

Personal Ads From Prisoners: Do Inmates Tell the Truth about Themselves?

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POPULAR DISCOURSE, MANY scholarly reviews/theories, and professional practices (i.e., Fleisher, 1989; Johnson, 1996; Sykes, 1958) emphasize that prison inmates are manipulative, cunning, untrustworthy, and dishonest. Training for corrections professionals and volunteers universally includes warnings about the attempts of inmates to mislead staff and gain some form of personal advantage. However, it is not only those working in corrections who may be susceptible to the manipulations and scams of prison inmates.

Researchers (Bond, Malloy, Arias, Nunn and Thompson, 2005) have previously demonstrated that prison inmates operate from a "lie-bias" in which they are disposed to believe messages they receive are lies. As a result, such immersion leads inmates to be skilled detectors of lies (but not necessarily of truthful messages) (Bond, et al., 2005; Hartwig, Granhag, Stromwall, and Andersson, 2004). However, drawing on responses to questionnaires, Marquis and Ebener (1981) reported that comparisons of inmates' self-reports of their arrest and conviction records with official records did not reveal under-reporting of one's record. Prisoners reported their convictions with a moderately high level of reliability, but not so for arrests. However, to date no research has directly assessed the popular assumption that prison inmates frequently do not tell the truth in social situations. This is a curiously under-investigated area of inquiry.

One such arena offering the possibility of manipulations and scams is in the area of inmates seeking contacts (presumably for social and psychological support) outside of prison. The value of maintaining contacts with friends and family members is well established (Casey-Acevedo and Bakken, 2001; Wooldredge, 1997); it is also believed by the public (Applegate, 2001; Hensley, Miller, Tewksbury and Kocheski, 2003) and correctional staff (Tewksbury and Mustaine, in press) to be among the most important components of an inmate's successful adjustment to incarceration. However, not all inmates have a support system or even one supportive individual on the outside of prison, and hence many prisoners may be motivated to seek out such a relationship. One means for doing so is advertising for pen pals for the inmate, essentially through the posting of a personal ad. Many means are available for placing such personal advertisements, including numerous websites today providing access to a wide range of persons interested in such a relationship. This may be a highly effective means of establishing a supportive relationship, as personal ads are known to be successful for persons seeking to meet others (Jason, Moritsugu and DePalma, 1992).

However, as both popular and professional beliefs center on inmates' lack of trustworthiness and honesty, it may be necessary to view the information provided by inmates in advertisements seeking pen pals with skepticism. Inmates may be motivated to dishonestly report personal information, in an effort to make themselves appear more attractive to potential support persons or to establish a social identity and persona to aid in manipulating outsiders to provide social, economic, or other kinds of benefits to the inmate.

The goal of the present study is to examine the accuracy of information provided by inmates posting personal advertisements on websites devoted to promoting positive relationships between inmates and persons in free society. As stated on one such website, "We are a website helping inmates find friendship while incarcerated....Our service offers inmates a chance to establish a positive correspondence that serves many purposes besides the passing of time; the encouragement offered through pen pal friendships has turned many a life around" (WriteAPrisoner.com). Specifically, this study examines the information reported by inmates as to their conviction offenses, projected release dates, and age, and assesses the veracity of this information in comparison to that reported for the inmate by the Department of Corrections incarcerating the individual.

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Methods

Data for the present analysis are drawn from two varieties of sources: websites that post prison inmates' personal ads seeking pen pals and websites at state departments of corrections that provide information on specific inmates.

Three different inmate pen pal advertisement websites provide the data for this study (WriteAPrisoner.com, Inmate-Connection.com and Inmate.com). These three websites were selected for use based on their size and the information included in each advertisement. Specifically, each of these websites publishes (along with other information) date of birth, projected release date, and conviction offenses for each inmate. At the time of data collection (August, 2005), these three websites included a total of 4,149 advertisements.

To assess the accuracy of information provided in these personal advertisements, it is necessary to also access official data on each of the three central variables. The websites for all state (as well as federal and District of Columbia) departments of corrections were reviewed. Of the 52 websites, 32 provide a publicly-accessible search engine for locating individual inmates. From this list of 32 possible states for inclusion, each site's search mechanism was examined and those that provided an inmate's date of birth, release date, and conviction offenses were selected. A total of 18 departments are included in the final sample (Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma and South Carolina).

Data collection involved reviewing all inmate personal advertisements soliciting pen-pals in each of the 18 included states and recording the inmate's name, date of birth, release date and conviction offenses. Then, for each of these inmates the same information was extracted from the website of the department of corrections in which the inmate is incarcerated. The final sample includes 1,051 cases.

Analysis draws on descriptive statistics and comparisons of inmate self-report data (on the personal advertisement website) and official data (from departments of corrections).

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Findings

Initial examination of the data shows that inmates who place personal ads are primarily (87.4 percent, n=919) male (although not in numbers disproportionate to national incarceration rates) and report an average age of 33. Additionally, these inmates are primarily violent offenders and drug offenders. [Table 1](#) reports the most serious conviction offense for the sample, drawing on both what inmates self-report in their personal ads and what departments of corrections report as the official data.

Overall, 14.3 percent (n=150) of inmates do not accurately report their most serious offense on their personal ads. Nearly one in five (18.9 percent, n= 199) do not accurately report their projected/anticipated release date. However, only 3.3 percent (n=35) do not accurately report their age. Inmates who do not accurately report their most serious offense tend to be individuals whom official records show are serious, violent offenders. Fully one-third (32.0 percent) of those inaccurately reporting their offenses are officially reported to have homicide convictions, 28 percent have a rape or other sex crime conviction and 10.7 percent have a robbery conviction as their most serious conviction offense.

Those who inaccurately report their release date report a mean age 2.5 years younger than that reported by the state incarcerating them. 1 Among those who do not accurately report their age, 88.8 percent report an age that is younger than their officially recorded age. There are no statistically significant differences in the likelihood of male and female inmates to accurately report their conviction offenses, release dates or ages.

Additionally, in their personal advertisements, some inmates specifically state that they are seeking correspondence with individuals willing to provide legal and/or financial assistance to the inmate. Across the sample a total of 11.6 percent (n=122) of personal ads request legal assistance and 14.0 percent (n=147) request financial assistance. Female inmates are more likely than male inmates to request both forms of assistance in their personal ads. Fully 47 percent (n=62) of personal ads from female inmates request financial donations and 23.5 percent (n=31) of female inmates' ads request legal assistance. This contrasts with only 9.3 percent and 9.9 percent respectively of ads from male inmates.

One of the websites (WriteAPrisoner.com) provides a boilerplate form for the provision of inmates' personal information, including places to note whether inmates are "seeking legal help" or "seeking donations." Of the 737 personal ads drawn from this website, 26.3 percent make a specific request for some form of assistance. Nearly one in every six personal ads (15.5 percent, n= 114) includes a request for legal assistance, and 19.8 percent (n=146) request financial donations. Interestingly, 14.9 percent (n=17) of inmates seeking legal assistance do not accurately report their conviction offenses. And, 13.7 percent (n=20) of the inmates requesting financial donations do not accurately self-report their conviction offenses. One of every eleven (9.2 percent) inmates specifically request both legal and financial assistance in their personal ads.

Nearly one-third (31.5 percent, n=331) of all inmate personal ads contain at least one inaccurate reporting of the three pieces of basic personal information (age, release date, conviction offense). Contrary to what some might expect, only 2 inmates (0.2 percent) inaccurately report all three pieces of information. More commonly, 4.9 percent (n=52) of inmates inaccurately report two of the three pieces of information and 26.4 percent (n=277) provide inaccurate information on one of the three assessed data points. As reported above, the information most likely to be inaccurately reported is release date and conviction offense.

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Discussion

While far from definitive as a response to the common suggestion that "inmates lie" and "you cannot trust what an inmate says," the results of this study suggest that personal information provided by inmates must be viewed with a healthy dose of skepticism.

An analysis of self-report data provided by a sample of inmates placing personal advertisements for the purpose of attracting pen pals shows that a significant minority of inmates inaccurately report at least one piece of basic personal information. Numerous inmates also specifically request legal or financial assistance.

The results of this study can be interpreted as empirical support for the common notion among both corrections professionals and the public that prison inmates cannot be trusted, even with basic information. However, it is also important to keep in mind that fully two-thirds of inmate personal ads reviewed in this study did not contain inaccurate information. As Marquis and Ebener (1981) reported, at least in certain types of reporting circumstances, the criminal history information provided by inmates is likely to be accurate and reliable.

There are two general implications of the results of this small study. First, individuals interested in establishing and pursuing personal relationships with prison inmates should view the information provided by an inmate with a skeptical eye. Clearly, many inmates not only offer inaccurate information about themselves to potential pen pals, but also see (and in many cases openly acknowledge) personal ads and pen pal relationships as ways

of gaining material and legal assistance. While many corrections professionals may acknowledge this as "common sense," this study now provides an empirical backing to such anecdotal knowledge. Second, this study also suggests that at least some forms of inmate self-report research should be viewed with a skeptical eye as well. If and when inmates believe there may be something to be gained from misreporting personal information, many may be likely to do so.

This study is not without limitations, however. Data are drawn from only three websites, and include inmates from only 18 states (where comparison data was available). Generalizing from these results should be done with caution. Additionally, while these results do provide initial empirical support for common beliefs about the veracity of personal/criminal information provided by inmates, it is important for future research to examine inmate-provided information in alternative forms and a broader range of types of information. Finally, some of the inaccurately reported information (especially regarding most serious conviction offense) may be the result of inmates applying different criteria for determining what offenses are more or less serious or more or less valuable for potential pen pals to know.

In the end, however, the answer to the question posed in the title of this article, "Do inmates tell the truth about themselves?" appears to be "some do, sometimes."