

Contraband and communications
with Joe Bouchard

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Contraband awareness: Fastening agents

Often overlooked because of their seeming lack of danger, fasteners can pose a huge threat to prison safety

By Joe Bouchard

When we think of contraband, we usually focus on the end product. Illicit goods such as spud juice, shanks, and stingers often come to mind. But what about the items that shape the final tradable commodity? What about the tools?

This essay doesn't focus on traditional contraband tools like screwdrivers, hammers, and pliers. While those are all potentially dangerous for obvious reasons, this article will focus on something less-apparently dangerous: fasteners and adhesives.

Fasteners come in many forms, and are divided into three general categories:

1. Fasteners obtained from an official source

These are legal items that can be used as adhesives: Toothpaste, soap, deodorant, envelope flaps, adhesive bandages, and sticky deodorant labels can all be used to fasten one object to another.

2. Naturally produced glues

These are all disgusting and potentially infectious: Saliva, mucus, and semen. Of course, they are impossible to forbid, as they are naturally generated.

3. Illicit fastener group

These are fasteners that inmates can't legally obtain: Velcro and all types of glue, clear tape, and the champion fastener -- duct tape.

These items, in and of themselves, are not necessarily dangerous. Their danger comes from their ability to aid concealment – inmates can use adhesives to keep notes, instructions and other correspondence hidden from staff eyes.

The fasteners in groups one and two are particularly efficient at hiding correspondence between book pages, under meal carts, and under furniture. It takes just one dangerous note to incite a riot or plan an escape.

Let's look at two cases of fasteners from group three.

Velcro – I have heard of staff who altered their work clothes with Velcro to facilitate easy undressing for illicit inmate relationships. Of course, the sexual contact is just the tip of the iceberg; after they'd had sex, inmates had leverage for manipulating the compromised staff member into smuggling contraband and doing other favors.

Duct tape – Duct tape, whether it's given to an inmate by an officer or smuggled in by another method, is a potential source of great power for inmates. With duct tape, inmates can construct false walls or floors in mobile food carts by cutting a piece of cardboard or fabric to size and taping themselves into the cart. Once the cart has been moved to an area closer to the outside, they escape.

How do we stop the trade in contraband fasteners?

I do not believe that we can completely halt the trade in contraband fasteners. Like the trade in other types of contraband, fasteners will always exist in prisons and jails.

Rather than focusing on stopping the trade completely, we should accept that the best we can do is reduce it and its ill impacts.

In the meantime, we must:

- Continue thorough and frequent searches of all who enter the secure perimeter
- Treat everyone who enters like they may be carrying contraband (either on purpose or inadvertently), regardless of good reputation or friendship
- Conduct random searches of all areas of control to keep contrabandists on their toes

Offenders come and go, but the goals of contrabandists are pretty much constant: To use goods and services to enhance their power and personal comfort while incarcerated. This is often achieved with the use of unauthorized fasteners.