspaper coverage of unrest events as a dataset. These incarcerated-centered movements, however, are gradually making a return to social science and subsequently, scholarly study.

This research study went beyond traditional social movement research by utilizing a dataset comprised entirely of newspaper coverage and content from January 1, 1970 to December 31, 2018. Individually coding newspaper articles based on the demands made by incarcerated individuals, the type of collective action (hunger strikes, labor strikes, sit-ins, general protests, riots, uprisings), location of disturbances, and whether or not incarcerated voices were cited within newspaper articles, the present study made significant determinations with a variety of statistically significant findings. In-depth analysis resulted in interesting findings and set the stage for the review of the hypothesis; however, the key findings below are important to developing a deeper understanding of the research:

* Hunger strikes (29.9%) and riots (29.9%) are the most common types of prison unrest. Collective sit-ins (9.3%) are the least likely form of collective action to occur within prison facilities in the United States.
* Aside from the general ‘other category’ most incarcerated demands are in relation to generalized prison conditions (35.5%) and concerns over solitary confinement (17.8%). Very few (8.4%) newspaper articles cited immediate concerns over prison authority as a leading cause of collective action.
* A majority of media-covered strikes occur in the Southern regions (32.7%) and Western regions (34.6%). California was the state with the most strikes occurring between January 1970 through December 2018.
* More often than not, newspaper articles fail to include the narratives of incarcerated persons. Less than 15% of examined newspaper articles cited a directly impacted incarcerated person in their written and published work.

## Review of Hypotheses

In both the introduction and reviewing the literature in relation to this project, the researcher cited numerous criminology and sociology studies that highlighted prison labor, particularly through the lens of exploitation, as a contributing factor to prison unrest. Considered by Flanagan’s 1989 work as a “defining characteristic of incarceration,” prison labor and subsequent exploitation impacts all able-bodied incarcerated persons in the United States.[[88]](#footnote-88) Contrary to labor as a causal concern, McCorkle et al (1995) suggested poor prison management as a leading contributor of unrest.[[89]](#footnote-89) These and other potential causes cited in academic literature created the framework for this project’s hypotheses and research variables.

Based on prior academic literature, the researcher hypothesized that labor exploitation and poor conditions would be the primary factors leading incarcerated individuals to strike. This hypothesis was only partially supported. Examining and further evaluating the data generated from newspaper coverage, the researcher found that generalized prison conditions, particularly the lack of resources and debilitating facilities (inadequate bedding, mold-filled housing units, improper plumbing, exposed wires, flooded buildings) made up 35.5% of the demands leading to collective action. Of the sample size, 29% of the data was marked “other,” meaning demands were unspecified or otherwise unclear (**Table 5**).

Seeking an answer to the second research question, “when strikes do occur, what category do they typically fall into?” the researcher relied on sociology and criminology text surrounding collective action and resistance. As noted earlier, previous research primarily surrounded the prevalence of violent rebellions and riots; however, researchers Montgomery and Crews (1988) made a case for the rising occurrence of both hunger and labor strikes within prisons.[[90]](#footnote-90) Contrary to this ideology, Gresham Sykes’ famous New Jersey study in the, “Society of Captives,” argued that most forms of unrest in facilities were forms of violent rebellions, or what many social scientists refer to as riots.[[91]](#footnote-91) Drawing from the first hypothesis and existing research, the researcher proposed labor strikes as the most common among incarcerated persons. This hypothesis was not supported. Within the sample, only 11.2% of strikes were categorized as labor related. Instead, the most common forms of unrest were riots and hunger strikes, both making up 29.9% (**Table 6**).

**Hypothesis one:** Labor exploitationand poor prison conditions are the primary factors leading

incarcerated individuals to strike. **Partially supported — *Prison conditions are the primary factors leading incarcerated individuals to strike.***

**Hypothesis two:** Labor/wage related strikes (incarcerated persons purposeful failure to report for

work as an act of resistance) occur most often within prison facilities. **Not supported — *when collective action does occur, it is primarily in the form of a hunger strike or riot.***

## Implications of Theory

As indicated and further explained in the one-way data tables and significant findings portion of this study, myriad factors influence the likelihood of a prison disturbance or strike occurrence. Reviewed in the theoretical framework, the four theories (*inmate balance theory, administrative control theory, social identity theory, and ‘bare life’ theory*), help explain different components of this thesis research. Presented in the theoretical framework section of this project, both *inmate balance* and *administrative control* were based on results from a 2011 analysis of incarcerated survey data and conversations with those deemed to have power within a prison facility.[[92]](#footnote-92) In their analysis, researchers Haslam and Reicher suggested collective action within facilities was often the result of correctional officers displaying “too much” authority and subsequently losing control over the prison.[[93]](#footnote-93) Additionally, the two are said to complement each other, often happening in tandem within prison facilities. The present research only partially supports both inmate balance and administrative control theories. Of the 107 cases in which incarcerated individuals participated in unrest, just 8.4% stemmed from concern over the prison’s authoritative figures. This result, though valuable, may not be considered significant or generalizable at a larger scale.

This research study placed focus on the collective action and demands made by incarcerated persons; therefore, theories that center their experiences best assist in explaining the data and results. In review, social identity theory, initially proposed to, examine the ways in which prisoners come together, “shines light on the factors that encourage incarcerated persons to act collectively.[[94]](#footnote-94) As the researcher’s generated database and subsequent analysis confirm, incarcerated individuals are most likely to act collectively when there are concerns over labor and wages, solitary confinement, and general prison conditions. Social identity theory, though rarely utilized to explain the experiences of the incarcerated, further explains the need to highlight incarcerated narratives and collective action within prison facilities.

## Sample Generalizability

The sample of data used to complete this research was inclusive of major newspaper articles mentioning prison strikes, riots, unrest, and other disturbances between January 1, 1970 and December 31, 2018. The information was originally obtained from over 127 published articles by the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, Tribune-Based news coverage, and the *Associated Press*. Accounting for repetition and removing data with insufficient context and other essential details, the final sample included an n of 107, describing accounts of varying disturbances within United States prison facilities.

Seen in the findings and discussion section of this paper, strikes and other forms of unrest can occur for varying reasons such as prison conditions, labor exploitation, and the reliance on solitary confinement and certain types of collective action are not particular to specific regions across the nation. Unless studied on a national scale, sample generalizability is fairly limited (when taking a broad, national approach, this study is generalizable); however, the procedures utilized and obtained results can be reframed to fit the needs of a similarly-designed study. For example, as state wide version of this research can be produced by creating a database with the specified state’s local newspapers and regional journalist organizations.

## Dataset Limitations and Potential Sources of Error

Though this thesis expands our understanding of incarcerated collective action in a new way, there are, as with many social science studies, a number of limitations and acknowledged potential sources of error. As stated in the data and methods section, this research relied primarily on the generated databases and archived documents within *LexisNexis*. Though *LexisNexis* provides researchers, students, and other account-holding members with extensive services and access to legal briefs, documents, and journal articles, the process of generating refined and filtered search results proved difficult. In order to generate newspaper articles that properly aligned with search parameters and the overall goal of the thesis project, the researcher had to rely on extremely specific terminology and punctuation marks. For instance, failing to include an extra parenthesis, quotation mark, or comma would lead the online-service to provide different newspaper results, proving difficult to pause when collecting data in one sitting, taking breaks, or resvisiting saved information. Additionally, the student membership component of *LexisNexis* used by the researcher did not have access to all major newspapers across the nation. Though the five newspapers were chosen due to their credibility, they were also among the few that could generate enough results for a statistically significant sample. In review, *LexisNexis* faces categorization errors in that certain newspapers have been purchased by new organizations, making archives difficult to locate without exact search terms and parameters. Similarly, the use of newspaper coverage as the main dataset can be viewed as both a limitation and source of error. Relying on newspaper coverage and rhetoric, the researcher must account for the bias of news organizations and the decisions of individual journalists to accurately highlight the unrest and disturbances within prisons. The researcher was mindful of this, especially when discussing independent and dependent variables.

Most notably, the author of this research project was the sole researcher and coded the data online, by hand, and by means of excel spreadsheets or additional documents. Within this research, there is the acknowledgement of the potential for human error. In subsequent review, much of this potential error was remedied by reviewing each article and data entry two times for both content and completion. Though not as detailed in their review, an additional Master of Arts degree candidate reviewed the dataset contained in the spreadsheet and coding schemes for potential errors.

## Areas for Further Research

Stated throughout this research project, though scholarly journals have highlighted collective action, this thesis is among the first to bring newspaper coverage into an academic study, particularly as a main dataset and unit of analysis. Moving forward, there exists an opportunity to explore the prevalence of prison unrest in a deeper and more detailed manner, likely possible with a longer data collection timeframe. As this project relied on five major news media organizations and publishers, future research could expand the dataset to include local news coverage, broadcast television transcripts, incarcerated-lead newsletters, and other multimedia projects like images, podcasts, and social media posts. Concerning newspaper coverage, specifically, it is important to ask what riots, uprisings, and strikes have occurred that never grasped the attention of news organizations or publications. Smaller acts of resistance likely never made it to large newspaper articles or publications and thus, were absent from this study. Research questions should also be expanded to explore why certain narratives are missing from written works.

Since the national prison strike of 2018 organizations like Jailhouse Lawyers Speak and other collectives have actively relied on social media platforms to voice their concerns and share images of prison conditions with the greater public. A recent podcast, *Ear Hustle San Quentin*, features bi-weekly content produced by incarcerated individuals within California’s San Quentin State Prison and has been shared throughout correctional facilities across the nation. These newformed elements of multimedia are growing in popularity and may particularly, among other mediums, amplify untold narratives and include the voices of incarcerated persons themselves. Researchers must speak directly with currently incarcerated persons, family members of those impacted by the criminal legal system, and must not overlook the experiences of those who are formerly incarcerated as well.

Additionally, due to the time parameters and research constraints, the present project focused on analyzing the conditions of unrest within prisons for men. Though research, particularly around collective activity and disturbances within facilities, is continuously growing, it often times fails to include the narratives and experiences of those housed in prison facilities for women. According to the Vera Institute of Justice, women are the fastest growing incarcerated group in both prisons and jails, especially in rural areas.[[95]](#footnote-95) Though outside of the parameters of this present study, future research, scholarship, and time should be taken to explore and address women’s experiences and collective activity while incarcerated.

These suggested forms of qualitative research are virtually impossible without the solidarity, displays of unity, and willingness of incarcerated persons to put their lives on the line. Living within a carceral state, each act of violence, form of protest, collective action, and revolt put forth by incarcerated persons, comes with great risk and should be acknowledged within academic literature, especially within the interdisciplinary fields of criminology, sociology, and human rights. As a majority of prior research has centered around riots in a quantitative manner, there exists, a possibility to perform a rhetorical analysis, examining interpersonal connections between incarcerated individuals and how that may translate to collective action. No matter what route is taken, future research must amplify and uplifts the voices and individual experiences of incarcerated persons. Failure to do so would deny their humanity and importance in this interdisciplinary study and beyond.

## Where do we go from here? Moving Forward

Much of the existing research surrounding incarcerated collective action and that of the early prisoners’ rights movement was conducted numerous decades ago; however, such focus is gradually returning to social science and academic research, particularly at the nexus of human rights scholarship. Opening with and framing this research topic around the record-breaking national prison strike of 2018, the present rhetoric surrounding resistance, prisoners’ rights, movements throughout history, collective action, and other movement work presents renewed opportunity to focus on the experiences of incarcerated individuals.

On September 9, 2018, the final day of the 17-state prison strike, incarcerated persons proved ‘successful’ in galvanizing a large movement and gaining the attention of individuals around the nation. During the strike and in following news cycles, myriad newspapers, both large and small, as well as those utilized in this study, highlighted the demands, desires, requests, and experiences of the incarcerated persons living behind bars. The nation-wide strike grasped the attention of social media outlets and users alike, generating a trending topic on the first day of the collective action. Though difficult to measure exact parameters of success, especially when concerning incarceration and action taking place in facilities generally absent from the public eye, the incarcerated persons and allies attempts to generate trending topics and spark conversations on a variety of social platforms, and grasp the attention of communication-based organizations should be viewed as a major progress point in the growing movement for prisoners’ rights. Since the official end of the 2018 national prison strike, and noted throughout this research, conversation has persisted concerning that of poor working wages, depleting resources, heinous prison conditions, overcrowding, solitary confinement, and concern over incarcerated persons’ health and general lived experiences while behind bars. Despite difficulties in obtaining data, addressing significant generalizability, and other limitations (detailed in the dataset limitations portion of this study), this research holds growing importance, highlights the often-overlooked experiences of incarcerated persons around the nation, and can one day lead to policy changes, greater awareness, as well as a reformation of the criminal legal system among other things.

The national prison strike of 2018 is easily credited among the most intriguing mobilizations of an otherwise marginalized group in recent history. Frameworks of social identity theory and administrative control theory, and especially the emerging ‘bare life’ theory, may explain why incarcerated individuals — members of one of the most vulnerable groups within the nation, sparked strikes and other disturbances across the U.S. Living in a carceral state, in which one’s livelihood is consistently under direct scrutiny and reliant upon those holding positions of power, the experiences and desires of incarcerated persons must be acknowledged and further assessed within the interdisciplinary studies of criminology, sociology, human rights, and other social-centered avenues. Incarceration at the nexus of human rights must also be discussed within the greater public, likely through news coverage, individual conversations, and accessible publications. Based on present research and observed experiences by the author of this project, a greater shift in narrative and public opinion can be brought about with the introduction of focused academic studies on incarcerated collective action. Just as it has been important to study the civil rights movement, women’s movements, environmental movements, that of Black Lives Matter, and a variety of others, there is growing space for the inclusion of and experiences had by those behind bars. As first seen predominately throughout the 1970s, a new-aged prisoners’ rights movement is occurring, bringing with it, a collection of gender identities, races and ethnicities, personal experiences, desires, and cultures.[[96]](#footnote-96)

By seeking to answer the questions: what are the conditions under which incarcerated individuals strike; and when strikes do occur, what categories do they typically fall into, results prove that if willing, facilities across the nation can better equip incarcerated populations with proper resources. Though not at the root of this present thesis project, subsequent findings also establish a case for decarceration, alternatives to incarceration, and rooted in some of the literature within this project*,* abolition. Finding ultimately that poor prison conditions and a general lack of resources are the leading factors contributing to unrest across the nation, this research contributes to important academic literature and provides an inexplicable link between the study of human rights, sociology, criminology and other social sciences. Noting that incarcerated voices are often lacking, if at all present, in newspaper and other media coverage, the results of this research have the ability to pave the way for future study of incarcerated experiences, specifically concerning collective resistance, social action and social change. Jailhouse Lawyers Speak and other organizations working directly with and among the nation’s incarcerated populations, often refer to a Latin phrase common among resistance circles:

A Luta Continua. The findings of this project further confirm — *The Struggle Continues*.

# Appendix A Data Codebook

N=107

**Unrest Code**

1 Hunger Strike

2 Labor Strike

3 Sit-in; Generalized Protest

4 Uprising

5 Riot

**Demands Code**

1 Labor; Wage-Related

2 Solitary Confinement Concerns

3 Generalized Prison Conditions

4 Authority (Warden, Correctional Officer)

5 Other

**Incarcerated Voices Code**

0 No Incarcerated Voice(s) Present in Article

1 Incarcerated Voice(s) Present in Article

**Newspaper Coverage**

1 Associated Press (AP)

2 Washington Post

3 New York Times

4 USA Today

5 Tribune (Business & Affiliates)

**Regional Breakdown**

1 Region 1 (West)

2 Region 2 (Midwest)

3 Region 3 (North East)

4 Region 4 (South)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Demands Code; n=107 | | |  |
| 1 | Labor, Wage-Related | 10 | 9.3% |
| 2 | Solitary Confinement Concerns | 19 | 17.8% |
| 3 | Generalized Prison Conditions | 38 | 35.5% |
| 4 | Authority | 9 | 8.4% |
| 5 | Other | 31 | 29.0% |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Unrest Code; n=107 | | |  |
| 1 | Hunger strike | 32 | 29.9% |
| 2 | Labor Strike | 12 | 11.2% |
| 3 | Sit-In; Generalized Protest | 10 | 9.3% |
| 4 | Uprising | 21 | 19.6% |
| 5 | Riot | 32 | 29.9% |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Incarcerated Voices; n=107 | | |  |
| 0 | No Incarcerated Voice Present | 91 | 85.0% |
| 1 | Incarcerated Voice Present | 16 | 15.0% |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Newspaper Coverage; n=107 | | |  |
| 1 | Associated Press (AP) | 29 | 27.1% |
| 2 | Washington Post | 17 | 15.9% |
| 3 | New York Times | 19 | 17.8% |
| 4 | USA Today | 20 | 18.7% |
| 5 | Tribune (Business & Affiliates) | 22 | 20.6% |

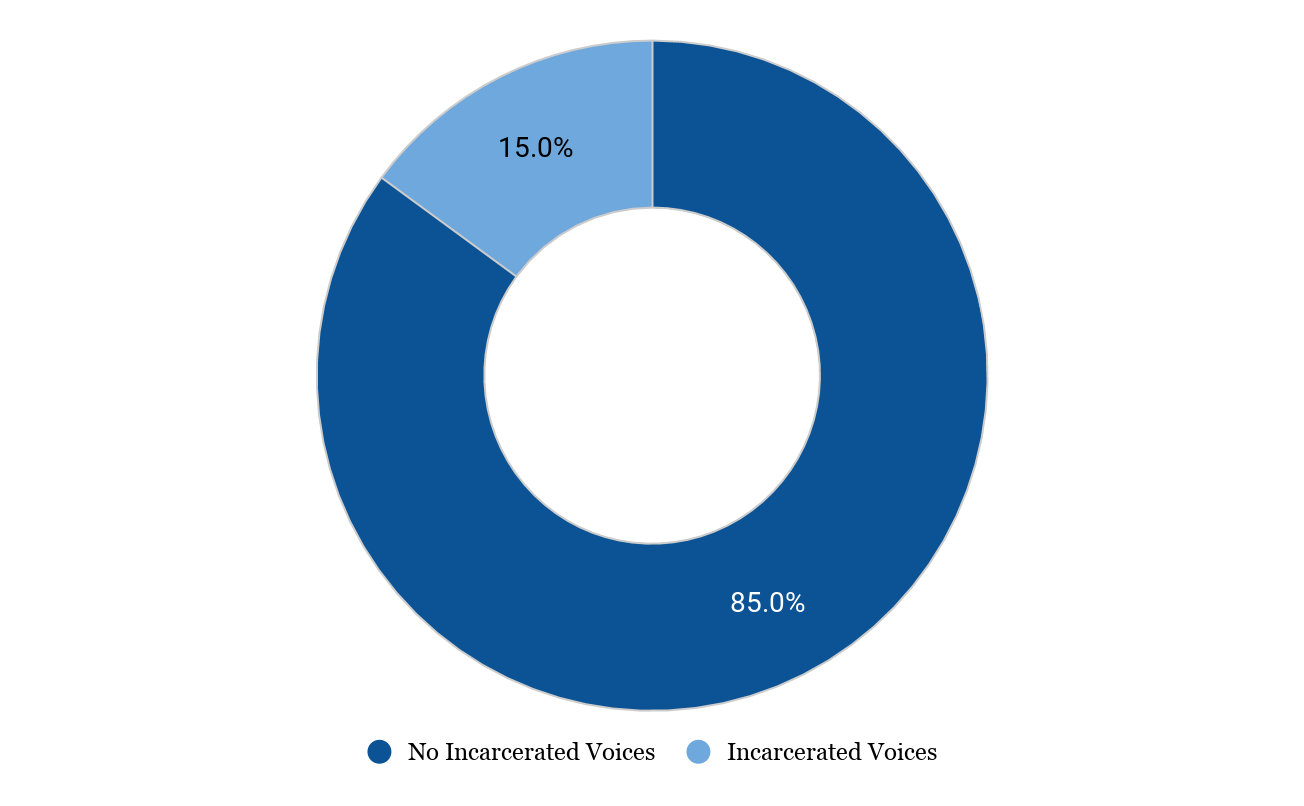
|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Regional Breakdown; n=17 | | | |
| 1 | Western Region | 37 | 34.6% |
| 2 | Midwestern Region | 16 | 15.0% |
| 3 | Northeastern Region | 19 | 17.8% |
| 4 | Southern Region | 35 | 32.7% |

*The dataset and subsequent codes were designed by the researcher and utilized Microsoft excel to generate graphics, percentages, and additional charts.*

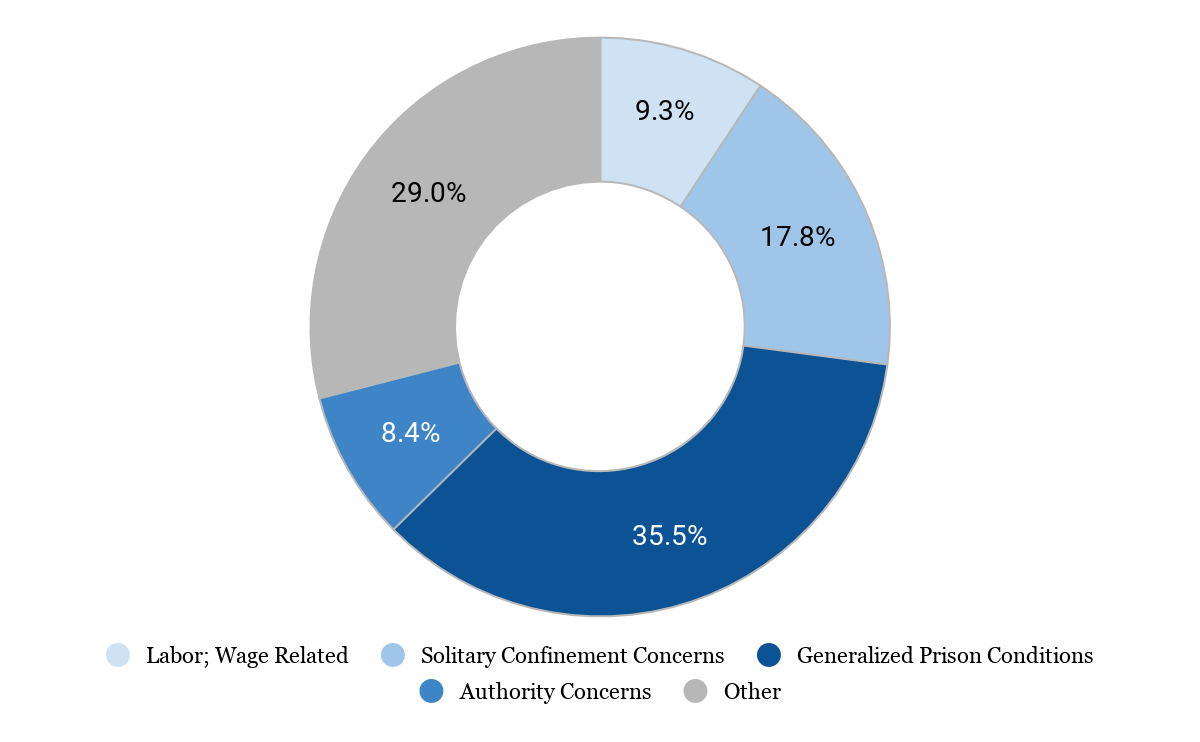
# Appendix B Data Tables and Charts

Were incarcerated voices present within the newspaper article?

N=107

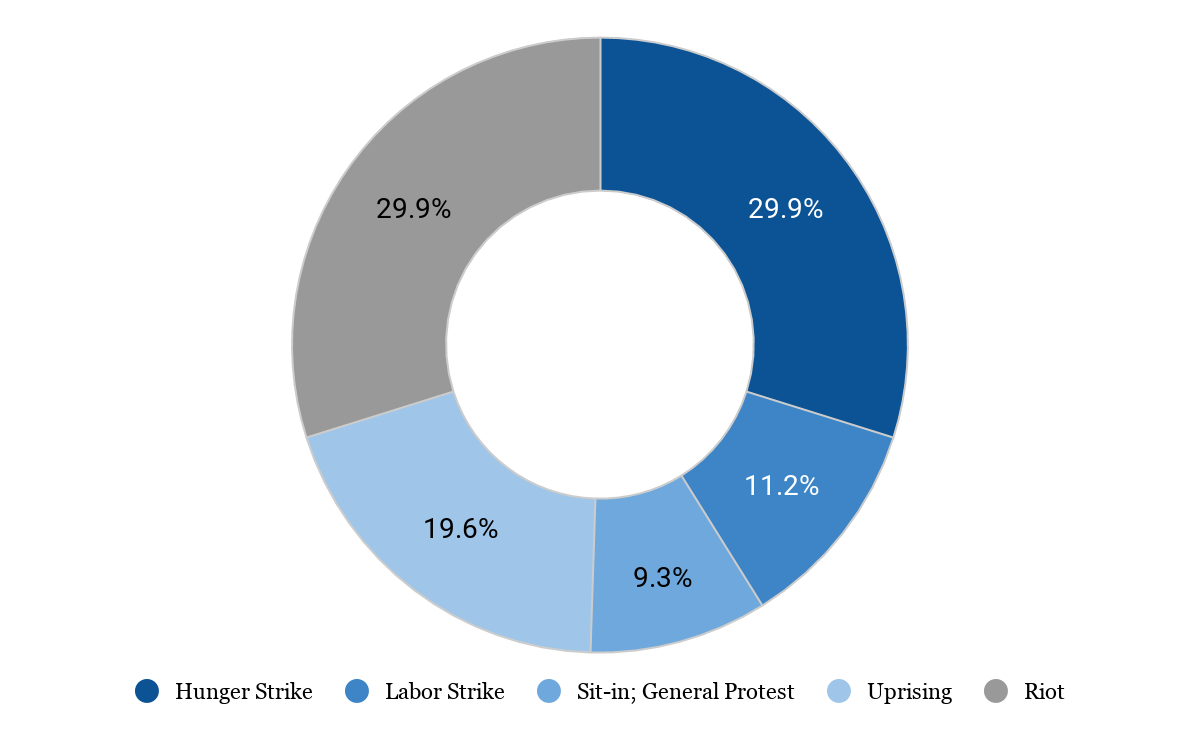


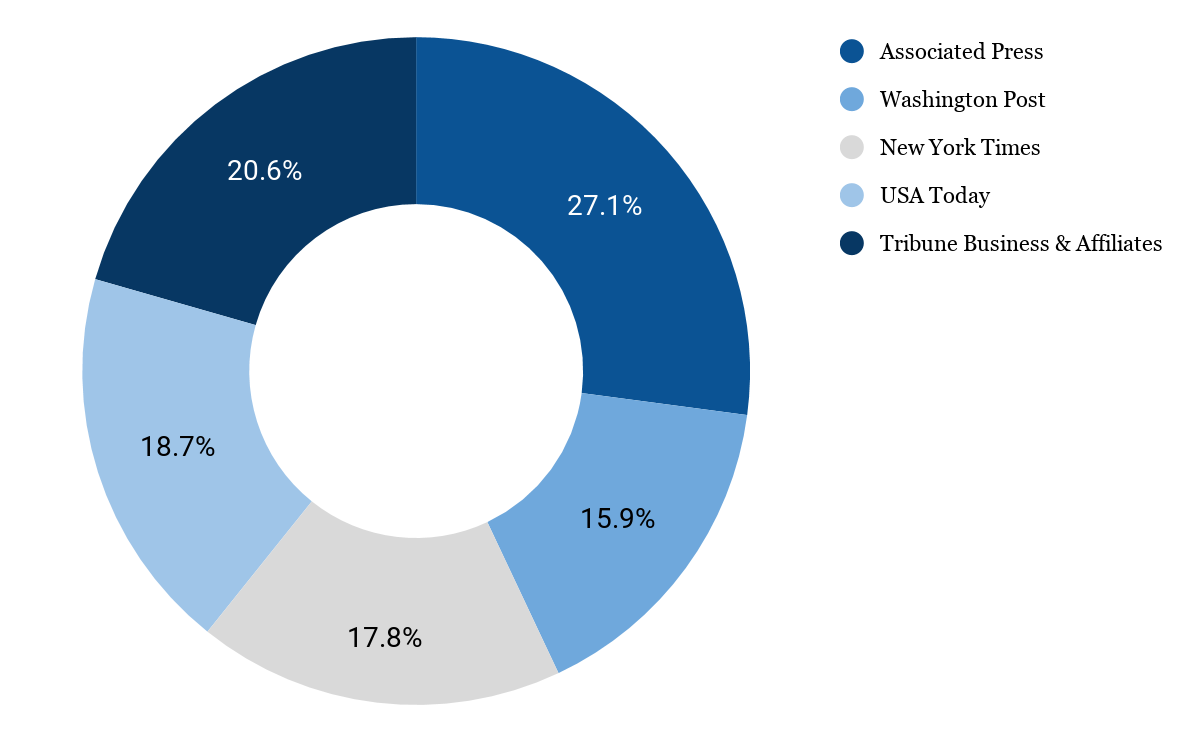
Demands made by Incarcerated Individuals  
N=107



Type of Unrest within the Prison Facility

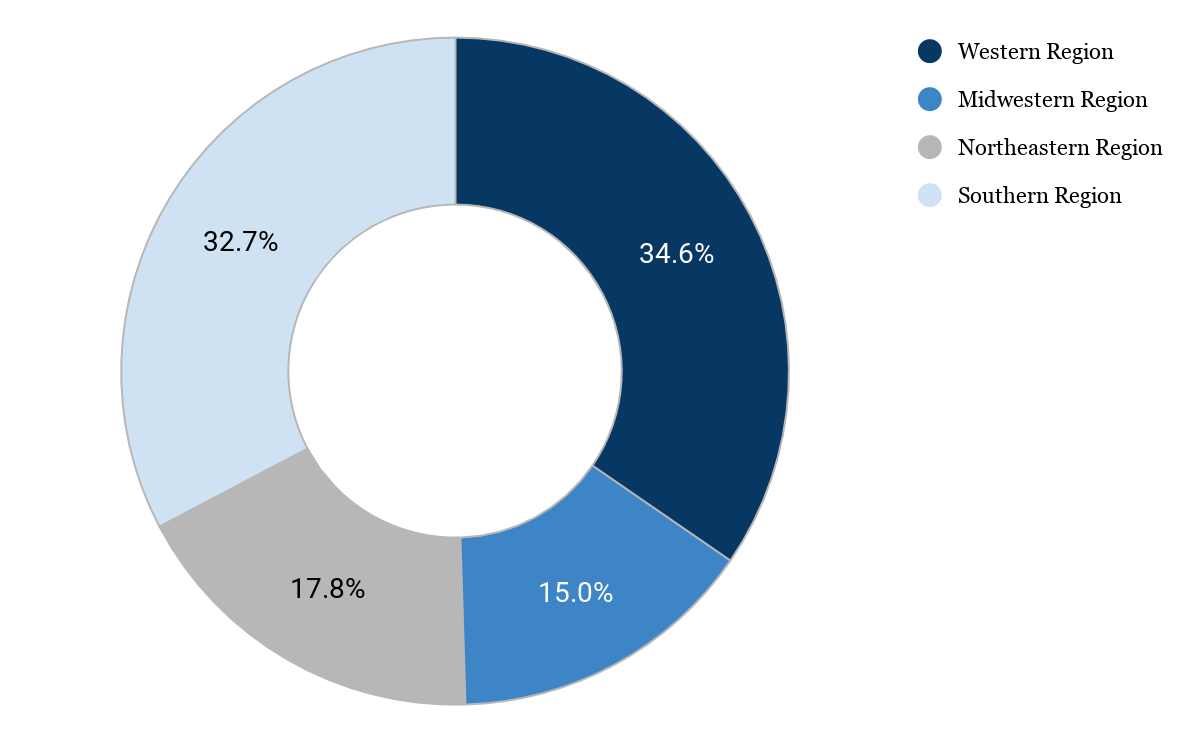
N = 107



Prison Unrest by Newspaper Coverage  
N=107  


Prison Unrest by Region

N=107



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