

# Inmate-on-Inmate Prison Violence in Chile: The Importance of the Institutional Context and Proper Supervision

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## Abstract

In this article, using a quantitative approach, we analyze interpersonal, inmate-on-inmate physical violence in Chilean prisons, using administrative records on collective violence, provided by the Prison Service for the period 2014 to 2017. Violence behind bars is problematic as it threatens inmates' fundamental rights such as personal safety but also because it undermines efforts to maintain an environment prone to inmates' social reintegration. Our data showed a sharp increase in the number of collective fights, from 808 in 2014 to more than 4,000 in 2017. In terms of the predictors, being in a private prisons as well as a greater ratio of inmates to guards were associated with increased collective fights for each of the 4 years we examined. Two additional predictors were statistically significant, yet only for 2017: A higher average criminal involvement score and a smaller ratio between inmates/staff were both associated with increased violence. Despite the fact that prison violence has not yet reached the scale or level of brutality that can be seen in other parts of the region (i.e., Brazil), there are signs of concern that authorities should take into account, particularly the rapid increase in collective fights in just a 4-year period and the recent

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social turmoil that has taken place in Chile, whose impact cannot be seen yet from these data. In terms of recommendations, we suggest that authorities should prioritize efforts in four areas: (a) to gather better data on prison violence, including some reliable data on importation variables (age, criminal history, and nationality); (b) to provide prison guards with tools to anticipate and mediate conflicts; (c) to revise and possibly modify the way prisoners are transferred to different facilities, and (d) in sum, to promote prison environments that can be more legitimate and supportive to inmates' reintegration.

### **Keywords**

prison, violence, inmate-on-inmate, Chile, administrative data

### **Introduction**

Most research on prison violence has been conducted in developed nations, with only few studies addressing the issue in developing countries. Only more recently has this topic received more public attention in the Latin America region, as a result of the brutality of some events that have taken place, for example, in the prison riot in Manaus, Brazil, in January 2017.<sup>1</sup>

Latin American prisons greatly differ from their counterparts in either North America or Europe. For example, most European prison systems usually have infrastructure conditions that allow inmates for at least some minimum privacy standards, whereas most Latin American facilities are extremely overcrowded, with inmates sleeping in collective spaces or even in bathrooms. Moreover, many facilities in the region date from the 19th century but are still operating nowadays, with the subsequent lack of proper sanitation and space for programming (Carranza, 2012; Dammert, 2016).

In addition, there is an already-installed research infrastructure in both North America and Europe that has been studying a variety of prison-related variables, such as the role of prisons in reoffending (Auty & Liebling, 2019), the process of prisoner reentry (Harding et al., 2019), the role of prison guards (Liebling et al., 2010), or even issues of legitimacy (Sparks et al., 1996), among many others. This is not to say that in Latin America there is nothing about these topics. There are, indeed, good efforts to study incarcerated women (Antony, 2007) or prison conditions (Bergman et al., 2014), for example, but the overall criminological and prison-related studies are still developing processes.

A third important difference is that in Latin American prisons, there are facilities self-governed by inmates themselves, yet at different degrees and

with different implications. In the region, one can find a sort of “religious track” of self-governance (Sanhueza, 2019), or a more secular configuration (Dias, 2011; Teixeira, 2012) or even some extreme cases of self-governance where entire prisons are administered by drug cartels (some cases in Mexico, Brazil or El Salvador). Of course, there are gangs in Europe and in the United States, but the high degree of power these groups exert in some parts of the region may constitute *de facto* a state within a state.

Within this Latin American context, the Chilean prison system has a relatively better reputation in the region when compared with its counterparts in the region (Mertz, 2015). Nevertheless, when compared with more developed nations, prisons in Chile have been failing to provide a human rights prone environment as there have been different reports on violence committed by guards toward inmates in Chile or when basic needs are not met by the prison system (Espinoza et al., 2014; Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos [INDH], 2013; Sánchez & Piñol, 2015).

One particular aspect that is becoming increasingly problematic inside prison walls (with repercussions on the outside, as well) is the issue of violence behind bars. Prison violence negatively affects inmates’ quality of life and humanity (Liebling, 2004), disrupts the internal order of the facility, threatens inmates’ successful reintegration once they leave prison (Pollock et al., 2012), and exacerbates the impact of organized crime inside and outside prison walls (Dias, 2011). In this regard, only a few systematic studies have been conducted on the magnitude, evolution, and determinants of violence in Chilean prisons (Sanhueza, 2014).

This article intends to fill part of this gap by describing the magnitude of collective prison fights in Chilean prisons and identifying relevant predictors. To do so, we analyze administrative data (facilitated by the Prison Service) on inmate-on-inmate events that were registered during 2014 to 2017. We have chosen “collective fights” as our central, dependent variable as it is an indicator available nationwide, prison personnel is accustomed to record it, and they offer enough variation from center to center to think plausibly about covariates.

## Literature Review

### *Theories and Predictors of Prison Violence in the Developed World*

According to many scholars in the field of prison studies, prison order is a concept that encompasses legitimacy, mutual respect, and decency, and not merely the absence of violence. Nevertheless, the absence of violence is a

necessary condition for an orderly facility, which in turn is a prerequisite for treatment and rehabilitation (Coyle, 2003; Liebling, 2004; Sparks et al, 1996; Ward et al., 2007).

In developed countries, prison violence has been usually associated with three main theoretical perspectives: deprivation, importation, and administrative control theories. Deprivation theory links violence within prisons to the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes, 1958) and suggests that violent behavior originates among inmates as an adaptive response to incarceration, caused by the loss of various rights and values, such as freedom and autonomy, the absence of heterosexual sexual relations and personal security (Paterline & Petersen, 1999; Rocheleau, 2013). Considering that Latin American prison systems have a series of infrastructure deficiencies, deprivation theory emerges as an appealing explanation for violence in the region (Carranza, 2012; Dias & Salla, 2013; INDH, 2013).

In this regard, research findings have shown that boredom, noise, and lack of privacy have a positive influence on prison violence (Hochstetler & DeLisi, 2005). In the same vein, Rocheleau (2013), by proposing an updated version of Sykes’ (1958) pains of imprisonment, found that boredom was strongly and positively associated with violence behind bars. Others have found associations between prison violence and overcrowding (Austin & Irwin, 2001; Bonta & Gendreau, 1990; Lester, 1990; Spector, 2010). Regarding the security level of the facility, scholars have found that violent assaults are more likely to occur in maximum or high-security settings (Jayewardene & Doherty, 1995; McCorkle et al., 1995). In the same vein, Steiner (2009) found that a higher proportion of inmates in high-security custody was significantly associated with higher levels of violence, both cross-sectional and longitudinally.

In the importation model, people’s socio-cultural experiences and processes prior to incarceration trigger violence between inmates inside prisons (Drury & DeLisi, 2010; Irwin & Cressey, 1962). Unlike the model proposed by Sykes, the subcultural aspects of the prison come from various previous contexts of the prison population (Irwin & Cressey, 1962). Padrón (2006) also suggests that violence originates outside the prison walls, where the gangs are competing for drug markets or having conflicts over territorial control, and that previous, preprison rivalries are imported to prison when members of the gangs are incarcerated. Once inside, inmates continue struggling to achieve supremacy over other rival groups or gangs. In terms of individual-related predictors related to importation theory, many studies have identified relevant variables such as younger age (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; DeLisi et al., 2010; Sorensen & Cunningham, 2010), being male (Kuanliang & Sorensen, 2008; Sorensen & Cunningham, 2010), or having previous history of violence inside the prison (Arbach-Lucioni et al., 2012; DeLisi et al., 2010).

The administrative control model, meanwhile, postulates that officers and administrators are a determining factor in misbehavior, violence, and revolts inside prisons, as they are responsible for the control of the facility (Reisig, 2002; Snacken, 2005; Sparks et al., 1996; Useem & Kimball, 1989). Hidalgo (1995) adds that one of the determinants of prison violence is the loss of control of the prison based on the situations of corruption that are generated between officers/guards and inmates. In the same line, Padrón (2006) argues that prison violence tends to occur when there are systematic failures or breaches of institutional duties and responsibilities, such as corruption or staff misconduct. Matthews (2011) points out that an adequate relationship between inmates and officials favors a greater flow of information and trust, contributing to the management of future or possible conflicts in the prison. Lindegaard and Gear (2014) found that deficient program access and poor managerial practices were linked to higher levels of violence. Furthermore, Huebner (2003) discovered that remunerative controls (monetary, work-related incentives) worked more effectively than coercive ones to lower prison violence, and Steiner (2009) observed that a higher proportion of working inmates was related to decreasing violence among them. Byrne et al. (2005) linked higher levels of violence to a variety of poor prison management practices, including many issues of inappropriate interactions between inmates and guards: “staff sexual misconduct and/or sexual harassment of prisoners, staff assault on inmates, excessive use of force, confrontations between staff and inmates, staff over-familiarity with inmates, and discrimination” (p. 14).

Nevertheless, in a critical approach to the predominant approach to studying prison violence, Cook et al. (2008) criticized an individual-centered approach, reasoning that “violent prisoners are only violent in certain circumstances” and that we need “to understand not only the origins of violence in prison but also the situational contexts in which violence occurs” (p. 1065). Cunningham and Sorensen (2007), similarly, have argued that individual-level variables only modestly predicted different forms of misconduct and that a broader set of indicators should be employed.

### *Prison Violence in Latin America*

When analyzing prison violence in Latin America, it is important to contextualize some predominant characteristics of the prison regimes and how they are connected to socio-historical characteristics of the societies in which they are embedded. First of all, most countries in South America were under the control of military dictatorships during the 70s and 80s. As a result, many of the prison regimes inherited a way of functioning based on abusive practices,

including torture as an accepted way to obtain information from detainees. Second, Latin America has become the second most violent region in the world (Moncada, 2013; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2011) as 10 of the 20 countries with highest homicide rates are in this region. One direct result of such epidemic figures of homicides is an increase in prison population and the resulting additional pressures on the already-troubled prison systems of the region (Dammert, 2016).

Another aspect that distinguishes prison life in Latin America is that it both reflects and amplifies the structural violence present in the region, which has the highest inequality levels in the world. Here, then, acts of violence are not isolated phenomena but, rather, they are directly linked to other spheres where violence is spread through a chain that links different types of damage generated from a violent exchange, and that then contaminates the entire social fabric of the community, connecting both the street and the home, the public sphere and the domestic space (Auyero et al., 2014). In this context of urban marginalization, the poorest people become the victims and, at the same time, the aggressors. (Auyero et al., 2014; Briceño-León & Zubillaga, 2002).

This urban marginalization, where violence occupies a crucial place, has different expressions in Latin America. One of it has to do with spatial segregation, gentrification, and the concentration of negative, territorial externalities. In addition, urban marginalization and violence are linked to the unequal quality of services available to the general population in sensitive areas of daily life such as public education, health care, and access to transportation, among others. Third, many of the neighborhoods where inmates came from in the first place are places where drug trafficking and “soldiers” exercise control over the social and physical space (Link et al., 2015; Rasse et al., 2019).

Additional characteristics that affect the prison systems in the region include the rise of a penal populism agenda that has ended up increasing incarcerated individuals and, thus, prison overcrowding; a prolonged lack of investment in both prison personnel (Dammert, 2016); persistent inhumane living conditions for most inmates (Sánchez & Piñol, 2015); scarce access to basic services and rehabilitative programs; and the fact that many facilities are infested by corruption, drug dealing, and a lack of state governance (Carranza, 2012; Dammert, 2016).

In this regard, the role of gangs and organized crime in the region is significant, with Brazil, perhaps, being the most emblematic (yet not the only) case in the region. Scholars have documented that a prolonged abandonment of the prison system by the state in Brazil has resulted in the unification and strengthening of criminal organizations inside prisons, as these groups offer inmates a sense of identity, belonging, and social organization. This has been the case, for example, of the “First Command of

the Capital” (*Primeiro Comando da Capital* [PCC], in Portuguese), which operates even outside prison facilities and is responsible for dozens of assassinations and other coordinated attacks (Dias, 2011; Teixeira, 2012). One paradoxical result of the consolidation of PCC has been that, at least for the Brazilian case, there is very little prison violence among inmates when there is just one group controlling (self-governing) prison facilities. Thus, the existence of inmate-on-inmate violence could be interpreted as an indicator of unorganized factions disputing power inside prison walls (Dias, 2011; Teixeira, 2012).

### *Prison Violence in Chile*

Mertz (2015) has stated that, when compared with its counterparts in Latin America, the Chilean prison system has a relatively better reputation in the region. The Chilean prison system currently houses about 42,000 incarcerated individuals, representing an incarceration rate of about 245 individuals per 100,000 inhabitants. It is a mixed system where most facilities (75) are publicly operated, yet eight of them are operated by private consortiums. Private prisons started to operate in the country by the mid-2000s with the double mission of ameliorating the critical overcrowding of the prison system and offering better rehabilitative programs than its public counterparts. In both systems, security is provided by the Prison Service, whereas the rehabilitative dimension is provided by staff hired by the companies, in the private model. The Chilean model has succeeded in terms of diminishing overcrowding, whereas other tasks remain pending: reoffending reaches about 50%, program access is scarce and of low quality, and violence and victimization are experienced by most inmates (Sanhueza, 2015).

According to the Chilean Institute of Human Rights (INDH, 2013), violence is one of the main problems in the prison system, with inmate-on-inmate homicides counting as one third of in-prison deaths nationwide (INDH, 2013); the other two thirds of inmates' deaths are counted as a result of “illness,” “accidents,” “suicides,” or “other causes.” In recent years, homicides in Chilean prisons have been declining (from 62 in 2014 to 48 in 2017), partially as a result of efforts by the Prison Service to set collective, monetary incentives for staff to decrease them. Nevertheless, using homicides as an indicator of violence is also problematic because perpetrators are usually “unknown.” Not until 2018 did the government create a task force to identify ways to facilitate denouncing homicides in prison and to make the entire process of investigation easier. Today, the Prison Service has data on the number of deaths but barely any information on the circumstances or the perpetrators of these homicides.

Some qualitative studies on prison violence among inmates in some Chilean prison facilities have referred to the roles that inmates played in violence. They find that, for example, a common “character” is the so-called “dog” (also called “soldier,” at the street level), who is an inmate who fights as a way to symbolically express loyalties, to reclaim internal power balances in the prison, and/or to respond to previous conflicts among the prison leaders, even if they took place outside prison walls (Ramm et al., 2016). Other accounts have revealed histories of violence, abuse, and exploitation that many inmates involved in violence have suffered since their infancy, either with their families of origin or inside state institutions like foster care (Lillo, 2016; Marín, 2016; Ramm et al., 2016).

In terms of quantitative, empirical findings, in 2013, scholars carried out the first national survey on prison life, which revealed figures on aspects of prison life that were mostly unknown to the public. Some data from this survey revealed that about one fifth of inmates (20%) reported having suffered physical abuse by fellow inmates and that almost half of the prison population had suffered physical mistreatment from guards (Espinoza et al., 2014). Another study, conducted by the Institute of Public Affairs of the University of Chile, indicated that approximately 80% of the inmates felt unsafe inside the prisons; likewise, 32% of inmates stated that they had been beaten by another inmate (Sánchez & Piñol, 2015).

When predictors of inmate-on-inmate violence are considered, physical victimization by fellow inmates was positively associated with a (self-reported) bad relationship with officers. Also, a correlation existed between inmate-on-inmate violence and being previously in a disciplinary cell. However, inmates’ perception of the quality of prison infrastructure was associated with lower victimization (Sanhueza et al., 2015). Based on survey data, Sanhueza and Miller (2016) found that inmate-on-inmate violence was more likely to happen when prisons housed a higher proportion of younger inmates and a higher proportion of inmates with high criminal involvement severity scores and when prison total population is greater.

In a national study on Chilean prisons, Sanhueza (2015) found evidence that violence inside Chilean prisons was a common experience that may take different forms (physical, psychological, and/or sexual violence), that may come from different actors (from guards and/or fellow inmates), and that the magnitude of such events varied from region to region of the country as well as by prison and gender. At a national scale, survey results revealed that about a 44% of inmates reported psychological mistreatment from guards and about a 39%, physical mistreatment. When fellow inmates were the source of the mistreatment, a 33% reported having suffered psychological violence and a 21%, physical violence. Sexual violence was reported by fewer than 2% for both sources (guards or fellow inmates).



More recently, in a smaller study, Sanhueza and Pérez (2019) analyzed the moral performance of five large Chilean prisons, finding that inmates highlighted the critical role that prison guards and officers had in the daily aspects of prison life, becoming “what mattered most,” even more than infrastructure conditions. Indeed, inmates of the sample had more negative perceptions of the corruption on the prison personnel, the lack of clear rules and procedures inside prison walls, and the deteriorated daily-life relationships with guards, compared with other aspects of prison life, such as infrastructure or relationships between fellow inmates.

Despite the emergence of more studies on prison violence in Latin American countries, including Chile, there is still a need for more in-depth knowledge that can inform and contribute public policy initiatives to address and reduce violence inside prison walls, for its own sake as well as to create a better environment for rehabilitative purposes. Thus, our current study analyzes inmate-on-inmate interpersonal violence, using official Prison Service data on collective fights, considering 83 facilities over 4 years (2014–2017).

## **This Study**

This article will try to fill part of this gap by studying the magnitude and evolution of prison violence in Chile in recent years and exploring some of its predictors using administrative, nationwide, quantitative data. Thus, this study addresses the following research goals:

1. To describe the magnitude and evolution of collective, prison fights (involving physical violence) in the Chilean prison system during the period 2014 to 2017.
2. To establish some predictors of collective fights at the facility level, considering both literature-relevant variables and administrative data.

## **Method**

This study uses administrative data that were provided by the Chilean Prison Service (*Gendarmería de Chile*, in Spanish). Data were gathered by the Unit of Statistics at the Bureau of Prisons, using numbers submitted by each facility. The author obtained permission from the Prison Service to analyze data through an agreement of collaboration framed within a research project on the moral performance of Chilean prisons. Once facilitated, data were cleaned and prepared by the first author of this article. Data included information on inmate-on-inmate collective fights between 2014 and 2017 for 83 facilities. Although our data did not differentiate whether there were women or men involved in the collective fights, we can reasonably assume that in the vast

majority of cases (not to say “all of them”), men are those involved in collective fights. Incarcerated women in Chile do have conflicts, but usually at an interpersonal level rather than at in a collective fight.

Regarding data on homicides, despite the fact that they were available and well recorded, most other relevant information regarding the perpetrator, the specific place where the incident took place, or who were the witnesses in most cases is recorded as “unknown.” Finally, administrative data included reports on violence committed by guards against inmates, but these records offer no reliable information as, in most cases, they registered zero incidents of this type across the country which, of course, does not represent daily life in Chilean prisons (INDH, 2013). Therefore, this study uses only the data on collective fights among inmates in prisons, as recorded by officials.

Following Wolff et al. (2008), it is important to clarify what we mean in this study by “prison violence”: (a) it is limited to physical violence, (b) its nature is interpersonal, inmate-on-inmate (in our case), and involves intentionality, and (c) it refers to a violent event registered as such in official records of the Chilean prison system. We chose “collective fights” as our dependent variable because it is an indicator available nationwide; prison personnel is accustomed to recording it (as opposed to other indicators that are also available in administrative records such as one-to-one aggressions with or without weapons, for example); and because they offer enough variation from center to center to establish some covariates or predictors.

Data analyses included descriptive statistics for all the variables as well as an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to model “collective fights,” based on a series of literature-anchored predictors such as overcrowding, inmates’ average age, average criminal history severity score, whether inmates were in a private or publicly operated facility, the operational and control score of the facility, the ratio of inmates to guard, and the ratio of inmate staff. The analyses were conducted using Stata 12.0.

## **Study Variables**

*Dependent variables.* The outcome we examined in detail in this study (collective fights) operationally represents the best regular indicator that the Chilean prison system records to assess physical violence among inmates in recent years. However, this is not a perfect indicator of the complex phenomenon of “prison violence”—as a portion of collective fights are not formally recorded. Collective violence is defined by the Prison Service as a fight involving three or more individuals, with the clear intention of inflicting damage to other inmates, usually involving someone injured (to different

degrees) after the event. We chose the period 2014 to 2017 because it reflects most recent data we had at hand as well as because this period is coincidental with the presidential, political cycle in Chile, where usually important organizational changes take place at the Prison Service, including the ministry of Justice.

*Independent variables.* In the case of the independent variables, we considered the following: occupancy rate, inmates' criminal history severity score, inmates' average age, operational conditions and control score (OCCS) of the facility, the ratio of inmate to guards, the ratio of inmate to staff, and the facility's average population flux. We define each variable as follows:

1. Occupancy rate: a number that indicates prison design capacity versus real occupancy, based on administrative information at the facility level provided by Gendarmería records. For example, a rate of 100 would indicate total occupancy of the facility with no overcrowding. An occupancy rate of 200 would mean that, in a space designed to house 100 inmates, there were actually 200 individuals living there. We expect that overcrowding is associated with more violence.
2. Inmates' average age at the facility level: provided by the Gendarmería's Statistical Unit, these data show the average age of the inmate population for each year in our study (2014–2017). Thus, we expect that more violent events would occur where the average age of inmates is lower.
3. Average "criminal involvement severity score" (individual score, aggregated at the facility level): Once sentenced, each inmate is assessed (and classified) according to an instrument (Ficha de Clasificación, in Spanish) established by the Prison Service to identify the extent to which each individual was involved in criminal activities in the past. Thus, a higher score means that an individual has behind him or her more criminal history than someone with a lower score. At an aggregated level, which is the case in this study, this measure indicates that on average, a particular prison has a prison population with a richer history of criminal involvement and, thus, in theory, constitutes a population more difficult to handle. The score ranges from 0 to 150.
4. Ratio of inmates to guards: the number of inmates adjusted per the number of prison guards in a particular facility. This was defined as a continuous variable, which has been identified in literature as relevant for an appropriate control of prison population. We expect that as the ratio of inmates to guards increases, so the rate of violent events increases.

5. Ratio of inmates to professional staff: the number of inmates versus the number of available professional staff (psychologists, social workers, and/or occupational therapists). This was a continuous variable that is also considered a proxy for program availability. We expect that as the ratio of inmate to staff increases, so the rate of inmate–inmate violence increases.
6. OCCS of the facility: This is a composite score defined by the Prison Service that defines the functioning conditions of a particular prison as well as the conditions for exerting a proper control over the prison population, including the characteristics of the external perimeter, structural conditions of the cell blocks, CCTV and security cameras, and sanitary conditions, among other variables related to the good functioning and security conditions of a prison facility. A higher score represents a higher sophistication of infrastructure and the level of control by the administration in a certain facility, overall. The score ranges from 0 up to 500
7. Type of prison: whether the prison is public or privately operated; this was coded as 0 = public; 1 = private. Previous research has identified greater violence committed from guards to inmates in private prisons (Espinoza et al., 2014), yet private prisons in Chile have better infrastructure conditions than its public counterparts, and thus, we were not sure about what to expect in terms of inmate-on-inmate violence.

We included inmates' average age (at the facility) as a proxy for importation theory as it suggests that younger inmates commit more violence. We also took into account inmates' criminal involvement severity score (higher score implies more history of inmate misconduct inside the facility and/or a greater severity of the previous offenses) as a proxy variable of the importation theory of violence as it refers to an inmate's previous path through either the judicial or the prison system or both. We included the occupancy rate as a predictor as it is relevant in deprivation theory as well as because it affects a prison's ability to implement labor-focused or job skills reintegration programs. Also, we included the ratio of inmates to guards and the ratio of inmates to staff (social workers, psychologists) to explore the administrative control theory, assuming that lower ratios would facilitate both coercive and remunerative controls. Finally, the OCCS (higher score representing better functioning conditions) of the facility and whether the facility was a private (or public) prison were included as predictors because these two systems differ in terms of both administration style and infrastructure conditions.

**Table 1.** Number of Violent Events in Chilean Prisons, 2014 to 2017.

Inmate–Inmate Type of Violent Event	2014	2015	2016	2017	Variation 2014–2017
Collective fights	808	1,921	1,951	4,162	515%

Source. Own elaboration with administrative data from 83 prisons, for period 2014 to 2017.

## Results

### Descriptive Results

Our first research question was to identify the magnitude and changes in violent events in recent years in Chilean prisons. Data provided by *Gendarmería* show the evolution of collective fights during 2014 to 2017 and are given in Table 1.

First of all, our data show a sharp increase in the number of collective fights, from 808 in 2014 to more than 4,000 in 2017, representing a variation of more than 500% in only 4 years of observation. In addition, we present descriptive statistics for both the dependent and independent variables, as shown in Table 2.

Descriptive data show an increase in the average number of collective fights, from almost 10 on average per facility to more than 50 in 2017. This was followed by a modest increment in the average operational conditions score of the facility (from 373 to almost 380). However, the ratio of inmate to staff drops from 54.3 to 43.4. Other variables remained relatively steady during the 4-year period we examined. This was the case for the average occupancy rate (114~112), inmates' age (34.7~34.5), criminal involvement severity score (~90), and ratio of inmates to guards (~3).

### Predictive Analysis: OLS Regression Model

The next research question sought to identify predictors of inmate-on-inmate collective fights in Chilean prisons. Table 3 shows the results of the OLS regression model and the predictors.

Our results show, first of all, that our OLS regression model was significant, as well as the adjusted  $R^2$  accounted for an important amount (ranging from 49% up to 71%) of the variability in the collective fights for each of the years here considered.

In terms of the predictors, private prisons were associated with increased collective fights, which may be due to different reasons we could not test in

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Relevant Variables, 2014 to 2017.

Variables	Average per Facility											
	2014			2015			2016			2017		
	M	SD	Min–Max	M	SD	Min–Max	M	SD	Min–Max	M	SD	Min–Max
Collective fights	10	16.5	0–87	23.7	34.3	0–164	23.8	33.3	0–145	50.3	74.6	0–398
Occupancy rate	114.4	55.6	13.5–294	114	59	15.8–322.6	116.2	57.5	18.8–293	111.9	56.1	10–287
Criminal involvement score	89.8	15	55–127	90	14	53.9–125	90.2	14.3	49.6–123	90.3	13.5	48.6–120.3
Average age of inmates	34.7	4.9	29–71	34.6	4.92	30–71	34.7	4.6	27–68	34.5	4.7	26–71
OCCS per facility	373	75.7	0–477	373	75.8	0–477	379.5	63.5	0–477	379.5	63.5	0–477
Ratio of inmate to guard	3.3	2.4	0.3–11.8	3.1	2.3	0.3–11.6	3	2.2	0.4–11.7	3	2.4	0–11.2
Ratio of inmate to staff	54.3	65.8	2.8–486	55	68	2–476.2	48.6	62.2	1.5–428	43.4	59.1	1.25–432.4
Private prisons <sup>a</sup>	0.09	0.30	0–1									

Note. OCCS = operational conditions and control score.

<sup>a</sup>Each year, we considered 73 public facilities and eight private ones.

**Table 3.** OLS Regression, Multivariate OLS Regression Model for Selected Predictors of Collective Fights, 2014 to 2017.

Variables	OLS Results of Collective Fights, by Year													
	2014				2015				2016				2017	
	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	$\beta$	B	SE B	B	SE B	$\beta$
Average age	-0.181	0.329	-.051	0.163	0.633	.022	0.327	0.533	.044	1.299	1.399	.082		
Criminal involvement score	-0.121	0.121	-.103	0.412	0.274	.156	0.374	0.224	.161	1.391**	0.625	.248**		
Occupancy rate	-0.042	0.317	-.137	-0.059	0.057	-.098	-0.083	0.044	-.145	-0.096	0.122	-.069		
Operation and control score	-0.023	0.024	-.088	-0.065	0.051	-.111	-0.034	0.059	-.048	0.023	0.152	.014		
Ratio of inmate to guard	4.335***	0.987	.617***	5.879***	2.031	.380***	6.407***	1.688	.431***	14.024***	4.579	.427***		
Ratio of inmate to staff	-0.039	0.038	-.156	-0.078	0.065	-.151	-0.028	0.066	-.054	-0.526***	0.190	-.425***		
Private prison (1 = yes; 0 = no)	23.58***	7.092	.430***	61.156***	13.124	.542***	56.943***	11.238	.525***	178.061***	29.138	.735***		
Constant	26.73	22.69		-7.319	47.171		-22.291	46.989		-154.856	121.746			
Probability > F		0.000			0.000			0.000			0.000			
R <sup>2</sup>		.54			.61			.73			.64			
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>		.49			.57			.71			.60			
N		76			74			77			76			

\*\*p < .05. \*\*\*p < .01.

this study: One possibility is the fact that private facilities usually house inmates with history of previous misconduct and/or those who present a greater risk of escape, due to their higher criminal involvement, may be also due to the harsher daily regimes these facilities have, despite their better infrastructure conditions. In the same vein, a consistent predictor of increased inmate-on-inmate violence was a greater ratio of inmates to guards (more inmates per guard, in our case). In addition, the ratio of inmates to staff was significant, yet only for 2017 and in an opposite direction as we initially expected, namely, collective violence tended to increase when there were more staff available for inmates (when the ratio of inmate to staff decreased). Finally, we had inmates' average criminal involvement score as a significant predictor for increased collective fights, yet only for 2017.

## Discussion

In terms of a possible explanation of the overall increment in prison fights, this may be due to variables we did not observe in our study. One possibility may have to do with a perceived decreased legitimacy affecting the prison service during the studied period (2014–2017) as a result of two highly publicized scandals that took place precisely during those years: a pension scheme that discretionally benefited few prison officers, combined with corruption scandals affecting the prison system in Chile. If one assumes that prison organizations are social systems that are highly elastic, what happens at the system's highest organizational level will affect downward by "sending messages" about order and the use of power and, ultimately, about the role of the state in punishing through "legitimate" ways (Bottoms, 1999; Kurzfeld, 2017).

Another possible explanation may have to do with the role of organized crime. In the São Paulo's case, for example, Dias (2011) has found the crucial role of gangs in establishing and maintaining prison order. She argues that consolidation of the control of the Primeiro Comando da Capital in the state of São Paulo explains both the increase in the levels of violence that accompanied the gang's rise and the decline that followed its consolidation. Perhaps, the fact that prison violence *is on the rise* within Chilean prisons is a sign that no single organization has the power to rule the entire system yet.

Our data on private prisons and the ratio of inmates to guard were significant predictors of inmate-to-inmate violence, suggesting two things: that private prisons may have particular conditions—perhaps in the way they are run—that make violence more likely to happen and that monitoring inmates' behavior is important to prevent violence.

Our data show that being in a private prison is, relatively speaking, the most influential predictor of inmate-to-inmate violence for years 2015,



2016, and 2017. Only in 2014, the ratio of inmates to guard was the heaviest, significant predictor. Now, being sent to a private prison is not a random event in the Chilean prison system. Private facilities have higher construction standards, are newer than their public counterparts, and have better security measures. In the year of the sharp increase (2017), there were also increases in transfers of prisoners for misconduct. Many of them were moved from (usually) public facilities to private ones, due to higher levels of security (to avoid escapes) and as a way to punish “conflicting” inmates. When these individuals are transferred to a different region—as it is usually the case when moved—local inmates feel threatened and the power relations, imbalanced.

In addition, prison officers and staff members have mentioned through informal conversations that the proportion of foreign inmates has also been on the rise in Chilean facilities, contributing to a sharp increment on violent events as a result of recommendations of power inside prisons. This has been also linked to difficulties—by the prison system itself—to properly classify foreign inmates, whom usually have scarce or virtually no criminal history in Chile due to the lack of shared criminal records among countries in Latin America.

From an administrative control approach, Matthews (2011) stated that optimal relationships between inmates and officials would favor a greater flow of information and trust, contributing thus to the management of future or possible conflicts in the prison. On the contrary, when the relations are distant, the personnel of the enclosure tends to apply measures that collaborate to the distrust between the inmates, weakening a harmonious environment between them. In this regard, there may be some unobserved components in the way guards, officers, and professional staff members interact with both inmates and among them that may be explaining violence. In the same vein, some research on the moral performance of Chilean prisons has shown that relationships inmates and guards create are crucial to the moral performance of a prison facility and, possibly, to the legitimacy of the entire prison system (Sanhueza & Pérez, 2019).

In terms of the importation theory, our data were not suitable to completely test this approach, as we lacked individual-level data for both the victims and the perpetrators of violence. We only had at hand some aggregate, crude measures of importation variables such as inmates’ average ages and average criminal involvement score per facility, which usually did not show any significant results (except in the case of criminal involvement, for 2017). Based on previous, qualitative research as well as testimonies from officers in Chilean prisons, importation variables are relevant to explain variations in violence, but, unfortunately, data from the Prison Service do

not currently collect and offer this valuable information. Information that is needed to know has to do, for example, with ages, nationality, history of misconduct, and belonging to gangs. In the context of troubled, underfunded prison systems in Latin America, tasks of proper data collection are usually one of the last organizational priorities.

Inmates' average criminal severity score was only significant in 2017. One possible explanation for that could be linked on the fact that both age and criminal involvement were average numbers per facility and, as such, they may hide internal variations, as suggested in the descriptive figures for the two variables. One finding that, despite its statistical significance, did not align with our expectations was the negative association between the ratios of inmates to staff in 2017. That is, as there are more staff members available to inmates, it is more likely that they are going to engage in collective fights. One possible explanation might be that inmates, perceiving that there are more staff members possibly available to them, may generate on them unrealistic expectations about being attended (as a synonym of, later, obtaining benefits such as parole or probation). Later, when negative evaluations are given to them, frustration arises for not obtaining the expected benefits. In troubled prison systems like the Latin American ones, the mere possibility that an average inmate has to simply being received and attended by a staff professional (psychologist, social worker, and so on) is very rare, and thus, when it happens, it may lend space for expectations about early release.

### *Limitations of This Study*

One limitation of our study is that we only focused on inmate–inmate physical violence, but in Chilean and Latin American prisons, violence of different kinds is commonplace, so that other forms of violence—such as that committed by guards—should be considered in future research. In addition, although we analyzed physical violence, we did not take into account outcomes like inmate-to-inmate homicides or sexual assaults, mostly because data for these were not complete (covariables of homicides are recorded as “unidentified” in vast majority of cases), not available, or not reliable (such as official records on sexual assaults by fellow inmates or by staff members). Finally, our analyses did not take into account (due to lack of data) situational variables that could be potentially relevant to explain collective fights (i.e., who were both the aggressor and the victim, where violence took place, reasons or motivations, age of those involved, and so on). This lack of data should be, somehow, overcome, if new studies are going to investigate violence behind bars because simply “average” ages or “mean” scores do not fully account for variations in prison fights.

## Conclusion

This study attempted to provide an account for the magnitude of inmate–inmate collective fights in Chile, being one of the first contributions to prison violence research, within a quantitative framework using administrative data from the Prison Service. Our descriptive analyses showed a sharp increase in the number collective fights occurring in just a 4-year period (2014–2017). Our results suggest that violent events tended to consistently increase in private prisons, or when the ratio of inmates per guard is higher, for all the 4 years analyzed. Based on our data, and considering that our prison system has already important deficits of legitimacy, we suggest that measures should be taken in four areas: (a) to gather better data on prison violence, including some reliable data on crucial importation variables (age, criminal history and nationality, at least); (b) to train prison guards differently, providing them with tools to anticipate and mediate conflicts; (c) to revise and possibly modify the way prisoners are transferred to different facilities, and (d) in sum, to promote prison environments that can be more legitimate, humane, and supportive to the reintegration of inmates.

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