

# Prison: 'Big house' to race wars to politics

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the 14th of 15 articles on crime and justice in America. The series was written for Courses by Newspaper and constitutes the text for an Oakland University course taught by Prof. Jesse Pitts.)

By JOHN IRWIN

Most of our ideas about male prisoners are mistaken because they fix on a type of prison — the "big house" — that has virtually disappeared during the last 25 years.

In the "big house," the prisoners, mostly white, lived according to the "convict code." Primarily, this meant not informing on other prisoners, "doing your own time" and not talking to guards.

Prisoner leaders — "right guys" — taught and enforced the code. A few prisoners carried on illegal activities like making "pruno" (a nasty tasting prison brew) and got involved in prison sex, a peculiar sexual world with "jockers" (the masculine partners), "punks" (prison-made homosexuals) and "queens" (admitted homosexuals).

But most prisoners stayed close to a prison friends, worked at their job assignments, took up hobbies, played sports, read and tried to stay out of trouble.

ADMINISTRATORS ran the "big house" with one overriding concern: to keep the place running smoothly and out of the public's attention.

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Guards kept the peace by striking a bargain with convicts: "Don't get too far out of line and I won't bother you, but if you cause me trouble, I'll bust you."

By and large, the big house was a mean and monotonous place — but peaceful. Contrary to popular belief, most prisoners didn't learn crime there, but they didn't learn how to live outside either.

They learned how to do time, and about half came back to serve more.

TODAY'S PRISONS, in contrast, are torn by violence, with inmates assaulting both each other and their guards. Gang warfare is common. By 1973 the murder rate inside San Quentin was 20 times higher than that in the outside world.

Meanwhile, penologists, prisoners and the public have all come to recognize that prisons are failing to rehabilitate convicted criminals or deter others from crime.

What has caused such turmoil? And what can be done to end the war behind walls and ensure that prisoners serve their purpose?

The decline of the big house began seriously tried to "rehabilitate" prisoners.

Innovative penologists accepted the idea that criminals were sick and could be cured, and they developed elaborate classification systems to diagnose criminals' sicknesses; therapy, education and vocational training programs to cure them; and indeterminate sentence systems to release prisoners when — and not before — they were cured.

In the early years of rehabilitation, many, perhaps most, prisoners accepted the idea that they were sick and willingly participated in the new programs. Communication flowed more freely between prisoners and staff, and the gap between them narrowed.

Many prisoners stopped thinking of themselves as "criminals" or "convicts," and the ties of the convict code that had held prisoners together weakened.

BY THE 1960s, however, social scientists and prisoners began questioning the worth of rehabilitation. The new programs had not really helped ex-prisoners faced with the same conditions which, in the past, had pointed them toward crime.

Furthermore, under the dogma of rehabilitation, prisoners were subjected to indeterminate sentence systems. Parole boards fixed and refixed sentences for reasons that were never quite clear to the prisoners.

On the average, prisoners served more time. In California, for example, the median sentence increased from 24 months in 1950 — the real beginning of the rehabilitative era — to 38 months in 1968.

Harshly punitive measures, such as indefinite segregation in "adjustment centers," were slipped in as "rehabilitative" devices. The discrepancy between rhetoric and reality produced a sense of rage and injustice among prisoners.

AT THE SAME time, racial hostilities soared.

Prisons in the East, North and West which formerly housed predominantly white prisoners now contained half or more non-white prisoners.

Black prisoners began organizing religious, cultural and political groups. Chicanos in the West and Puerto Ricans in the East followed the lead of black prisoners. Violence between races increased drastically, and many prisons became tense battlefields with voluntary segregation by race.

In the late 1960s, outside political activists became interested in the prisons and began working to improve and

to help prisoners organize. For a short period, a political "movement" grew among prisoners of all races.

Prisoners planned strikes, formed unions and even ran a prison in Wapole, Mass. for 11 weeks after the guards walked out in protest over the administration's lenient policies.

Although the old "big house" order based on a single convict code and respected prison leaders had been torn apart, involvement in political organizations and demands for prisoners' rights temporarily created a new form of solidarity among inmates and reduced racial violence.

PRISON ADMINISTRATIONS across the country acted swiftly to stop this new development.

They identified prison leaders as "revolutionaries" and segregated, transferred or paroled them. They succeeded in halting or stalling the prison political movement.

However, without a unifying purpose, the prisoners have again split into hostile factions. These divisions, particularly racial divisions, prevent prisoners from following a single code.

Many inmates have formed gangs or cliques to protect themselves and to control drugs and other contraband, including money, which is now in the prisons in large amounts. Gang members attack rivals and reallocate when attacked.

MOST PRISONERS, as always, try to avoid trouble, but this is now more difficult.

They must obey the informal rules of racial segregation enforced by the gangs and tiptoe carefully around violent gang members. Even then they run some risk of being assaulted, robbed, raped or murdered.

Prisoners now assault guards much more frequently. Accordingly, guards have grown more hostile toward prisoners and toward the administrators, whom they blame for the dismal state of the contemporary prison.

Prison guards are organizing into labor unions that demand more punitive policies against prisoners, in addition to such traditional labor benefits as higher pay.

Unfortunately, we are stuck with our contemporary prisons. Despite talk about "alternatives to incarceration," the public will accept no substitutes that are more humane.

Some convicted persons may be placed on probation or in half-way houses. Others may be sentenced to volunteer services or some alternative to prison. But the public will ordinarily demand that those convicted of serious crimes be imprisoned.

Actually, the expansion of "community corrections" has increased the number of people in the control of the criminal justice system by adding new categories of minor offenders, as the number of offenders in prison also rises.

SINCE WE ARE stuck with prisons. (Continued on page 10A)

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