Dangerous Places:  
The Right to Self-Defense in Prison 
and Prison Conditions Jurisprudence 

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The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.

Attributed to Fyodor Dostoevsky¹

Prisons are dangerous places.

Judge Frank H. Easterbrook²

The political character of judicial decisions can be disguised by claims that these decisions are compelled by the logic of the law. A recent decision depriving Indiana prisoners of their right to self-defense illustrates the important role this ruse plays in current prison conditions jurisprudence.

After days of threatening sexual innuendo, Indiana Reformatory prisoner Michael Evans attempted to rape cellblock neighbor John Rowe. Rowe responded by hitting Evans with a hot-pot and calling for help.³ Prison officials found that Rowe had violated prison rules by committing battery,⁴ and imposed as a punishment one year in disciplinary segregation.⁵ Rowe was not allowed to plead self-defense.⁶ In Rowe v DeBruyn, the Seventh Circuit upheld the outcome of the prison hearing, concluding that prisoners may be denied the right to defend themselves against

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³ Rowe v DeBruyn, 17 F3d 1047, 1049 (7th Cir 1994), cert denied, 115 S Ct 508 (1994).

⁴ Id at 1048-49.

⁵ In the end, the penalty was suspended. Id at 1049.

⁶ The prison officials did, however, consider self-defense a mitigating factor in sentencing Rowe. Id at 1049.
violent attacks by other prisoners.\textsuperscript{7} As a result, prisoners in the Indiana penal system must now submit to violence, even rape, or suffer potentially severe and recurrent punishment for their acts of self-defense.

This Comment argues that prisoners have a constitutional right to self-defense. The \textit{Rowe} decision epitomizes the worst in prison conditions jurisprudence, ignoring important constitutional doctrines and unnecessarily imperiling prisoners. Section I illustrates the importance of the right to self-defense in the prison context, where violence is ubiquitous, and demonstrates that traditional prison conditions jurisprudence offers little promise of protection. Section II reviews the constitutional jurisprudence regarding self-defense, finding it to be both ambiguous and underdeveloped. Section III argues that there are at least two grounds for finding that prisoners have a constitutional right to self-defense. First, because self-defense has been an indispensable element of Anglo-American criminal justice, it is a fundamental right within the doctrine of due process. Second, the law governing the due process rights of the institutionalized, properly understood, mandates that when the state fails to protect prisoners, they must be allowed to protect themselves.

This Comment concludes that the decision in \textit{Rowe} reflects not the logic of the law, but an inhumane conception of prisoners' rights. Judges often observe that "prisons are dangerous places," as though this were positive fact. \textit{Rowe} reveals the fallacy in such an analysis. Judges often determine the conditions of prison life. If prisons are dangerous places, it is, at least in part, because judges make them so.

\section{I. The Importance of Self-Defense in the Prison Context}

It has long been recognized that the rule of law cannot be absolute: there are times when lawbreaking is justified or excusable.\textsuperscript{8} Of all the justifications and excuses present in the law,

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\item \textsuperscript{7} 17 F3d 1047, 1052 (7th Cir 1994), cert denied, 115 S Ct 508 (1994). Specifically, the court stated: "[W]e . . . consider if the right to self-defense is a fundamental constitutional right within the Due Process Clause itself. We conclude that it is not." Id.
\item \textsuperscript{8} The doctrines of justification and excuse are the two most important limitations on the reach of the criminal law. Justified conduct is conduct that under ordinary circumstances is criminal but which under the special circumstances that constitute the justification defense is not wrongful, such as when choosing the lesser of two evils, defending another, or defending oneself. Joshua Dressler, \textit{Understanding Criminal Law} § 16.03 at 182-83 (Matthew Bender 1987). Excused conduct is wrongful and unjustified conduct that causes social harm but for which the actor is not held personally to blame, such as when
none has been more fundamental than the right to self-defense. Although Anglo-American law has always deplored violence, for nearly as long it has recognized that victims of unjustified attacks must be allowed to fend off their attackers, even if doing so requires violence. It has been said that the self-defense instinct is so irresistible that legal prohibition would be futile, resulting only in punishment detached from culpability, and that prohibiting self-defense under the law would undermine notions of security that undergird civil society itself. For these reasons, the law declares that violence is wrong, but that violence as a defense against violence is justified.

The modern American prisoner is exposed to tremendous violence. Assault, rape, and murder occur with extraordinary frequency in prison. Yet modern prison conditions jurisprudence fails to provide prisoners meaningful protection from each other. This Section describes the pervasive violence encountered by prisoners in the modern American prison and the inadequate protection offered by current law. In this context, the right to self-defense takes on profound importance: nowhere is the need to defend against violence more pressing than amidst the pervasive violence and sparse protections of the modern American prison.

A. Prisons Are Dangerous Places: The Ubiquity of Violence in the Modern American Prison

Academic literature has documented an epidemic of prison
violence. James E. Robertson calculates that the murder rate in prison is eight times that outside of prison and that the assault rate is at least twenty times that beyond the prison walls. Michael Mushlin speculates that the incidence of homosexual rape and sexual assault is even more disproportionate. Thus, while "no one knows for certain how much violence takes place in American prisons since so much of it is not reported," the available evidence depicts prison as a place where violence is ubiquitous:

[T]here are violent persons housed in our nation's prisons. These persons, left unchecked, can make prey of weaker inmates. The explosive mixture of personalities inherent in any prison setting is made even more incendiary by the overcrowding prevalent in numerous prisons, the lack of supervision and control in others, and the rising presence of . . . AIDS, which makes the prospect of sexual assault even more frightening than it already is. The result is that, in all too many prisons, the risk of serious violence is pervasive.

Thus, writes Robertson, "a reign of inmate terror has descended upon many prisons." The ubiquity of prison violence demonstrates its crucial role in prison social and institutional dynamics. One author observes that there are several powerful incentives for violence in the prison context:

Violence . . . (1) provides a reputation for violence that in itself becomes a deterrent against victimization; (2) improves the self-image of the user; (3) gives sexual relief; (4) serves as a means of extortion; (5) enhances the prospect for parole because the staff wishes to be rid of the troublemaker.

Violence is also used to establish prison hierarchy: sexual assault becomes "an act whereby one male (or a group of males) seeks testimony to what he considers is an outward validation of
his masculinity," and "new inmates are usually tested by predators to determine if they will resist exploitation." Likewise, violence is an outlet for racial tension; indeed, "racial conflict, including extreme violence and riots, is the reality of institutional life in prisons around the country." Finally, some speculate that the extraordinary rate of prison violence reflects its utility in maintaining prison order:

> Actions of prison officials make homosexual rape easier to commit. They do not discourage it because rape "facilitates greater control over the inmates[,] . . . divides the prisoners . . . [and] gives them real cause to suspect, fear, fight, and hate each other."23

Commentators have paid special attention to the gruesome form of violence threatened in *Rowe*: prison rape. It is now well established that prisoner-on-prisoner rape is a widespread form of prison violence.24 One observer has written that "[s]exual assault appears to be as common in American prisons as iron bars."25 Another estimates that "of the forty-six million Americans . . . who will be arrested at some time in their lives, ten million will be raped while in prison."26 And Justice Blackmun has observed that:

> A youthful inmate can expect to be subjected to homosexual gang rape his first night in jail, or, it has been said, even in the van on the way to jail. Weaker inmates become the property of stronger prisoners or gangs, who sell the sexual services of the victim.27

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21 Robertson, 56 U Cin L Rev at 92 (cited in note 14).


Victims of prison rape typically experience severe physical and psychological injury. Some are killed during the assault, and others may subsequently commit suicide. Survivors experience the "feelings of shame suffered by anyone who is raped [as well as] . . . a 'loss of manhood,' and a shattering of their self-esteem." At least one judge found the psychological harm resulting from prison rape so terrible that he released the victim before the victim's sentence had expired.

One of the most disturbing problems posed by rape in the prison context is the unique danger of AIDS transmission associated with this form of violence. As David M. Siegal has written:

The virus that causes this disease is transmitted rapidly through anal intercourse, especially forceful, violent intercourse. . . . The combination of AIDS and rape within our prisons thus poses a dilemma: any man sent to prison confronts, from the first moment he is incarcerated, the Kafkaesque prospect of brutal attack by another inmate and infection with one of the world's most deadly diseases.

Another commentator has suggested that AIDS transmission in prisons is evolving into a new form of the death penalty. These descriptions starkly illustrate what was at stake in Rowe. Had Rowe complied with the prison policy against self-defense, he would have risked not just the immediate physical and psychological injury associated with rape, but infection with a gruesome and fatal disease. Yet in spite of the frightening frequency with which this scenario arises in the prison context, the Rowe court denied a victimized prisoner the right to resist.

The ubiquity of violence, the pervasive threat of rape, and the potential for infection with the AIDS virus illustrate the importance of protection from violence in the prison context, and thus the importance of the right to self-defense. Moreover, the

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30 People v Insignares, 121 Misc 2d 921, 470 NYS2d 513, 515 (Sup Ct 1983), rev'd, 109 AD2d 221, 491 NYS2d 166 (App Div 1985) (reversed on ground that trial judge abused his discretion in dismissing the sentence).
31 Siegal, Note, 44 Stan L Rev at 1542 (cited in note 23) (citations omitted).
prevalence of such conditions illustrates the utter failure of the modern American prison system to provide this protection. The next Section shows that this failure follows in large part from the abdication of prisoner protection by modern prison conditions jurisprudence.

B. Prison Conditions Jurisprudence and Prison Violence

The law governing prison conditions substantially relieves prison officials of responsibility for prisoner-on-prisoner violence. As one court recently observed: "[s]ome level of brutality and sexual aggression among [prisoners] is inevitable no matter what the guards do." Thus, "no matter how deplorable, prisoner conditions that are undesired [by prison officials] are not 'punishment'" and, therefore, are not subject to Eighth Amendment challenge. Such analysis is typical of modern prison conditions jurisprudence, which erects daunting hurdles for plaintiffs in prison conditions cases. As a result, prison systems have few legal incentives to protect prisoners from violence.

Modern prison conditions jurisprudence is grounded in the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. As early as 1890, the Supreme Court applied the Eighth Amendment to prohibit punishments involving "torture or a lingering death." Still, it was not until the 1970s that the Court recognized that "[t]here is no iron curtain drawn between the Constitution and the prisons of this country." Although it may seem obvious that egregious prison conditions, such as rampant prison violence, should be evaluated as potentially cruel or unusual punishment, the Supreme Court did not explicitly affirm this connection until 1976, when it decided Estelle v Gamble. That case has given rise to a doctrine that in theory requires "civilized" prisons, but in practice rarely punishes even the most egregious failures to meet this standard.

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33 McGill v Duckworth, 944 F2d 344, 348 (7th Cir 1991).
34 Id at 349.
35 See Mushlin, 1 Rights of Prisoners § 2.00 at 21-22 (cited in note 15). The Eighth Amendment provides: "Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted." US Const, Amend VIII. The Eighth Amendment is the only provision of the Bill of Rights applicable by its own terms to prisoners.
36 In re Kemmler, 136 US 436, 447 (1890).
39 See Mushlin, 1 Rights of Prisoners § 2.01 at 21-40 (cited in note 15). For an excellent analysis of the emergence of this tension and its applicability to problems of rape and AIDS in the prison context, see generally Siegal, Note, 44 Stan L Rev 1541 (cited in
In *Estelle*, a Texas prison inmate alleged that he had been denied proper medical treatment for a back injury, and that this denial amounted to cruel and unusual punishment in violation of the Eighth Amendment.\(^4\) The Supreme Court concluded that prisons have an obligation to provide medical care for inmates.\(^4\) In the Court's view, "deliberate indifference to serious medical needs constitutes the 'unnecessary and wanton infliction of pain' proscribed by the Eighth Amendment."\(^4\) From this analysis were born the two basic and sometimes incompatible principles of modern prison conditions jurisprudence. First, prison conditions that unnecessarily and wantonly inflict pain violate the Eighth Amendment.\(^4\) Second, such an Eighth Amendment violation may be found only in limited circumstances—namely, when prison officials have acted with an egregiously culpable state of mind, which the courts have defined as "deliberate indifference."\(^4\)

In *Wilson v Seiter*, the Supreme Court extended these principles to cover a wide range of "inadequate 'conditions of confinement'\(^4\) understood to fall short of "minimal civilized measure[s]."\(^4\) Examples of treatment courts have held violative of the Eighth Amendment include insufficient nourishment,\(^4\) failure to allow exercise,\(^4\) inadequate shelter,\(^4\) poor sanitation,\(^4\) environmental hazards,\(^4\) overcrowding,\(^4\) and excessive use of force by guards.\(^4\)

Consistent with this doctrine, courts have recognized that prisoners have an Eighth Amendment right to be free from excessive risk of prison violence.\(^4\) The basic right had been recog-

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40 429 US at 101.
41 Id at 103.
43 *Estelle*, 429 US at 104. See also text accompanying notes 158-60.
48 *French v Owens*, 777 F2d 1250, 1255 (7th Cir 1985).
52 *Moore v Morgan*, 922 F2d 1553, 1556 (11th Cir 1991). See also *Rhodes*, 452 US at 349 (holding that overcrowding must cause serious hardship before Eighth Amendment violation arises).
54 See, for example, *Farmer v Brennan*, 114 S Ct 1970, 1976 (1994); *Rhodes*, 452 US
nized by some lower courts even prior to *Estelle.* 55 One judge, surveying particularly horrific prison conditions, wrote that “pen- itentiary inmates . . . ought at least to be able to fall asleep at night without fear of having their throats cut before morning, and . . . the state has failed to discharge a constitutional duty in failing to take steps to enable them to do so.” 56

The Supreme Court also has recognized that the Eighth Amendment provides at least some protection against prisoner violence. As a subsequent court observed, the Court assumed in *Davidson v Cannon* 57 that “the prison system may not ignore prisoners’ risk of harm at the hands of other inmates.” 58 Similarly, in *Farmer v Brennan,* the Court asserted that “[b]eing violently assaulted in prison is simply not ‘part of the penalty criminal offenders pay for their offenses against society.’” 59

Nevertheless, it is exceedingly difficult for prisoners to win either prison conditions or prison violence cases. The Supreme Court has read *Estelle’s* deliberate indifference requirement narrowly, thereby limiting Eighth Amendment protection for prisoners. In *Whitley v Albers,* for example, prison guards panicked during a riot and shot an innocent prisoner, but the Court refused to find a violation of the Eighth Amendment on the ground that the requisite culpability had not been established: panic could not be equated with deliberate indifference. 60 Subsequently, in *Wilson,* the Court affirmed this understanding of deliberate indifference, reasoning that since “punishment” implied a deliberately administered purpose, the Eighth Amendment is not triggered unless prison officials act with “some mental element” akin to intent. 61 In keeping with this emphasis on intent, the Court

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55 See, for example, *Woodhouse v Commonwealth,* 487 F2d 889, 890 (4th Cir 1973) (“A prisoner has a[n Eighth Amendment] right . . . to be reasonably free from the constant threat of violence and sexual assault by his fellow inmates . . . .”); *Holt v Sarver,* 442 F2d 304, 308 (8th Cir 1971) (holding that system of armed “trusty” inmates with supervisory authority over other inmates, combined with “open barracks” and other dangerous conditions, violated Eighth Amendment); *Roberts v Williams,* 302 F Supp 972, 989 (N D Miss 1969) (holding that unprovoked shooting of inmate by “trusty” violated Eighth Amendment).

56 *Holt v Sarver,* 300 F Supp 825, 831 (E D Ark 1969), aff’d, 442 F2d 304 (8th Cir 1971).


58 McGill, 944 F2d at 347, citing Davidson, 474 US at 350.


60 475 US 312, 320-21 (1986).

61 501 US at 299-302. See also Mushlin, 1 Rights of Prisoners § 2.01 at 27-28 (cited in note 15).
recently stressed that it is not enough that prison officials should have known about horrific conditions—rather, they must actually have known about them.\(^6\)

Beyond the common observation that prisons are not meant to be comfortable places, two justifications have been offered for the use of the deliberate indifference standard. First, courts in general have been reluctant to burden the legitimate efforts of the states to deal with difficult social problems.\(^6\) In the Eighth Amendment context, judicial review has been limited by the concern that “courts cannot assume that state legislatures and prison officials are insensitive to the requirements of the Constitution or to the perplexing sociological problems of how best to achieve the goals of the penal function in the criminal justice system . . . .”\(^6\) Second, courts have increasingly emphasized that the text of the Eighth Amendment itself limits the Amendment’s reach: the Eighth Amendment regulates punishment, and punishment is by definition intentional. Thus, the Eighth Amendment, by its terms, can only apply where government officials act with a state of mind akin to intent—that is, where the officials’ indifference may be said to be deliberate.\(^6\)

This deliberate indifference standard poses a daunting obstacle for prisoners making prison conditions claims. Severe injuries and deprivations are often caused by official behavior that does not fit within the deliberate indifference paradigm. For example, one commentator has noted that, under the Wilson test, budget-constrained prison officials would not violate the Eighth Amendment even where they had full knowledge of horrible prison conditions because courts are unlikely to find that the officials deliberately imposed the conditions to magnify the inmates’ punishment.\(^6\) By this reasoning, disinterested ignorance, negligence,

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\(^6\) *Farmer*, 114 S Ct at 1979. See also *McGill*, 944 F2d at 351 (observing that in the Eighth Amendment context, deliberate indifference is governed by a subjective standard under which a prison official must actually know of or suspect a dangerous situation before he can be deliberately indifferent to it).


\(^6\) *Rhodes*, 452 US at 352.


[A] state-of-mind inquiry might allow officials to interpose the defense that . . . fiscal constraints . . . prevent the elimination of inhumane conditions. Even if that were so, it is hard to understand how it could control the meaning of ‘cruel and unusual punishment’ in the Eighth Amendment.
and incompetence would be similarly valid defenses to Eighth Amendment liability.\footnote{501 US at 301. See also McGill, 944 F2d at 349 (suggesting that prison officials should not be found liable for prison conditions for which legislators, architects, judges, and taxpayers are all at least partly responsible).}

The deliberate indifference standard stands as an especially daunting barrier to prison violence claims. When injury is caused by a systematic failure to provide a basic necessity, as when prisons fail to provide heat or adequate nutrition, the resulting injuries will be widespread and traceable to policy decisions made by prison officials. As identical injuries with identical causes mount, prison officials’ claims to ignorance of either injury or cause become less credible and allegations of deliberate indifference become more plausible. But when injury is caused by prisoner violence, the causal connection between policy and injury becomes more obscure—an autonomous, aggressive prisoner has interceded. Prison officials may argue that the acts of the aggressive prisoner, rather than their policy, caused the injury. Or they may argue that they had no capacity to foresee the acts of specific, autonomous prisoners, and thus did not know about the risk of violence. By this line of argument, prison officials are absolved of any general duty to try to separate more dangerous inmates from less dangerous ones.\footnote{“It is obduracy and wantonness, not inadvertence or error in good faith, that characterize the conduct prohibited by the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause . . . .” Wilson, 501 US at 299, quoting Whitley, 475 US at 319.} Indeed, such defenses are particularly viable where courts embrace the assumption that some prison violence is inevitable. The more courts see prison violence as inevitable, the less they will attribute causation to prison officials. Thus, the deliberate indifference standard offers prison officials numerous defenses to claims based on prisoner violence.\footnote{This was the argument approved of in McGill. 944 F2d at 350-53.}

As a result, prison conditions doctrine allows prisons to leave prisoners perilously vulnerable to the violence of their peers. Yet the Rowe court concluded that a prison may lawfully punish a prisoner for defending himself. This holding is cruel. Given the epidemic of prison violence and the inadequacy of Eighth Amendment protections against such violence, thousands of prisoners

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\footnote{Not surprisingly, the practical result of these cases has been to shift the burden of protection from prison officials to inmates. “As the opportunities for violence have expanded, and the risks of detection and punishment diminished, more responsibility has had to be taken by the inmate to secure his own safety.” Richard C. McCorkle, Personal Precautions to Violence in Prison, 19 Crim Just & Behav 160, 171 (1992).}
inevitably will be faced with a terrible choice: submit to assault, rape, and perhaps infection with the AIDS virus, or suffer serious punishment by the prison system. It is, as one judge has written, "a Hobson's choice." The Rowe court concluded that this tragic outcome is compelled by the Constitution. The remainder of this Comment argues the contrary.

II. SELF-DEFENSE: A NEW CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

The Rowe court viewed the law governing Rowe's claim to a right of self-defense as clear and, therefore, disposed of his claim in one short paragraph. The court explained that it could "find no precedent establishing a constitutional right of self-defense in the criminal law context," and that it had found one earlier case denying the existence of such a right.

In fact, the law before the court was far from clear. The Supreme Court has never directly considered the constitutional status of self-defense. In addition, only a handful of lower courts have considered the issue, and those courts have reached inadequately reasoned and unsatisfactory conclusions. Thus, as dissenting Judge Ripple observed in Rowe, "it is [not] hyperbole to characterize the position of the majority as a novel one." No well established law required the Hobson's choice the Rowe court imposed on prisoners.

A. Supreme Court Analysis of the Right to Self-Defense

The Supreme Court has never directly considered whether self-defense is a constitutionally protected right. Early Supreme Court self-defense cases were preoccupied with determining the contours of the common law right, an effort the Court appears
Dangerous Places

Some constitutional self-defense questions have reached the Court. Recently, these have involved the allocation of the burden of proof when a defendant claims that he acted in self-defense. In *Martin v Ohio*, the Court concluded that a state may place the burden of proving self-defense on the defendant. But while *Martin* addressed an important constitutional question about the place of self-defense in a criminal trial, it did not resolve the issue of whether self-defense is a constitutionally protected right. Requiring defendants to prove that they acted in self-defense (rather than forcing the state to prove that they did not) is different from withholding the defense altogether.

Indeed, the Court has long recognized that while states have broad discretion in the allocation of burdens of proof in criminal trials, there are limits to this discretion. In *Speiser v Randall*, for example, the Court warned that:

> It is of course within the power of the state to regulate procedures under which its laws are carried out, including the burden of producing evidence . . . "unless in so doing it offends some principle of justice so rooted in the traditions and conscience of our people as to be ranked as fundamental."\(^7^6\)

While the Court has never had occasion to apply the *Speiser* principle to a self-defense case, the principle has often been noted in other cases considering the allocation of burdens in criminal trials.\(^7^7\) Section III of this Comment explores whether taking away the right to self-defense would violate the *Speiser* principle.

B. Lower Court Constitutional Analysis of the Right to Self-Defense

A handful of lower courts have considered whether there is a constitutional right to self-defense. Unfortunately, their decisions compose an anemic body of constitutional jurisprudence. Two cases prior to *Rowe* held that there is no constitutional right to

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\(^7^5\) 480 US 228, 232 (1987) (holding no violation of Due Process Clause when state requires defendant to prove affirmative defenses).


\(^7^7\) See, for example, *Patterson v New York*, 432 US 197, 210 (1977) (noting that Due Process Clause permits states to require criminal defendants to prove affirmative defenses, but that "[t]here are obviously constitutional limits beyond which the states may not go" in relabeling the elements of its crimes).
self-defense.78 However, these decisions exhibit both a cursory consideration of the issue and a failure to invoke significant supporting authority. In contrast, two judges have speculated—one in dictum and one in dissent—that the right to self-defense must necessarily be guaranteed in the Constitution.79 Here too, the arguments are cursory and unsupported.

1. Cases denying that there is a constitutional right to self-defense.

The first case to deny that the Constitution guarantees a right to self-defense was Fields v Harris.80 Following her termination for assaulting a coworker, Fields brought a wrongful discharge claim to a federal employment review board.81 After her claim was rejected by the review board, Fields appealed to federal court, where she argued that she had acted in self-defense and that the dismissal therefore violated her constitutional rights.82 Rejecting her claim, the Fields court concluded that self-defense is “not a substantive right conferred directly by the federal Constitution.”83

The discussion of the constitutional question in Fields is thin: two short sentences. The court cited no authority—statutory, common law, academic, or otherwise—in support of its holding. Rather, the court suggested that the constitutional argument was not a serious one, but merely “an effort to circumvent [a] statutory time bar and establish jurisdiction.”84 Hence, while the Fields court rejected the constitutional claim in this procedural posture, the opinion does not purport to dispose of the issue of whether there is a constitutional right to self-defense.

78 See Fields v Harris, 675 F2d 219 (8th Cir 1982); White v Arn, 788 F2d 338 (6th Cir 1986).
79 See Griffin v Martin, 785 F2d 1172 (4th Cir 1986); Isaac v Engle, 646 F2d 1129 (6th Cir 1980) (Merritt dissenting on other grounds).
80 675 F2d 219, 220 (8th Cir 1982).
81 Id at 219-20.
82 Id at 220.
83 Id. Fields had attempted to ground this right in the Second, Fifth, and Eighth Amendments. Id.
84 Fields was appealing an adverse ruling by the United States Civil Service Commission, review of which must be filed with the Court of Claims or a Court of Appeals within thirty days. Her constitutional claim was apparently an effort to get into court after the thirty-day period had lapsed. (The court did not comment on whether this ruse would have worked had her constitutional claim been valid.) Id, citing Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, 5 USC § 7703(b)(1) (Supp 1978).
The other case cited for the proposition that self-defense is not a constitutional right is White v Arn. There, the state placed the burden of proving self-defense on a criminal defendant. Anticipating the ruling in Martin, the White court rejected the claim that this burden allocation was unconstitutional. Unlike the plaintiff in Martin, however, White also argued that "there is a constitutional right of self-defense, founded in the Eighth, Ninth, and Fourteenth Amendments, which an accused cannot be required to prove." The White court responded that this argument was foreclosed by the burden allocation analysis of earlier Supreme Court cases: "[T]o hold that self-defense is a constitutional right which a defendant cannot constitutionally be required to prove, would be to reject the Supreme Court's established analysis ...."

White, like Fields, is weak authority for the proposition that there is no constitutional right to self-defense. Like the Fields court, the White court did not cite a single authority regarding the constitutional status of self-defense. More significantly, although Rowe suggests that White held there is no constitutional right to self-defense, this is a mischaracterization of White. In fact, the White court rejected only the proposition that the right to self-defense was constitutionally protected in a way that had bearing on the allocation of the burden of proof. Indeed, White expressly reserved the broader question whether the right to self-defense exists at all: "This holding does not reject the notion that a defendant has a limited right to act in self-defense under certain circumstances." Therefore, neither White nor Fields is reliable authority regarding the constitutional status of the right to self-defense.

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85 788 F2d 338 (6th Cir 1986).
86 Id at 343-47.
87 Id at 347.
88 Id, citing Patterson v New York, 432 US 197 (1977). Patterson had held that the prosecution in a criminal case is not constitutionally required to prove the nonexistence of all affirmative defenses, and that states may therefore allocate the burden of proving affirmative defenses to the defendant. 432 US at 208-09.
89 Rowe, 17 F3d at 1052.
90 White, 788 F2d at 347.
91 Id at 347 n 15. The court specifically limited its holding to the burden of proof issue: "Our holding simply embodies a determination that Ohio's allocation of the burden of proving self-defense does not violate the Due Process Clause." Id.
2. Judges arguing that there is a constitutional right to self-defense.

While no court has held that there is a constitutional right to self-defense, at least two judges prior to Rowe argued that the Constitution must incorporate such a right. Judge Merritt first advanced this position in a brief dissent in Isaac v Engle. Like White, Isaac was one of numerous pre-Martin cases considering the burden-of-proof issue; the Isaac majority concluded that because Ohio had, by statute, effectively made the absence of affirmative defenses an element of the crimes in question, the burden of proving self-defense could not be placed on the defendant. Dissenting on procedural grounds, Judge Merritt nevertheless took special care to argue that self-defense is a constitutional right:

I believe the Constitution prohibits a state from eliminating the justification of self-defense from its criminal law and requires the state to prove as an element of the crimes of assault and homicide that no such self-defense justification exists.

In Griffin v Martin, Judge Murnaghan reached a similar conclusion in dicta. The issue in Griffin was whether trial instructions on the burden of proof issue were so contradictory and misleading as to be unconstitutional. The appellate court held that the instructions were unconstitutional and found for the defendant. Murnaghan's opinion, however, went beyond the scope of the case to discuss the constitutional status of the right to self-defense. In a footnote, he reasoned that, because self-defense is a complete exoneration, its absence must be regarded as an element of a crime; accordingly, defendants should not bear the burden of proof on this issue. Judge Murnaghan also stated that:

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92 646 F2d 1129, 1140 (6th Cir 1980) (Merritt dissenting on other grounds).
93 Id at 1134-35. The majority contended that placing the burden of proof on the defendant would be inconsistent with In re Winship, 397 US 358, 364 (1970) (holding that due process requires prosecution to prove "every fact necessary to constitute the crime").
94 Isaac, 646 F2d at 1140 (Merritt dissenting on other grounds).
95 785 F2d 1172 (4th Cir 1986), withdrawn upon rehearing en banc, 795 F2d 22 (1986).
96 Id at 1173.
97 Id at 1187 n 37. The dissent rejected Judge Murnaghan's reasoning. See id at 1194 (Sneeden dissenting).
It is difficult to the point of impossibility to imagine a right in any state to abolish self-defense altogether, thereby leaving one a Hobson's choice of almost certain death through violent attack now or statutorily mandated death through trial and conviction of murder later.  

Given this sparse and inconsistent body of law, it is not surprising that one federal court recently observed in dicta (without referring to Rowe, Fields, White, Isaac, or Griffin) that the constitutionality of the right to self-defense would "present an important question." Neither the Supreme Court cases nor the decisions and dicta in the lower courts employ satisfactory analysis of, or invoke significant authority regarding, the constitutional status of the right to self-defense. Rather, current law comprises a disconnected array of unsupported decisions and musings—a sad basis for a decision with the ramifications of Rowe. The next Section demonstrates that the Constitution offers fertile ground for a more compassionate approach.

III. THE PRISONER'S RIGHT TO SELF-DEFENSE AND JUDICIAL RESPONSIBILITY IN THE PRISON CONDITIONS CONTEXT

A manual for jailhouse lawyers informs prisoners: "It is virtually certain that you retain your right of self-defense if attacked by a fellow inmate . . . ." Contrary to the arguments in Rowe, the logic of the law does not compel the conclusion that prisoners must submit to violence. Rather, as this Section demonstrates, the Due Process Clause supports a right to self-defense. First, it has long been held that due process protects

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98 Griffin, 785 F2d at 1187 n 37.
99 Jackson v Senkowski, 817 F Supp 6, 7 (S D NY 1993). The Jackson court indicated it would ground the right to self-defense in due process:

One might well be deprived of liberty without due process if incarcerated for attempting to defend one's life . . . . All states appear to recognize a defense of self-defense [and] security of the person is an obvious component of the domestic Tranquility [sic] which was one of the original objectives of the Constitution.

100 Barret L. Brick, The Right to be Free from Assault, 16 Colum Hum Rts L Rev 347, 381 (1985), citing United States v Stahls, 194 F Supp 849 (S D Ind 1961), and State v Boyd, 498 SW2d 532 (Mo 1973) (no mention of whether the right has a constitutional dimension).
101 The Fifth Amendment, which is binding on the federal government, provides: "No person shall be . . . deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law . . . ." US Const, Amend V. Nearly identical language in the Fourteenth Amendment imposes the same restriction on the states: "[N]or shall any State deprive any person of life,
those rights essential to the Anglo-American conception of criminal justice, and self-defense is such a right.\textsuperscript{102} Second, even if there is not a general right to self-defense, an emerging strand of due process doctrine supports the argument that the state must either protect institutionalized individuals, or allow them to protect themselves.\textsuperscript{103} This Comment concludes that failure to recognize the right of self-defense is not only unconstitutional, but also a disturbing abdication of judicial responsibility.

A. Self-Defense as a Fundamental Right in Anglo-American Criminal Justice

In \textit{Speiser}, the Supreme Court warned that while states may place heavy burdens of proof on criminal defendants, they may not do so if in so doing they “offend[ ] some principle of justice so rooted in the traditions and conscience of our people as to be ranked fundamental.”\textsuperscript{104} Courts have long recognized that certain rights are so essential to the Anglo-American system of criminal justice that, although they are nowhere explicitly enumerated, they are nevertheless guaranteed by the Due Process Clause. Whether entrenched in the common law or recognized as part of our history, these rights have been called “fundamental”\textsuperscript{105} and necessary to “ordered liberty.”\textsuperscript{106} No right recognized within this doctrine, however, has been more entrenched in the common law, nor more universally recognized, than the right to self-defense.

1. The doctrine of fundamental rights.

In \textit{Palko v Connecticut}, the Supreme Court described the class of rights protected by constitutional due process as those rights without which “neither liberty nor justice would exist”; of which “a pervasive recognition . . . can be traced in our history,

\textsuperscript{102} See text accompanying notes 104-09.
\textsuperscript{103} See text accompanying notes 164-69.
\textsuperscript{104} 357 US at 523, quoting \textit{Snyder v Massachusetts}, 291 US 97, 105 (1934).
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Palko}, 302 US at 325.
political and legal"; and the violation of which would be "so acute and shocking that our polity will not endure it." In short, constitutional due process protects "those 'fundamental principles of liberty and justice which lie at the base of all our civil and political institutions.' In Moore v City of East Cleveland, the Court described such rights as those that are "deeply rooted in this Nation's history and tradition."

These standards remain controversial. Their vague terms offer courts little guidance when confronted with specific rights. Thus, the Supreme Court has been reluctant to guarantee rights under Palko, Moore, and their progeny: "the guideposts for responsible decisionmaking in this unchartered area are scarce and open-ended." Yet time and again, the Supreme Court has determined that certain rights, not elaborated in the text of the Constitution, are nevertheless inherent in the constitutional conception of due process.

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108 Id at 328, quoting Hebert v Louisiana, 272 US 312, 316 (1926). The discussion in Palko was confined to rights enumerated in the Bill of Rights. The Court stated that some, like free speech, are fundamental (and therefore binding on the states through the Fourteenth Amendment), and held that double jeopardy is among those that are not. Id at 328. The holding as to double jeopardy was later overruled by Benton v Maryland, 395 US 784, 794 (1969). The idea of fundamental rights implicit in the concept of ordered liberty was, consistent with the quoted language from Palko, later applied to other, nonenumerated rights. See, for example, Moore v City of East Cleveland, 431 US 494, 498 (1977) (right to count grandsons as part of a "single family" for zoning purposes); Griswold v Connecticut, 381 US 479, 496 (1965) (right to marital privacy); Shapiro v Thompson, 394 US 618, 627 (1969) (right to interstate travel).

Other courts have used language different from Palko to convey the notion of fundamental rights. For example, in Rochin v California, the Court stated that substantive due process is violated by state actions which "offend those canons of decency and fairness which express the notions of justice of English-speaking peoples even toward those charged with the most heinous offenses. These standards of justice are not formulated anywhere as though they were specifics." 342 US 165, 169 (1952) (citation omitted).

110 Collins v Harker Heights, 503 US 115, 125 (1992). Justice Black expressed the core concern in dissent in In re Winship: "When this Court assumes for itself the power to declare any law—state or federal—unconstitutional because it offends the majority's own views of what is fundamental and decent in our society, our Nation ceases to be governed according to 'the law of the land' and instead becomes one governed by the 'law of the judges.'" 397 US 358, 384 (1970) (Black dissenting).

111 See, for example, Mooney v Holohan, 294 US 103, 110-12 (1935) (Knowing use of perjury by a prosecutor inconsistent with constitutional due process.); Napue v Illinois, 360 US 264, 269 (1959) (Failure of the prosecution to correct known, false testimony violates due process.); Brady v Maryland, 373 US 83, 87 (1963) (Prosecutorial suppression of favorable, material evidence requested by defendant violates due process.); Giglio v United States, 405 US 150, 152-54 (1972) (Failure of the prosecutor to disclose agreements with witnesses violates due process.).
The most famous inherent rights case, *In re Winship*, provides some guidance in identifying what constitutes an inherent right. There, the Court held that the reasonable-doubt standard in criminal trials is protected by constitutional due process. According to the *Winship* Court, such a right is indispensable in “a society that values the good name and freedom of every individual” and is a “historically grounded right[ ] of our system, developed to safeguard men from dubious and unjust convictions.” To this end, the Court focused on two factors. First, the Court emphasized that the reasonable-doubt standard had long been recognized in Anglo-American criminal justice: “The requirement that guilt of a criminal charge be established by proof beyond a reasonable doubt dates at least from our early years as a Nation. The ‘demand for a higher degree of persuasion... was recurrently expressed from ancient times...’” Second, the Court stressed that the reasonable doubt standard was recognized in nearly every contemporary common-law jurisdiction. According to the Court: “Although virtually unanimous adherence to the reasonable-doubt standard in common law jurisdictions may not conclusively establish it as a requirement of due process, such adherence does ‘reflect a profound judgment about the way in which law should be enforced and justice administered.’” Thus, the decision in *Winship* turned on the historical entrenchment and universal acceptance of the reasonable-doubt standard.

While the doctrine of inherent rights is notoriously vague, the more concrete standards of historical entrenchment and universal recognition provide a reliable foundation for identifying fundamental rights. Moreover, legal analysis that derives the meaning of due process from consensus that cuts across time and place has the salutary effect of minimizing the potential for abuse of judicial discretion. Under the above standards, courts should consider the right to self-defense to be inherent in due process, for it has been affirmed by a consensus that spans

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113 Id at 364.
114 Id at 363-64.
115 Id at 362-64, quoting *Davis v United States*, 160 US 469, 488 (1895).
118 See also *Albright v Oliver*, 114 S Ct 807, 825 (1994) (Stevens dissenting) ("In *In re Winship*, [the Court’s holding] relied on history and certain societal interests... ").
119 See note 110.
several hundred years of common law and every modern common law jurisdiction.

2. Self-defense as essential to the Anglo-American system of criminal justice.

Some conception of the right to self-defense is as fundamental to the Anglo-American conception of criminal justice as any of the rights affirmed in the line of cases stretching from Palko to Winship to the present. As a brief survey of its history shows, the lineage of self-defense rivals that of the reasonable-doubt standard. Likewise, the right is almost universally recognized today.

The right to self-defense has been entrenched in the English system of criminal justice since the decline of the Saxons. As early as the thirteenth century, prototypical conceptions of justification and excuse were emerging in criminal law, and the right to self-defense began to take form. At first, the right was recognized in only limited circumstances. Killings committed to prevent crimes or to fulfill a lawfully mandated punishment became lawful, but only because they were considered an implementation of the state's interest in a safe and secure society.

As one commentator explains, "at early common law, justification defenses [including self-defense] had a strong public-benefit cast. Conduct was . . . justified [when] it was performed in the public's interest." 

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120 In Anglo-Saxon law prior to the nineteenth century, self-defense was viewed as a mitigating factor—and often the basis for a pardon—rather than a complete justification for homicide. Dolores A. Donovan and Stephanie M. Wildman, *Is the Reasonable Man Obsolete? A Critical Perspective on Self-Defense and Provocation*, 14 Loyola LA L Rev 435, 442 (1981). As one commentator suggests, the provisions of Saxon law were geared to maximize the power of the ruling class: "Prohibition of any form of self-help allowed early English rulers to control violence and establish obedience to the rule of law." Cathryn Jo Rosen, *The Excuse of Self-Defense: Correcting a Historical Accident on the Behalf of Battered Women Who Kill*, 36 Am U L Rev 11, 25 (1986). The Anglo-Saxon reluctance to allow self-help gave way between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries to the concept of justifiable homicide, which was rooted in the theory that such killings were done on behalf of the state and benefitted society. Id at 25.


123 Dressler, *Understanding Criminal Law* § 17.02 at 187 (cited in note 8). See also *Mullaney v Wilbur*, 421 US 684, 692 (1975) ("At early common law only those homicides committed in the enforcement of justice were considered justifiable . . . .").
An alternative understanding of self-defense began to take form in the medieval common law courts. Some came to recognize the right to self-defense as essential to a fair system of criminal justice. Courts observed that acts of self-defense often arose irresistibly from human instinct, and that punishment of such acts would distort the calibration of punishment to culpability. "A medieval English defendant who acted in self-defense was probably presumed to have had no real choice whether to act because of the natural human instinct for self-preservation—an instinct inconsistent with the need for social control."

By the seventeenth century, the concept of self-defense had matured and was well established. The original social-control account of self-defense had given rise to a more general understanding that acts of self-defense were "justified" because they contributed to the social order. Kant, for example, believed that "[s]elf-defense [had] to be understood exclusively as an institution designed to secure the Right, the framework securing the maximum freedom of all."

The early conception of self-defense as an irresistible instinct had also taken hold. By the eighteenth century, it was widely recognized that, because the self-defense reaction was irresistible, it was not blameworthy; in legal terms, it became an "excuse" from punishment. On this basis, Blackstone declared self-defense a fundamental individual right. In his view, the common law "respect[ed] the passions of the human mind." Killing in self-defense was "excusable from the great universal principle of self-preservation, which prompts every man to save his own life preferably to that of another." Indeed, Blackstone maintained that society could not take away the right: "Self-defense... is justly called the primary law of nature, [and therefore] it is not, neither can it be... taken away by the law of society."

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124 Rosen, 36 Am U L Rev at 26 (cited in note 120).
125 Mullaney, 421 US at 692.
126 For a discussion of self-defense as a justification, see George P. Fletcher, Rethinking Criminal Law § 10.5 at 857-64 (Little, Brown 1978).
128 For a discussion of self-defense as an excuse, see Fletcher, Rethinking Criminal Law § 10.5 at 856 (cited in note 126).
129 Dressler, Understanding Criminal Law § 18.05 at 208 (cited in note 8), quoting William M. Blackstone, 3 Commentaries *3.
130 Dressler, Understanding Criminal Law § 18.05 at 208 (cited in note 8), quoting William M. Blackstone, 4 Commentaries *186.
131 Blackstone, 3 Commentaries *4 (cited in note 129).
From these early principles, several modern justifications for the right to self-defense have emerged. Some contemporary theories are rooted in the early understanding of the relationship between self-defense and a stable social order. One utilitarian justification, for example, holds that when choosing between aggressors and victims, the law should favor victims as a class because they are and will be less destructive to society than aggressors. Another common argument is that giving victims the right to act violently against aggressors will reduce the overall level of violence in society: aggressors will be deterred by the threat of defensive violence, and the violence deterred will more than counterbalance the violence resulting from self-defense.

Most modern scholars, however, follow Blackstone's argument that the self-defense reaction is irresistible and therefore not blameworthy. They echo Blackstone's assertion that no fair system of criminal law can remove so natural an impulse as self-defense. For example, according to Professor Fletcher, self-defense "has its origins in the common-sense view that a person sometimes has 'no choice' but to kill his adversary. . . . [T]he human response is to kill rather than be killed." The excuse of self-defense is therefore necessary to the proper calibration of punishment to culpability: it is "our way of making the moral claim that [the defender] is not to be blamed for the kind of choice that other people would make under the same circumstances."

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122 Dressler, Understanding Criminal Law § 18.05 at 208 (cited in note 8). See also Sanford H. Kadish, Respect for Life and Regard for Rights in the Criminal Law, 64 Cal L Rev 871, 882 (1976). A similar conclusion is sometimes reached in "principled" or deontological moral argument, where it is said that the victim's claim to safety and life is "superior" to that of the aggressor. Dressler, Understanding Criminal Law § 18.05 at 210 (cited in note 8). Another common argument from moral principle is that the high value of personal autonomy authorizes victims to protect that autonomy even by violence against encroachers. Here again the arguments echo the early "social good" justifications. Fletcher, Rethinking Criminal Law § 10.5.3 at 860-61 (cited in note 126). See also Robinson, 2 Criminal Law Defenses § 131(a) at 70 (cited in note 9).

123 Kadish, 64 Cal L Rev at 882-83 (cited in note 132); Dressler, Understanding Criminal Law § 18.05 at 209 (cited in note 8).

124 The crudest version of this account asserts that unlawful attackers forfeit their right to legal protection, at least while engaged in the unlawful attack, because their interests are "discounted . . . by the degree of [their] culpability." Fletcher, Rethinking Criminal Law § 10.5.2 at 858 (cited in note 126). See also Kadish, 64 Cal L Rev at 882 (cited in note 132) (observing that "on the balance of utilities it is better . . . that it be the attacker [who dies] rather than his victim").

125 Fletcher, Rethinking Criminal Law § 10.5.1. at 856 (cited in note 126).

126 Id. See also Rosen, 36 Am U L Rev at 27 (cited in note 120) ("The "intentional infliction of physical harm upon another is not culpable when it is inflicted in self-defense.").
Similarly, many modern scholars echo Blackstone's assertion that the right to self-defense is so essential to justice that it cannot be denied by the state. According to Professor Kadish, "[t]he individual does not surrender his fundamental freedom to preserve himself against aggression by the establishment of state authority... [It is a] moral right against the state..." Kadish concludes that "[t]he answer is unambiguous in every legal system: the victim may kill to save his own life." Dressler makes a similar argument:

[The innocent person may have a right against the government to kill the aggressor. The thesis is that people band together to create a legal system in order to protect themselves against various forms of aggression. Every person has a right, therefore, to the law's protection against aggression; when the law fails to provide protection, the threatened person has a right to resist the aggression.]

Finally, Fletcher observes that "there are few legal ideas as basic as the principle of legitimate self-defense... Th[is] principle is so deeply ingrained in our legal thinking that it is difficult to imagine a legal system that did not acknowledge it."

Every modern American jurisdiction recognizes, in some form, the right to self-defense. All states now have statutory provisions establishing a form of the right to self-defense in the general population. Similarly, state courts have consistently recognized some form of the common law right to self-def-

137 Kadish, 64 Cal L Rev at 885 (cited in note 132). See also Fletcher, Rethinking Criminal Law § 10.5.4 at 887 (cited in note 126) ("According to this view of necessary defense, the private use of force is tolerated... because the state fails in its task of providing protection against aggression.").

138 Kadish, 64 Cal L Rev at 881 (cited in note 132).

139 Dressler, Understanding Criminal Law § 18.04 at 201 (cited in note 8).

140 George P. Fletcher, Self-Defense as a Justification for Punishment, 12 Cardozo L Rev 859, 859 (1991). Fletcher notes that even in legal systems that do not embrace our conception of rights, such as the system elaborated in the Talmud, "self-defense and defense of others emerge... as central and unquestioned aspects of legal life." Id. For an interesting counter to these traditional arguments, see Epps, 55 L & Contemp Probs 303, 304 (cited in note 121) (posing that "pure" self-defense is rare—and therefore not a useful concept—because most homicides occur following ambiguous confrontations between persons who know each other and have conflicted before).

141 Robinson, 2 Criminal Law Defenses § 132 at 96 n 1 (cited in note 9) (citing statutory and/or case law recognition of the right to self-defense in "every American jurisdiction").

142 Id (listing self-defense statutes in every state).
fense. So too have federal courts, including the Supreme Court.

Thus, while it may seem striking that only a few courts have ever considered the constitutional nature of the right to self-defense, the dearth of case law actually attests to the universal acceptance of the right. Because states and courts have always permitted claims of self-defense, the constitutional foundation of this prerogative has rarely ever been at issue. In *Winship*, the Court paid special note to similar circumstances. As Justice Harlan explained:

> It is only because of the nearly complete and long-standing acceptance of the reasonable doubt standard by the states in criminal trials that the Court has not before today had to hold explicitly that due process, as an expression of fundamental procedural fairness, requires [the reasonable doubt standard]... 

Consideration of the constitutionality of the right to self-defense has been foreclosed in much the same way.

In sum, the right to self-defense clearly meets the standards established in *Speiser*, *Palko*, and *Winship*. Like the right to proof beyond a reasonable doubt, the right to self-defense has been entrenched in the Anglo-American system of criminal justice for several centuries. Similarly, and again like the right to proof beyond a reasonable doubt, the right to self-defense is now accorded near universal recognition in common law jurisdictions. Indeed, the theories underlying the right suggest that it is indispensable to the calibration of punishment and culpability and that a legal system without a right to self-defense could not achieve justice.

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143 Id.

144 See, for example, *Brown v United States*, 256 US 335, 343 (1921) (recognizing right to use deadly force against an attacker if grievous harm reasonably believed imminent); *Smith v Lauritzen*, 356 F2d 171, 176 (3d Cir 1966) (same).

145 397 US at 372 (Harlan concurring) (citation omitted).

146 Indeed, courts have occasionally recognized that the question of the constitutionality of the right to self-defense might never arise. The majority in *Griffin* recognized that "[t]he question is not presented in Griffin's case, and is unlikely to arise." 785 F2d at 1186.
B. Self-Defense as a Due Process Right of the Institutionalized

While the doctrine of inherent rights provides a basis for finding that prisoners have a right to self-defense, it is not the only basis. The prisoner's right to self-defense may also be grounded on a narrower rationale, one that emerges at the intersection of the law governing the due process rights of the institutionalized in general and the law of necessity in the prison context.

The Due Process Clause places substantive limits on the conditions to which the institutionalized may be exposed. Specifically, their "basic human needs" must be met. But there is a problem with this doctrine. In deference to the difficulties faced by state-run institutions, courts have injected a culpability requirement into the due process analysis, transforming seemingly absolute limits on the conditions of institutionalization into frail and contingent protections. This Section demonstrates that recognizing a necessity defense within the due process doctrine governing the rights of the institutionalized mitigates this problem by reinforcing certain basic rights without unduly burdening state institutions. From this necessity defense arises a prisoner's right to self-defense.

1. Due process rights of the institutionalized.

The Constitution provides special protection to those the state institutionalizes against their will. According to a line of cases culminating in DeShaney v Winnebago County Department of Social Services, due process requires that institutions provide food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and reasonable safety to the institutionalized. While the Court in DeShaney recognized that "nothing in the language of the Due Process Clause itself requires the state to protect the life, liberty, and property of its citizens," it also held that due process requirements

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147 See DeShaney v Winnebago County Department of Social Services, 489 US 189, 200 (1989).
148 See text accompanying notes 158-59.
150 Id at 200. DeShaney traced this principle to Youngberg v Romeo, 457 US 307, 315-16 (1982). Youngberg involved inmates in a state-run mental hospital. The Court there held that substantive due process requires the state to assure the reasonable safety of involuntarily committed mental patients. Id. See also Revere v Massachusetts General Hospital, 463 US 239, 244 (1983) (holding that due process requires provision of medical care to injured suspects in police custody).
151 489 US at 195.
Dangerous Places

change dramatically when the state institutionalizes an individual. The Due Process Clause is phrased as a limitation on the state's power to act, and incarceration is state action. Thus, "it is the state's affirmative act of restraining the individual's freedom to act on his own behalf—through incarceration, institutionalization, or other similar restraint of personal liberty—which is the 'deprivation of liberty' triggering the protections of the Due Process Clause . . . ."

As the Court has repeatedly recognized, these due process protections require the state to assure that the basic human needs of those it incarcerates are met. As the Court held in DeShaney:

[If] the state . . . so restrains an individual's liberty that it renders him unable to care for himself, and at the same time fails to provide for his basic human needs—e.g., food, clothing, shelter, medical care, and reasonable safety—it transgresses the substantive limits on state action set by . . . the Due Process Clause.

In Youngberg v Romeo, a case involving patients committed to a state-run mental hospital, the Court identified "adequate food, shelter, clothing, and medical care" as the "essentials of the care that the State must provide." The Court also declared that the state "has the unquestioned duty to provide reasonable safety for all residents and personnel within the institution."

The principle that institutionalized individuals must be assured such basic necessities as food, shelter, and protection from violence serves an important purpose. The absence of such assurance would allow states to render the institutionalized helpless, then forswear responsibility for injuries, even death, suffered by these individuals. Furthermore, this understanding of due process resolves some of the most disturbing hypotheticals posed by critics of Eighth Amendment jurisprudence. For example, the Eighth Amendment allows petty thieves to starve, freeze, or be raped when prison officials are handcuffed by budgetary constraints, so long as such conditions do not result from deliberate indifference or intentional punishment. Fortunately, starving

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152 Id at 199-200.
153 Id at 200.
154 Id.
156 Id.
157 See text accompanying note 66.
thieves have other constitutional recourse—the Due Process Clause.

While the due process principles articulated in DeShaney and Youngberg seem to establish firm limits on the conditions to which the institutionalized may be exposed, these limits are undermined by the injection of a culpability element into the due process analysis. Specifically, under Youngberg, courts must defer to the decisions of institutional officials regarding conditions of confinement in all cases where the decisions are made in good faith. Indeed, the Supreme Court has suggested that the particularly daunting deliberate indifference standard applied to the Eighth Amendment should be applied to due process analysis in the prison context. However, as in the Eighth Amendment context, the injection of the culpability requirement into due process analysis undermines constitutional safeguards, and transforms the substantive limits of due process into unreliable, contingent protections.

Courts justify the culpability requirement in due process analysis by concerns that are similar to, but crucially distinct from, those invoked in the Eighth Amendment context. As in the Eighth Amendment context, courts are reluctant to impose onerous constitutional burdens on state institutions. Courts recognize that such institutions face challenging social problems on limited budgets. The requirement of deference to decisions made in good faith serves to shield institutions from liability for their honest mistakes as they struggle to allocate their limited resources appropriately. Often, however, this means that state institutions escape liability for even the most deplorable conditions unless they act with a culpable mental state.

Although the text of the Eighth Amendment has been interpreted as necessarily including an intent requirement (since

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158 457 US at 324.
159 "[W]e suggested that [deliberate indifference] is required to make out a substantive due process claim in the prison setting." DeShaney, 489 US at 199 n 5, citing Whitley, 475 US at 326-27 (holding that Due Process Clause affords inmate no greater protection than the Cruel and Unusual Punishments Clause).
160 See, for example, Parham v J.R., 442 US 584, 608 n 16 (1979) (procedures for commitment to state mental hospitals); Youngberg, 457 US at 324 (care and safety of committed mental patients); Wolff v McDonnell, 418 US 539, 556 (1974) (prison disciplinary proceedings). See also text accompanying notes 60-65. Indeed, this may have been what the Rowe court was really getting at. Having held that there is no constitutional right to self-defense, the Rowe court held in the alternative that even if there were such a right, it could be overridden: "The policy purportedly advances prison security by discouraging all physical violence among inmates . . . [P]rison security and the reduction of violence are certainly legitimate penological interests." Rowe, 17 F3d at 1053.
“punishment” requires purposeful state action), no such element is textually required by the Due Process Clause. Thus, unlike the culpability requirement in the Eighth Amendment context, the culpability element of the due process analysis is merely a vehicle for deference to institutional decision making.

In some circumstances, however, such deference is not warranted. The following Section demonstrates that a limited defense of necessity can and should be recognized as a central component of the due process rights of the institutionalized. Recognition of such a defense would revitalize DeShaney’s substantive limitations without unduly burdening state institutions. From this limited necessity defense arises a prisoner’s right to self-defense.

2. Institutionalization, necessity, and self-defense.

The law governing the due process rights of the institutionalized typically addresses institutional conditions by placing obligations on the state. The institutionalized must be fed, sheltered, and protected, for example. Because these obligations can be so costly, good-faith institutional decisions regarding their fulfillment are protected by the culpability element of the due process analysis. What some courts fail to recognize, however, is that the institutionalized also have rights that do not place corresponding obligations on the state; institutional actions and decisions affecting these rights should not be shielded in the same way. The right to necessary acts of survival is such a right. This right provides a basis for a constitutional right to self-defense in the prison context.

Necessity is a longstanding defense to criminal liability. It is properly invoked by one who has broken a law, but did so because lawbreaking was necessary to avoid a greater evil. Most commonly, necessity is claimed where the lawbreaker’s life depended on the lawbreaking. While there is no universally accepted definition of necessity, its basic elements are widely agreed upon: “[c]onduct that the actor believes to be necessary to avoid a harm or evil . . . is justifiable, provided that . . . the harm or evil sought to be avoided by such conduct is greater than that sought to be prevented by the law [broken].”

161 See text accompanying notes 61-62.
162 For the texts of the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendment Due Process Clauses, see note 101.
163 MPC § 3.02(1). See also Dressler, Understanding Criminal Law § 17.02 at 183.
Recognizing a limited due process right to perform necessary acts in the institutional context solves some of the problems created by the tension between the basic human needs of the institutionalized and the practical difficulties confronted by state institutions. First, recognizing a right to perform necessary acts places no significant corresponding obligations on state institutions. The right to claim necessity as a defense to a charge of wrongdoing cannot be translated into a right to a given resource that the state must provide. Necessity authorizes an individual to act, but it imposes no concomitant, affirmative performance obligation on the state. Unlike the familiar, concrete rights to food, shelter, and safety—typical of the due process cases—the prisoner's right to perform necessary acts of survival does not unduly burden the institution.

Second, recognizing the necessity defense in the prison context preserves to the institutionalized at least a baseline right to survival. When the individual's survival is jeopardized, he is allowed to act regardless of the institution's culpability or lack thereof. Despite his institutionalization, he is not required to submit to his own destruction. Thus, recognizing a limited necessity defense in the institutional context revitalizes at least the core ideals articulated in *DeShaney*.164

Indeed, necessity has a long history in the institutional context, and in the prison context in particular. As early as 1736, English courts had determined that prisoners escaping from burning prisons could claim necessity as a defense: "[I]f a prison be fired by accident, and there be a necessity to break prison to save his life, this excuseth the felony." In 1868, the Supreme Court affirmed this principle in dictum, observing that "he is not to be hanged because he would not stay to be burnt." Courts have since struggled to determine just what conditions really make escape from state institutions and prisons necessary,167

(cited in note 8); Kadish, 64 Cal L Rev at 888-89 (cite in note 132) (discussing the lesser-evil theory of justification).

164 See *DeShaney*, 489 US at 199 ("[T]he state [must] ... ensure [institutionalized persons'] 'reasonable safety' from themselves and others."); *Youngberg*, 457 US at 314-25.

165 Levin, 18 Colum J L & Soc Probs at 515 (cited in note 20), quoting *People v Whipple*, 100 Cal App 261, 279 P 1008, 1009 (1929), quoting Sir Matthew Hale, 1 History of the Pleas of the Crown 611 (1736).

166 *United States v Kirby*, 74 US 482, 487 (1868).

167 See, for example, *People v Lovercamp*, 43 Cal App 3d 823, 118 Cal Rptr 110, 111-16 (1974); *People v Noble*, 18 Mich App 300, 170 NW2d 916, 918 (1969); *Whipple*, 279 P at 1010; *State v Cahill*, 196 Iowa 486, 194 NW 190, 192 (1923); *State v Davis*, 14 Nev 439,
but in the last twenty-five years, the basic right to necessary escape has been widely accepted. As the court wrote in *People v Lovercamp*, the seminal prison escape case:

> [W]e may assume that a prisoner with his back to the wall, facing a gang of fellow-inmates approaching him with drawn knives, who are making it very clear that they intend to kill him, might be expected to go over the wall rather than remain and be a martyr to the principle of prison discipline . . . .

Since *Lovercamp*, the majority of courts that have considered the issue have agreed that recognizing some form of necessity in the prison context is appropriate. 169

As suggested by its historical pedigree, necessity strikes a workable balance between the needs of state institutions and the rights of institutionalized individuals. Claims of necessity do not burden state institutions by requiring them to reallocate precious and scarce resources. Yet the right to claim necessity as a defense to a charge of wrongdoing vindicates the institutionalized individual's right to act when the state fails to meet his basic human needs. Thus, necessity solves the most problematic aspect of the due process doctrine governing the rights of the institutionalized: it assures the survival of the institutionalized in the face of good-faith institutional incapacity.

From this right to claim necessity in the institutional context arises a prisoner's right to self-defense. Self-defense is, at bottom, a variation on necessity. It can only be invoked when danger is imminent, when no other alternative is available, and when the state has failed to intervene. 170 When self-defense is invoked, it is because violence is necessary to prevent worse or less-justified violence. Self-defense claims will almost always satisfy the requirements of necessity claims. 171

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444 (1880). See also Levin, 18 Colum J L & Soc Probs at 514-22 (cited in note 20) (reviewing cases struggling with necessity in prison context).

168 43 Cal App 3d 823, 118 Cal Rptr 110, 116 (1974). Significantly, the court noted that it was not creating any new judicial doctrine: "We do not conceive that we have created a new defense to an escape charge. We merely recognize, as did an English Court 238 years ago, that some conditions 'excuseth the felony.'" Id at 116.


170 See the definitions of the self-defense right in note 9.

171 Indeed, in the context of *Lovercamp*, recognizing a necessity-based right to self-defense seems to avoid perverse results. If the state cannot require the prisoner to submit
Thus, a prisoner’s right to self-defense may be found at the intersection of the due process rights of the institutionalized and the law of necessity as it has developed in the institutional context. Courts reluctant to embrace the general right to self-defense suggested by the Palko analysis might still recognize this more limited version, and thereby do justice to important due process principles without unduly burdening state institutions. In so doing, they would also avoid the disturbing outcome embraced by Rowe.

IV. CONCLUSION

If Dostoevsky is right that a society’s prisons reflect that society’s degree of civilization, then the unrelenting violence that makes the modern American prison such a dangerous place should be cause for concern. And while economic and political realities surely limit the resources available to the prison system, and thus determine in large part the conditions that prevail therein, the decision in Rowe illustrates that courts can and do play a vital role in determining just how dangerous modern American prisons are.

Rowe also illustrates the extent to which legal rhetoric disguises the role of the courts in shaping prison conditions. Despite the availability of a spectrum of legal arguments supporting a constitutional right to self-defense, the Rowe court embraced pallid precedent and made not even passing reference to the rich constitutional doctrines supporting more compassionate outcomes. As a result, a decision with cruel ramifications for prisoners was made to seem inevitable.

In fact, courts are entrusted with unusual responsibility in shaping prison conditions doctrine. To a unique degree, prisoners are excluded from the lawmaking process. They are pariahs, often disenfranchised, and generally despised by much of the to life-threatening violence, which version of prisoner self-help would it prefer—escape or self-defense? To allow escape, but not self-defense, would appear to indicate a preference for escape over self-defense within the confines of the prison walls. Clearly, escape seems to pose more of a threat to prison security and the general welfare of society than does allowing the prisoner to act in self-defense.

See text accompanying notes 107-08.

For a general discussion of the significance of minority and/or pariah status in constitutional theory, see John Hart Ely, Democracy and Distrust chs 4-6 (Harvard 1980). See also United States v Carolene Products Co., 304 US 144, 153 n 4 (1938).

Prisoners are permanently disfranchised in fourteen states. Most other states disfranchise prisoners for the duration of their stay in prison. See Andrew L. Shapiro, Note, Challenging Criminal Disfranchisement Under the Voting Rights Act: A New Strate-
dangerous places

public. Politicians distance themselves from prisoner interests and concerns, and often legislate by appealing to the fear, anger, and hatred that broad constituencies feel toward imprisoned criminals. Prisons disproportionately comprise racial and socioeconomic minorities whose access to political representation can already be tenuous. Thus, legislators and policymakers often pay little heed to prisoners' needs.

As a result, the task of safeguarding prisoners' rights falls uniquely to judges. As John Hart Ely has observed, judges have heightened responsibilities where there is reason to fear that "representatives beholden to an effective majority are systematically disadvantaging some minority out of simple hostility ...." The Supreme Court has long recognized that cases involving the rights of discrete and insular minorities warrant special scrutiny. Prisoners epitomize such a minority. Thus, as Justice Brennan observed, courts have a unique role in protecting the rights of prisoners: "Those whom we would banish from society or from the human community itself often speak in too faint a voice to be heard above society's demand for punishment. It is the particular role of courts to hear these voices ...." For prisoners, then, courts are a crucial check against potential abuse in the democratic process. The responsibility for assuring that prisoners are treated in a civilized manner lies primarily with judges.

Courts should recognize the prisoner's constitutional right to self-defense. Self-defense has been an indispensable element of Anglo-American criminal justice, and it is therefore a fundamental right within the doctrine of due process. Furthermore, the ideals of the law governing the due process rights of the institutionalized can best be realized by recognizing a necessity defense in the institutional context—and this necessity defense likewise provides a sound basis for a prisoner's right to self-defense.

The analysis in Rowe ignored both compassion and the Constitution. Prisoners in modern American prison are exposed to...
tremendous violence, and Eighth Amendment doctrine offers them little hope of protection. Even so, the *Rowe* court deprived prisoners of their last line of defense on the basis of a shallow legal analysis, ignoring or failing to recognize constitutional doctrines supporting far more compassionate results. It may be true that prisons are dangerous places, but, as *Rowe* illustrates, for the modern American prisoner, courts can be dangerous places too.