

When Guards Know Prisoners Too Well

The recent arrest of dozens of corrections officers for dealing drugs to inmates inside Lorton's prisons bolsters an impression of the D.C. Department of Corrections as corrupt—or ineffective—and of the Lorton Correctional Complex as hopelessly out of control [front page, Nov. 17].

However, the situation is more complicated.

Since 1986, when D.C. Department of Corrections Director Walter Ridley permitted me to study life inside Lorton, I have been allowed to visit the prison at any time and speak with anyone on tape in a confidential setting.

Back then, after 15 years of appeasement by prior administrations, the prisoners controlled the prison. They roamed the 68-acre compound attacking anyone, anywhere, anytime. Inmates settled scores with knives made from a chicken bone, a pencil, a bed shat, a piece of fence. They could sharpen these "shanks" in the metal shop on an unguarded grinding wheel.

At that time, the drug of choice was "boat"—marijuana soaked in PCP. Smoking it made a user feel both paranoid and omnipotent—everyone was out to get him, but no one could stop him. In interviews, inmates described Lorton as a "deathtrap," where "life was always on the line." They never let the soap cover both eyes in the showers, they told me.

If Central was a "hell hole," it was also a "sweet joint." Inmates controlled the records office, the

phones, the kitchen—in short, most of the prison. They made their own wine, got high on drugs, could have breakfast brought to them in bed and had sex with prostitute prisoners, visitors and occasionally, female corrections officers. Some prisoners worked in industry, others went to school. But many slept late and spent their days playing basketball, getting high and watching their own color TVs.

So what's changed in seven years?

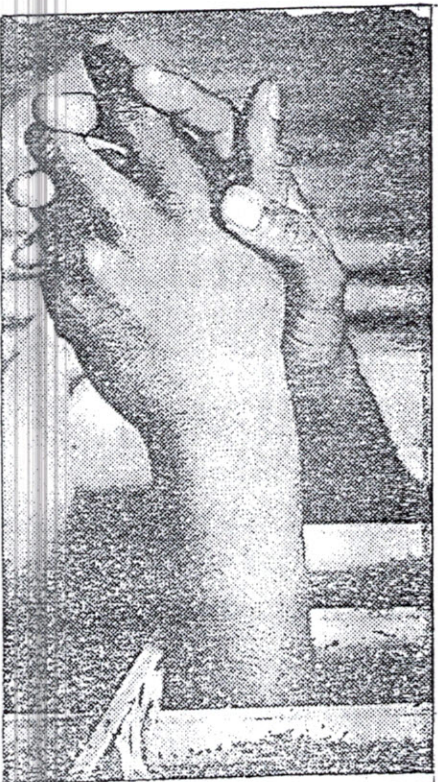


PHOTO BY WALTER RIDLEY FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Plenty.

Now officers are in the dorms 24 hours a day, and the prisoners' movement is mostly controlled, with fenced walkways restricting their freedom. During the day, most inmates work or attend school. Today, officers control the record office, the telephones and the mail room. Prisoners and staff agree that drug use is down substantially. Older prisoners generally applaud these changes.

However, some prison officers privately estimate that 5 percent of the staff have corrupt dealings with

inmates. Prisoners estimate 20 percent. Whatever the figure, it is way too high.

But the real problem within corrections goes beyond individual officers to a pervasive casual and disrespectful familiarity between officers and inmates.

"Twenty years ago," says one inmate, "when the work force was predominantly white, you didn't have guards from the street . . . There was a line. You stayed a convict, he stayed a guard. Now they come out of the same community. A guard might live next door to you. Went to school with you. Now there's a mingling."

Background investigations and more careful screening of personnel still can't prevent cousins and friends of inmates from joining the department. But if home rule for Washington means anything, the correctional staff should be drawn from the community.

However, because better officers generally advance to supervisory positions, high-contact posts often are left to low-paid rookies or burned-out officers. The outdated dormitory-style architecture of Lorton Central also requires these unarmed guards constantly to negotiate with prisoners.

So the problem goes much deeper than a "few rotten apples." Solutions are not obvious, easy or cheap. As one officer observed, "you can't change the inside without changing the outside."

Top administrators have instituted many constructive policy changes, struggling to make Central a more condusive environment for rehabilitation. But trickle-down is slow, and the problems within the D.C. Department of Corrections remain serious and frustrating. But they are not at the top.

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