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A safer brand of toothbrush

LISTEN TO THIS STORY

Two everyday bathroom products are everyday weapons in prison. So researchers at Johns Hopkins have designed razors and toothbrushes that can't be sharpened into makeshift knives. Steve Tripoli has details.

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TEXT OF STORY

SCOTT JAGOW: Here in the States, researchers at Johns Hopkins have come up with a new kind of toothbrush and a new kind of razor. They're designed for a specific group of people: prison inmates. Steve Tripoli explains.

STEVE TRIPOLI: Sharpening these items to stab or cut others is no small matter. Weapons fashioned from razors and toothbrushes are the top two prison security threats.

Paul Biermann at Johns Hopkins says his lab's versions of these items are made with a soft plastic that acts like a pencil eraser if you try to sharpen it.

PAUL BIERMANN: It won't happen. And even if you do get a, sort of a pseudo-point on it when you push against the handle as a whole will flex enough that you can't poke into the body.

Biermann thinks the products have a good shot at passing their next test — being successfully commercialized.

BIERMANN: Our goal is to transfer that technology out to the marketplace where they have the efficiency and scale to actually build these things in quantity.

And Massachusetts prison official Alex Fox, who heads a multi-state group that studies prison security, is hoping the end product fits prison budgets.

I'm Steve Tripoli for Marketplace.