

Study offers view of religious life behind prison walls

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Behind high prison walls and rolls of barbed wire, Muslim and pagan inmates are most likely to have extreme religious views and be the least assisted by religious volunteers.

Most prisoners who want religious books will get them, but wearing a beard is far less likely to be permitted. And the majority of chaplains who serve convicted murderers, thieves and other criminals are satisfied with their jobs.

Those and other findings form a snapshot of religious life behind bars in a report that was released Thursday (March 22) by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, based on the perceptions of 730 chaplains who serve in the nation's state prison systems.

As the U.S. has grown more religiously diverse, the prison population has, too, but often in different directions, said Stephanie Boddie, a senior researcher on the study.

"The unaffiliated is growing in the general population but it's decreasing in the prison population," said Boddie, who noted the Pew findings are based on the impressions of chaplains rather than official prison statistics. "We also have 1 percent of Muslims in the general population but in some of the prisons we had as high as 20 percent, and in some prisons they had 0 percent."

The majority of chaplains reported a significant amount of "religious switching," and said it's common for inmates to try to convert other prisoners. But Cary Funk, another senior researcher with the study, said chaplains

report that some of those conversions may be short-lived.

"Inmates can be motivated by things that on the outside we might take for granted but on the inside have a lot more value -- things like special food, special holidays," she said. "One chaplain put it that they were privilege-based conversions not religious-based conversions."

While a sizable minority of chaplains says religious extremism is common among prisoners, only 4 percent said it "almost always" poses a threat to prison security. Muslim chaplains were less likely to say they had encountered widespread religious extremism.

Boddie said generally the chaplains were not dealing with what might usually be considered "extremism" by people outside prison walls.

"They don't talk as much about some of the ways that possibly are more commonly thought of in terms of anti-government or anti-authority and violence," she said.

The chaplains described extremism as intolerance of racial or social groups, religious exclusivity and particular requests for accommodation, such as asking for raw meat for a Voodoo ritual. Close to half said their prisons have consulted with experts about suspected religious extremism or provided extra supervision for religious meetings.

The vast majority of chaplains are Christian and they are mostly white, male, middle-aged and conservative in their theological and political beliefs. The chaplains often reported that they had more Christian volunteers than necessary but lacked Muslim, pagan and Native American volunteers.

Tom O'Connor, a former Oregon prison chaplain who runs the company Transforming Corrections, said more trained volunteers are needed to help move inmates away from anti-social behavior. But he said he was heartened to learn that researchers found that Muslim chaplains constituted 7 percent of the respondents, and cited a program at Hartford Seminary that is training new prospects.

"More and more, Islam is producing chaplains in America because we desperately do need more of them," said O'Connor, who advised researchers on the

study.

But O'Connor cautioned against lumping too many diverse beliefs together when considering what might be extreme behavior. In the Pew report, Muslims included the Nation of Islam, a movement founded on black pride and racial separation, and pagan and earth-based religions included Asatru, which is sometimes associated with white supremacists.

"I've never come across a racially superior-inclined Wiccan," he said.

Prisoner requests for religious accommodation reflect a range of faiths. Chaplains said about half of the requests tend to be granted for special religious diets and sacred items such as turbans, crucifixes and eagle feathers.

Despite the lack of certain kinds of volunteers and the time spent on paperwork rather than religious services, about two-thirds of chaplains report high job satisfaction.

But they say work needs to be done. Hardly any think the prison system is doing an excellent job on preparing prisoners to re-enter society. And there is near consensus among the chaplains that first-time nonviolent offenders should be sentenced to community service or mandatory drug counseling instead of prison terms.

The survey was based on a response rate of about 50 percent from 1,474 chaplains who were asked to complete Web or paper questionnaires last year, and has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.6 percentage points.