

## **THE OTHER PRISONER -- TOO OFTEN, THE KEEPER IS THE KEPT.**

**Jim Bencivenga - Rikers Island, New York - 1983**

Making the rounds with Lt. Mike McGinnis at Ossining Correctional Facility (formerly called Sing-Sing), where 26 officers supervise 686 inmates in one five-story cellblock, it is necessary to detour underneath a first-floor steel overhang. The overhang deflects anything thrown down from one of the five tiers of cells stacked above.

The management of prisons can be a thankless job. Behind bars without having committed a crime, the guard is the "other prisoner." Unless there is a riot, he is as much out of the public's eye as the inmate whose freedom he denies.

Yet no single factor, not even overcrowding, is more important to the effective operation of a jail or prison than the people who staff it, say officials from the American Correction Association and the National Jail Coalition. That is why, with increased alarm, they note the record numbers of experienced officers who are tunneling out.

Not so in New York City. In the face of the same long-term prison overcrowding confronting other cities and states, it is an acknowledged leader for having improved the image and role of correction officers (COs). Its recruitment and training methods are national models.

In the last decade the New York City Department of Corrections (NYCDC) pushed major reforms on four fronts:

- \* **Training:** The NYCDC requires that all new officers take centralized training at its correction academy on Rikers Island. A mandatory seven-week course is conducted by its own officer staff and uses NYCDC jails as real-world classrooms.

- \* **Standards:** In conjunction with court reforms, it has established a "tested by experience" set of minimum standards and accreditation procedures. "When both inmates and officers know what's expected, what their rights are, consistency can be maintained," says Jess Maghan, president of the American Association of Correctional Training Personnel.

- \* **Unionization:** NYCDC has set up a correction /fficers' union which has resulted in better pay, a lower ratio Of officers to inmates, and, ultimately, greater say for those who run the cellblocks in the external political battles that shape internal prison conditions.

- \* **Job-related problems:** In 1982 a Personal Assistance Officer program (PAO) was established to help correction officers' deal with job-related or job-caused problems, especially alcoholism (high for guards throughout the country - not just in New York).

The PAO program seeks to balance the negative impact of corrections work on family and fellow employees. Experienced officers counsel their fellows who may have marital problems, other family difficulties, or financial or legal problems. The officers in trouble are not the only ones helped: If something keeps one officer at home, away from his assigned shift, another must work overtime to take his place.

(A jail has minimal staffing requirements determined by law. Just as a ship can't safely put to sea without a set number of officers on duty stations, so a cellblock or gate in a prison cannot be left unattended. Overtime must be accepted as part of the job by officers. If a replacement calls in sick, someone on duty must stay another eight hours.)

But even in New York, it's still an uphill battle to improve the image of correction officers. Cinematic portrayals of prison guards as brutal, racist, and dim-witted are well entrenched.

"The assumption that we're incompetent as well as psychologically, morally, and socially inferior is pretty widespread in our society," says James T. (Dep) Garvey, deputy warden and commanding officer of the NYCDC training academy. "The training academy provides a mandatory seven-week course in corrections before anyone works in the cellblocks. Every facet of the penal system is covered: Only a professional graduate."

**That's why they are sensitive about being called correction officers, rather than prison guards.**

"Think about it," says Dep Garvey, who has 20 years' experience working behind bars for the NYCDC, "If you were put in jail, would you want a "guard" or an "officer" to keep you there?"

Part of an officer's training involves alerting him to cultural taboos. "When you have a search of the cellblocks for contraband or weapons, you have to know not to touch the Koran unless you're a Muslim yourself," says Garvey. "You ask the inmate to hold it upside down so you know there's no knife inside. Or if you have to check behind a picture on a wall, if the inmate is Puerto Rican and it's his girlfriend or wife, you let him take it down. You have to be a sociologist. It makes your job that much easier."

NYCDC runs the largest municipal detention system in the world. It has doubled the number of officers who work in its jails to 4,900 in the last five years. The ratio of captains to COs is a desirable 1 to 10, one of the lowest in the country. This translates into new recruits being able to tap the irreplaceable asset of these captains' on-the-job experience - the most-often cited need in corrections management.

Here at Rikers Island, correction officers supervise the cellblocks and dormitories where inmates are housed, as well as the vocational shops and the dining and academic areas. They transport prisoners to hospitals and courts. They take turns serving on the disciplinary board and protect the gates leading into and out of the prison.

Informal counseling, breaking up fights, and sometimes even escorting prisoners on family visits are also part of an officer's duties. With unionization, there has been no hesitation to expand the description of the COs' role to include counseling and other treatment-oriented duties. And three times a day, after every meal, each inmate is frisked to see if he is trying to smuggle an eating utensil, something that could be turned into a weapon, back to his cell.

'Being a correction officer is not a job that has many inherent gratifications," says Capt. Earl Avery. He has 14 1/2 years' experience in the NYCDC. "You don't meet people at the best time in their lives. You've got to be able to turn it off at the end of the day, and have a social life, a family life , do something else productive."

Few People realize that except for those in the wall towers, guards in maximum-security prisons or jails are unarmed. COs are the first to point out the irony that, although prison regulations require them to be unarmed, prisoners frequently carry or have access to knives, pipes, or sharp bits of glass or metal. Because of this, it is not surprising that unions representing officers have emphasized safety and security as much as better pay."

All the goals of the union are consistent with the goals of prison reform," says Mr. Maghan. From the union's point of view, the more sophisticated the officer's role (the better his training, the higher his professional standards), the stronger the claim for better pay, and the easier it is to recruit better-qualified people. (Starting pay is among the highest in the country at \$ 21,000, and goes to \$27,000 in three years in the NYCDC. Recruits must have a high school diploma.) "What we call 'jailing' goes on in the cellblocks," says Capt. Errol Toulon. He has 21 years' experience at Rikers Island. "Inmates will try and get inside your head, wear you down. They don't want to be here and they want you to know that. What they are saying is, 'My life is miserable and I want to make your life miserable, too.' It takes experience to deal with it and it's something you only learn on the job."

"A new correction officer must be aware he or she is confined for eight hours every day," says NYCDC assistant commissioner Pauline Feingold, who is in charge of the PAO program. "It's the most difficult of the uniformed services in the city. Police officers are on the street, they meet people from all walks of life. COs communicate with only a certain segment of society. "How do officers deny freedom with dignity when counting, checking, watching, and locking define their contact with inmates? "I can always tell an inmate I didn't put him here," says first-year correction officer Samuel Smith. "I'm not here to punish anyone. And they're not here for jumping rope on a corner. We both have rules and regulations to follow. We're both protected by following them. "And at the end of the day, when I walk through the door, I push a button in my head and leave it all behind." The cellblock is where the "count" - determining several times a day whether all inmates are in fact where they are supposed to be - is conducted. If a count comes up short, all operations and movement cease.

A CO who is responsible for a miscount may be liable to discipline. Under the officer's union contract, the City of New York has one year to determine if he or she has the qualifications needed for corrections work. After one year, only gross misconduct, negligence, or poor health can result in an officer's being removed. Rikers Island houses 7,500 inmates. On average, if the inmates are adults, one officer is assigned for each 80 inmates. If the inmates are adolescents (under 21), two officers are assigned per 80."I'm a little harder now than when I first came on the job six years ago," says officer Inez Gray, who also works at Rikers Island. She has a desk job now, but was stationed in the cellblocks for four years, where she earned the respect of both inmates and fellow officers. "I'm sure not as gullible.

I've learned to leave my outside problems outside, and I don't bring my inside problems home with me." About 500 women are housed on Rikers Island. Women officers will work in the men's cellblocks, and officer Gray has. "The key difference is, a female does not have to show her macho the way a man might," she says. "We both go by the same rules and regulations and I just make this very clear. No way am I going to talk on the level of some inmates. They must come up to my level. They'll respect this, not the other way around." If you have ever visited a prison, you have been walked through metal detectors and had your wrist stamped with an ink visible only under ultraviolet light.

Officers do not open gates unless a visitor has been approved. It is at this point that tension, especially between family members of inmates and officers, can arise because of a visitor's resentment of questioning, searches, and other security measures. In the internal politics of many prisons, the gate post is an attractive spot for upward movement through the ranks. Officers are in constant contact with high-ranking security personnel and civilian administrators. Assignment to the gate is one route to sergeant status. And it is not lost on wardens and chief administrators that officers at the gates and those stationed in the visiting room represent the institution to the streams of outsiders - students, relatives, lawyers, legislators, reporters, and clergymen - who enter the prison each day.

In most corrections departments, there are usually three ranks above the line officer - sergeant, lieutenant, and captain. The work of a corrections sergeant can best be compared to that of a sergeant in the Army. Directly familiar with the line officer's work, he manages his unit, fills jobs requiring special responsibility (such as gatekeeper at various key points in the institution), and often substitutes for absent line officers. In addition, a sergeant is usually in charge of cellblocks, work units, and the hospital. Lieutenants serve as the prison's police force. When there is a disturbance in a cellblock, on a work assignment, or out in the recreation yard, the lieutenant is called upon to stop a fight, escort an inmate to isolation, or forcibly remove him from his cell. Captains are obviously fewer in number. They rarely have time to exercise personal supervision over a specific prison area. Instead, they are assigned to shift commands or to full-time administrative duties, which may include chairing the assignment or disciplinary committees. Paper work, personnel evaluations, and budgets fill up a large portion of their workdays.

The NYCDC knows that "when administrative changes are invoked, new policies implemented, revised, or reversed, or when rules and regulations are set by the courts, and a constant barrage of new programs (results), it is the guard who is expected to accommodate to all of these changes and, in the process, maintain custody and control," says Mr. Maghan. By making its officers the most professionally capable they can be, the NYCDC has brought real reform to corrections. "Only when the interests of society, correction officers, and inmates coincide in the cellblock will the officer stop seeing himself as a part-time prisoner," says Maghan.