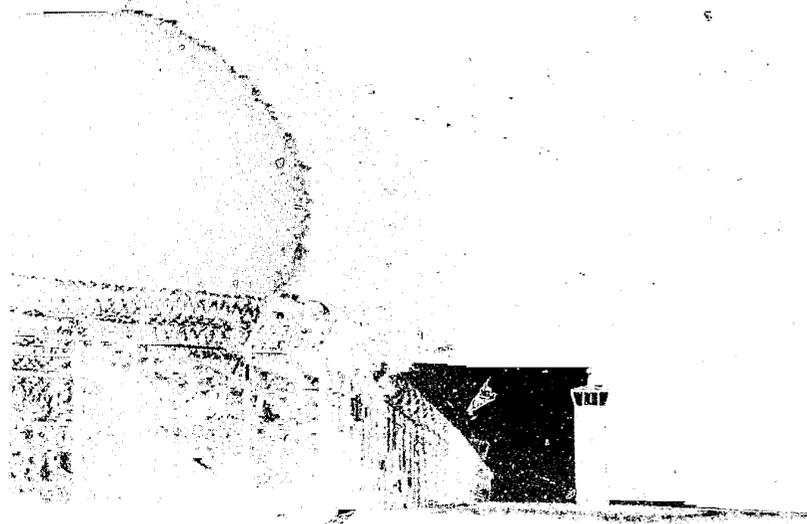


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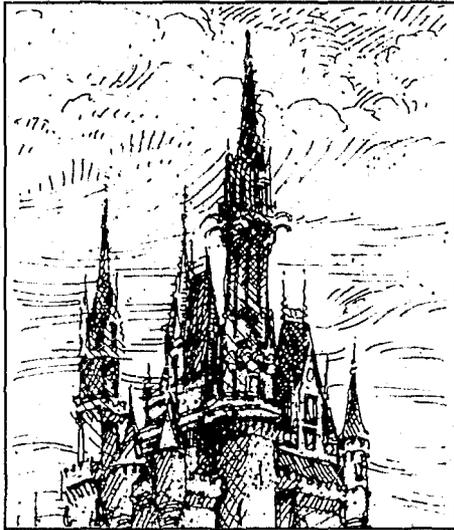
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# Long-term Prisoners

## Their adaptation and adjustment

Timothy J. Flanagan

Long-term prisoners are a growing segment of the State and Federal correctional population that poses formidable challenges for administrators. Inmates with terms of 10, 20, 30, or more years tax the imagination and resources of correctional systems to the fullest. The challenge is to develop a plan of productive work, education, and meaningful activity for persons who will spend much of their adult lives in confinement.

Several complications make the dilemma of the long-term prisoner even more troublesome. First, long-term prisoners (however defined) are a diverse group of individuals, who differ in criminal history and sophistication, propensity for violence, social background, and response to imprisonment. Prescriptions designed to "manage" long-term inmate populations that ignore this diversity are destined to be irrelevant—perhaps even dysfunctional.

The serious crimes and lengthy prior records of many long-term prisoners also make this group unattractive in terms of public and political support for innovative policies. Public protection demands that tolerance for correctional innovations and risk-taking varies inversely with the seriousness of potential recidivism, so a predominant theme in the management of long-term prisoners will be the provision of secure custody.

The current situation in American corrections is that we have little insight or empirical evidence on "better" methods of managing long-term prisoner populations. This is ironic in light of two considerations. First, other nations have devoted substantially more resources to

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the problem of long-term confinement. More than 20 years ago, for example, the British Home Office was commissioned to report on the basic elements of a regime for the confinement of long-term prisoners. Studies of long-term confinement have also been issued by the Council of Europe and by prison administrators and the judiciary in West Germany, Italy, Canada, the Scandinavian nations, Hungary, and Australia. In many of these nations, the "long-term prisoner population" is minuscule in comparison to the U.S., and the definition of long-term confinement is very different.

Second, the dearth of empirical study in the U.S. is ironic because we use long-term confinement at comparatively high rates. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that the average length of sentences to State prison for felony defendants sentenced in 1986 was nearly 7 years. The average sentence for murder and negligent manslaughter defendants was about 18 years; these figures do not

include the more than one-quarter of such defendants who received sentences of life imprisonment or death. The same study estimated that the actual time to be served in confinement for these defendants was more than 7 years for murder and negligent manslaughter defendants, more than 5 years for defendants sentenced for rape, and nearly 5 years for robbery defendants. These offense categories made up nearly 40 percent of the State prisoner population in 1986. The tremendous influx of drug offenders into State and Federal corrections systems in recent years, coupled with statutory changes that lengthen prison terms for serious offenses, ensures that the number and proportion of long-term prisoners in State and Federal prisons will continue to increase in years to come.

My objectives in this article are fourfold. First, I will try to make sense of the growing body of research on the *adjustment and adaptation* of long-term prisoners to confinement that has accumulated in the last 2 decades. Second, I wish to highlight the *special or unique problems* of long-term prisoners that merit attention in discussions of prison adjustment and program planning. Third, I will sketch what is known about *how long-term prisoners cope or adapt*. Finally, I will offer for discussion some ideas, informed by the research base at hand, about how best to *manage* long-term inmates. Let me anticipate my conclusion—we can do better than we've done in the past—but better management of long-term prisoners requires a commitment to experimentation (i.e., openmindedness) and taking a long view of long-term incarceration.

## Adjustment and adaptation

There has been a fundamental shift in our thinking about the adjustment of long-term prisoners to incarceration during the last 2 decades. Early thinking about lifers and long-termers assumed that the effects of extended incarceration were relatively predictable and profoundly negative. Long-term incarceration was inexorably linked to deterioration of the personality, growing dependence on the highly controlled regime of institutional life, and increasing levels of "prisonization" or commitment to an oppositional inmate value system. In this view, often articulated in inmate accounts and the reports of early prison researchers, few long-term inmates would survive the experience without substantial and irreparable damage.

In the past 2 decades, investigators who have forayed into prisons in several nations to document and quantify the nature and extent of deterioration suffered by long-term inmates have reached unexpected conclusions. Whether focused on physical impairment, intellectual deterioration, abnormal personality changes, attitudinal shifts, or behavioral manifestations, modern researchers have found "the evidence for a profound and incapacitating influence, that is both commonplace and severe, is scarce, if existent at all" (Wormith, 1984). The consistency with which these findings of "no systematic effect" as a consequence of long-term confinement have accumulated is remarkable. A few examples will suffice.

Rasch studied the *physical condition* of West German lifers and concluded that, as time served increased, "the state of health did not deteriorate in a serious or constant manner" (1977: 275). Although

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the prisoners reported numerous afflictions during the medical interviews, there were no statistically significant increases in serious ailments across time-served groups, and sleep disturbances and loss of appetite diminished as time served increased. Reed and Glamser's study of older prisoners (who had served an average of 23 years) concluded that "prisoners are reasonably healthy. The availability of regular meals, rest, and medical care exceeds that which is available to many adults, and the effects of economic factors are greatly reduced in a prison setting." While aging prisoners present typical geriatric problems, the researchers found that "much of what is viewed as part of normal aging does not take place in the prison setting." Other researchers have reported stability or actual decreases in illness complaints over time. A recent review concluded that "as far as physical health is concerned, imprisonment may have the fortuitous benefit of isolating the offender from a highly risky lifestyle in the community" (Bonta and Gendreau, 1990: 357).

Several investigators have focused on deterioration in *intellectual functioning* as a result of long-term confinement. These studies have also indicated no evidence of systematic decline in intellectual capacity, measured by standard intelligence tests, as a consequence of long-term imprisonment. *Personality deterioration* has also been investigated. In contrast to early descriptions of the "Ganser Syndrome" and related disorders attributed to long-term incarceration, recent studies suggest that personality changes in long-term prisoners are mild. Some investigators reported increases in inner-directed hostility, as well as increased introversion, flatness of affect, and dependency upon staff. In other studies, the findings on measures such as self-esteem and self-concept have been conflicting. As with studies of physical and intellectual functioning, this body of research generally fails to document widespread and serious deleterious results.

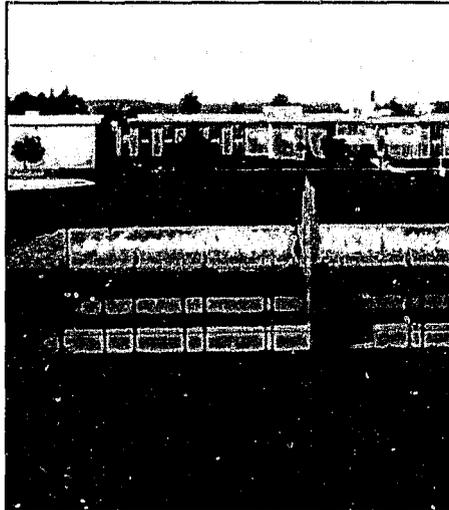
In contrast to the dimensions discussed above, studies of *attitudinal change* among long-term inmates report observable changes, though not in the expected direction. Attitudes towards prison staff have been found to improve as time served increases, attitudes toward the criminal justice system do not change dramatically, and emotions such as anger and hostility appear to subside.

The evidence concerning *psychopathological changes* during the long sentence is inconsistent. Several studies have utilized the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) and other measures of psychopathology, and the findings have been mixed. Although Rasch reported "no evidence" of psychotic symptoms in the West German lifer sample, an Austrian study found that after 4-6 years of confinement, many

long-term prisoners manifest symptoms of a "functional psychosyndrome," including inadequate emotions, obsessional ideas, infantile and regressive behavior, and growing insecurity (Sluga, 1977). A study of British lifers found a "remarkably high incidence of personal illness," but the incidence was *inversely* related to time served. More recent studies of American and Canadian long-term inmates have found no evidence of increasing psychopathology, and some have concluded that "prisoners with longer sentences displayed less mental disorder" (Wormith, 1984: 341).

Finally, several investigators have examined *behavioral responses* of long-term prisoners. The primary indicators of behavioral adjustment that have been studied are involvement in institutional disciplinary violations and the frequency of requests for medical services. A note of caution is in order. The most well established correlate of involvement in disciplinary violations is the inmate's age; older inmates have significantly lower rates of institutional misconduct. Of course, time served and age are highly correlated. The challenge is to disentangle the separate effects of age and time served in understanding behavior patterns of long-term and short-term prisoners.

My investigation of the rate of involvement in prison disciplinary infractions among long-term and short-term prisoners indicated that short-termers' rates were double those of long-termers. Even when I controlled for age and restricted the analysis to the first years in prison, I found that long-termers had significantly lower disciplinary infraction rates. More recently, Toch and Adams' massive study of inmate adjustment found that young long-term inmates had very *high* rates of disciplinary involvement, but that



*Warkworth medium security institution, Canada. The LifeServers Program for long-term inmates is conducted at Warkworth.*

these declined over time. Toch and Adams suggested that age was a better predictor of institutional adjustment than sentence length.

In a comprehensive study of coping and adaptation among Canadian prisoners, Zamble and Porporino found that after indicators of coping skills are taken into account, "sentence length does not predict any important measure of adaptation in prison, from disciplinary history to depression." Accordingly, Zamble and Porporino warned that current classification policies—in which sentence length plays a critical role in determining the assignment of offenders to institutions—are misguided. Under such classification systems, they argue, many inmates who *do not need* close supervision are assigned to maximum security institutions.

To summarize, our thinking about the effects of long-term confinement has come full circle from the early "deterioration" model. It would be unwise to accept these findings uncritically, however. Other sources, particularly

inmate accounts and ethnographic studies of prisons, suggest that the "pains of imprisonment" are quite real and that long-term inmates feel them acutely. There are several reasons to be cautious about accepting the conclusion that long-term imprisonment exacts no toll on inmates.

First, all of the studies mentioned above recognize that responses to confinement vary tremendously, so it is axiomatic that some long-term prisoners suffer. Second, the studies are based primarily on cross-sectional analyses of inmates who have served varying lengths of time. Comparing across groups of inmates who have served 2, 7, and 12 years in prison illustrates differences, but these designs are incapable of detecting *changes* over time. Investigating change over time requires research that follows inmates through their prison careers. To date, Zamble and Porporino's study is the only one that used such a design, and they were only able to follow their subjects for the first 16 months of confinement. However, they reported that "by the last interview we had seen the emergence of some effects that are probably characteristic of long-term imprisonment. The changes in socialization are signs of coldness and self-containment of men who have long been cut off from intimate contacts with other people. Psychological survival was the goal and they did manage to cope, but the cost was considerable" (1988: 122). Finally, and most importantly, there is reason to believe that long-termers face problems and challenges that are different from those faced by inmates serving shorter terms, and these stresses may not be adequately measured by the studies described above.

## Problems of long-term prisoners

Long-term confinement presents special stresses and amplifies noxious elements of incarceration into major problems. Studies of long-term inmates in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States indicate that long-term prisoners ascribe greater importance to problems associated with incarceration per se than to deprivations associated with the prison environment (Richards, 1978; Zamble and Porporino, 1988, and Flanagan, 1980 respectively). I've described the "special stresses of long-term prisoners" in several general categories: external relationships, relationships within the prison, fear of deterioration, indeterminacy, and the prison environment. Recent studies by Zamble and Porporino with Canadian prisoners and by Mitchell with British lifers confirm several of these problem areas.

In terms of external relationships, loss of contact with family and friends outside the prison is a source of stress for *all* inmates, but for long-term inmates the fear that these relationships will be *irrevocably* lost creates unique concerns. While relationships with spouses, family members, girlfriends, and others may withstand enforced estrangement for a few years, the prospects for maintaining these relationships over the long term are dim. Some long-term inmates seek to "freeze" a mental picture of life on the outside—and their role in it—as an aid in protecting the ego, but the gradual attenuation of relationships is a threat to this strategy. Maintaining external relationships is vital to coping with long-term imprisonment, but the price is high, because this reminds the prisoner that the world outside is changing.

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Within the prison, developing personal relationships is often no less troublesome. I have characterized these stresses as problems of commonality and continuity. The long-term inmate, especially an older long-termer, may have little in common with the younger, boisterous short-term inmate whose conversation centers on the triumphs and good times that await him upon return to the streets. Continuity is a problem because inmate friendships are often severed by transfers and releases. Unlike the situation of the short-termer, who can "wait it out," there is no wholly satisfactory way for long-termers to resolve the dilemma of prison friendships. Zamble and Porporino found that "many long-term inmates began to develop a more solitary lifestyle after a while," part of what they have termed the "behavioral deep freeze."

Concern with deterioration is another source of stress. Cohen and Taylor (1972) wrote that the long-termers with whom they worked were obsessive and highly self-conscious about outward signs of deterioration. The features of the prison that provoke these concerns

include the fact that prisoners are routinely offered unfavorable definitions of themselves by others, that it can be difficult to mark time in an environment where there is an abundance of time to fill and limited opportunities to fill it, and that limited personal choice in the restricted world of the prison provides few opportunities for prisoners to practice effective coping.

Two additional sources of stress are the indeterminacy of sentences and chronic exposure to noxious features of the prison environment. Goodstein found that the type of sentence had virtually no effect on adjustment, but other researchers suggest that indeterminacy regarding release date, especially among long-termers, causes significant problems (Farber, 1944; Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Flanagan, 1980; Mitchell, 1990). Finally, features of the prison environment may be at odds with features conducive to serving a long sentence. Toch (1977) reported that many long-term inmates prize *structure in their environment*—"a concern with environmental stability and predictability, a preference for consistency, clear-cut rules, orderly and scheduled events, and impingements." Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that some long-term inmates actually prefer the fortress-like "big house" prisons, where experienced inmates and veteran staff achieve a mutual coexistence based on formality and consistency.

As noted earlier, many of these stresses and problems would be difficult to measure with the standard psychometric instrumentation used in recent research. The most informative research in this area has productively blended this approach with ethnographic analyses that enable us to view long-term incarceration from the inmate's perspective.

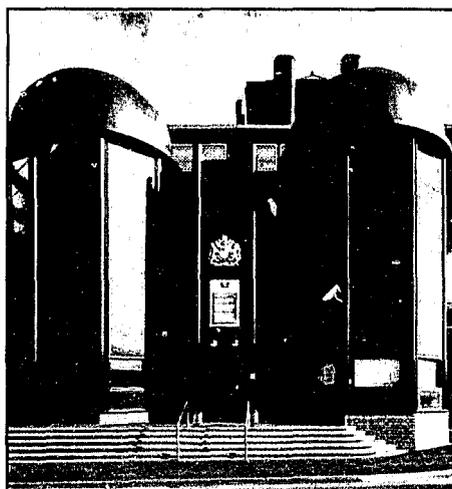
## Adaptation and coping strategies

How do lifers and long-term prisoners respond to the constellation of problems they face? Are they able to adapt or do they simply endure? Do some fall apart? We know that many long-term inmates successfully negotiate prison pressures, but the strategies employed are neither easily deduced nor readily classifiable

Unkovic and Albini (1969) suggested that lifers adapt by taking on a "philosophy of minimum expectation," a fatalistic perspective that establishes the release date as a time boundary. Sapsford also found that restricting future time perspectives was a common strategy among British lifers, and Flanagan reported these "barrier effects" among American long-termers. The adoption of a "here and now" perspective reduces uncertainty and ambiguity about the future; this resembles coping strategies used by physically disabled patients.

I've suggested that focusing on the "here and now" is a central attitudinal element of a perspective toward doing time that many long-term inmates adopt. The perspective is reinforced through affiliation with other long-termers. Key elements of the perspective are maturity, predictability of action, and the "prison sense" that comes from years of experience in serving time. This perspective also has behavioral implications that may be highly functional in enabling the prisoner to cope.

These behavioral manifestations include active avoidance of "trouble" within the prison and attempts to use time profitably rather than simply serving time. Long-term inmates avoid trouble through prescriptions such as "mind your own business," "adjust to authority," "choose



*Birmingham Prison, England. This facility contains a prerelease hostel. Lifers are given priority in the allocation of hostel places.*

your associates wisely," and "remain alert to cues in the physical environment." In addition, many long-termers express a desire to use prison time "to gain tangible improvements in skills, and a better chance to negotiate life following release" (Toch, 1977: 287). Zamble and Porporino referred to this motivation to change, which they found was highest in the early period of the sentence, as a "window of opportunity" for staff to direct inmates into productive programs. Mitchell reports that lifers pursue educational and training programs in prisons for several reasons: to improve postrelease employability, to pass the time, and because contact with civilian instructors was a "means of retaining a sense of awareness of life outside the institution" (1990:200-01).

Toch's research in the environmental psychology of prisons suggests a related adaptive strategy. Some inmates identify "niches" within the prison—environments that often feature lower social density, escape from the tumult of general population, nonconfrontational interactions with staff, and group identity

among participants. In many cases, educational, training, and work programs are highly prized "sanctuaries" that provide respite for the inmate.

Cohen and Taylor suggested that the coping style used by long-term inmates was determined primarily by the prisoner's attitude toward authority. Offenders whose pre-prison relationship with authority was based on confrontation will likely continue to rebel for many years. Those who lived by "bending, fixing, and rigging" rules on the outside continue to attempt to subvert authority inside. Cohen and Taylor suggested that long-termers shift their adaptive strategies until they find one that is most functional in their environment.

How well do long-term prisoners cope? A recent comprehensive study of coping among Canadian inmates, which included special attention to long-term prisoners, suggests that ineffective coping skills is a key reason that offenders end up in prison. Moreover, according to Zamble and Porporino, prisons do little to capitalize on the "window of opportunity" presented by the disequilibrium of incarceration; as a result, inmates' poor coping skills do not improve much over time. In part, they argue that this is because the motivation for change decays rapidly. After a few weeks in prison the "window of opportunity" is replaced by "monotony and boredom," which serves to "lower arousal levels and lull people into lassitude and stolid adherence to the daily routine" (1988:114).

Zamble and Porporino attribute the lack of improvement in coping to the "behavioral deep freeze" of incarceration. They assert that "most offenders arrive in prison with poor coping ability. Imprison-

onment then deprives them of experience with the normal environment, and thus limits their further experience with conditions they must deal with on the outside. Most of us learn to cope better through accumulated experience, but prisoners are deprived of much of that experience. As a result, they do not learn to cope satisfactorily with conditions in the outside world." Zamble and Porporino's pessimistic conclusion is that "prison affects men strongly, but in the long run it changes them hardly at all" (1988:152, emphasis added).

### Can we do better?

Along with more and better research on the adjustment of long-term prisoners and the impact of long-term confinement, a small but growing body of policy-oriented literature on the management of long-term prisoners has developed. The traditional argument in this area was the "concentration vs. dispersal" dispute. That is, is it more effective to concentrate lifers and long-termers in a single facility, or is it better to disperse them throughout a correctional system? As the Home Office Advisory Council on the Penal System observed more than 2 decades ago, "much of the history of penal administration is taken up with the constant dialectic between these two methods" (1968: 13). Citing the American experience with Alcatraz, the Advisory Council concluded that the problems of concentration outweighed the benefits and recommended a dispersal policy.

Facilities of the type discussed by the Advisory Council typically focus not on the environment appropriate for long-term prisoners but rather on the disturbed or disruptive inmate. But should specific institutions be designated as "long-term

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inmate prisons?" Previously, I have argued that three principles should guide our decisionmaking with respect to long-termers. Since removal from society is the primary sanction that falls most heavily on long-term prisoners, the overriding objective of correctional policy as it relates to long-termers should be reduction of the "secondary sanctions" inherent in imprisonment. These secondary sanctions are the features of prison life that Sykes discussed as the "pains of imprisonment" (Flanagan, 1982, 1985). In pursuit of this goal, the principles of long-term prisoner management ought to be:

- Maximizing opportunities for choice.
- Creating opportunities for the prisoner to pursue a meaningful life in prison.
- To the extent possible, enhancing the permeability of the institution so that the offender does not lose all contact with the outside world.

These objectives can be pursued in a variety of administrative arrangements. They can help define the qualities of programs or living units within an institution, or they could serve as the

blueprint for the development of a separate facility for long-term prisoners. Several examples of programs directed to the needs of long-term prisoners are available, and many such programs incorporate one or more of these principles. A review of several "long-term programs" by the National Institute of Corrections (1985) included a broad-based Long-termers' Program at the Utah State Prison, the "Cabbage Patch Program" at the Somers Correctional Institution in Connecticut, and others. Palmer's (1984) description of the LifeServers Program at the Warkworth Institution in Canada explicitly focuses on several of these objectives. Cowles and Sabath (1989) instituted several different programs directed to the needs of long-term prisoners in the Missouri correctional system in recent years.

Further development of these kinds of programs can be informed by the findings of Zamble and Porporino's Canadian research. Their findings suggest that such programs for long-term inmates should begin as soon as offenders arrive in prison, and that much of the program content should be focused on enhancing offenders' coping skills and reinforcing the motivation to change.

Thinking about productive correctional experiences for long-term prisoners also requires a different perspective. We have a person who will spend a career with us in prison, and career planning for these inmates is in order. Toch (1977) introduced the concept of the career perspective, and I have commented that "it is incumbent on the correctional system to work with the offender to plan a worthwhile career, one that will be beneficial both to the offender and others, and that will be transferable and capable of supporting the offender upon his eventual

release. Moreover, there is no reason why, during their long imprisonment, many long-term prisoners cannot make a substantial contribution to society through help provided to other inmates." Toch and Adams provided several examples of mutual help among inmates and proposed an extension of this model to build coping competence among disruptive prisoners (1989).

The British Home Office (1989) has instituted a series of policies that incorporate the career planning model for long-term inmates in a system-wide fashion. Mitchell, in his recent book *Murder and Penal Policy*, reports that this "Revised Strategy," which was adopted in response to an increasing number of life sentence prisoners, is based on certain underlying principles: treating life term inmates as a separate group, but integrating lifers with other prisoners; providing lifers with a sense of purpose and direction; career planning, which involves goal setting, revision, and progression, and makes use of the variety of settings and programs available within the prison system; recognition of the heterogeneity of the lifer group; and flexibility of security designations. Mitchell recognized that "a crucial factor in the success of the Revised Strategy is the extent to which lifers are motivated to use their sentence constructively..." (1990:293). The implementation of the Revised Strategy has not been without difficulties (for example, Mitchell reports that many long-termers deeply resent the "compulsory integration" with short-termers), and Mitchell makes a number of suggestions that highlight the crucial role of correctional staff in administering the Strategy.

In sum, I return to my "anticipated conclusion" that we've learned a great deal about the impact of long-term

imprisonment as a result of research during the last 2 decades, and some jurisdictions have begun to act on that knowledge. To learn more, we need to experiment with different approaches to the management of long-term prisoners. We need to think about designs for long-term inmate-oriented facilities, implement the plans, and carefully document the results. We will learn from the failures as well as the successes, provided that we are open-minded about the problem and patient enough to await results. ■

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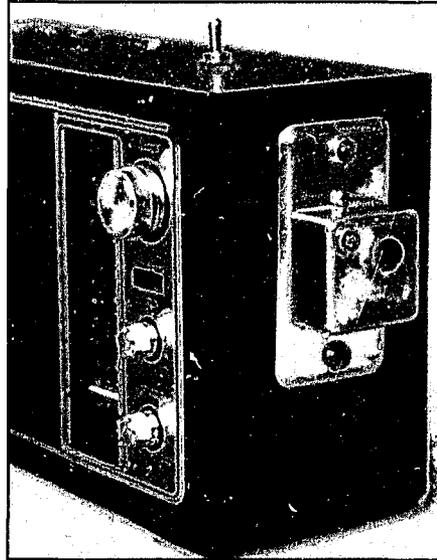
## Security Solutions

*With this new column, the Federal Prisons Journal will highlight some of the security technology issues that confront corrections personnel in the day-to-day operation of a prison.*

On August 30, 1986, while staff at the U.S. Penitentiary, Marion, Illinois, were picking up food trays, an inmate summoned a staff member to his cell. Upon the staff member's arrival, the inmate produced a zip gun, pointed it directly at the officer's face at point blank range, and detonated the weapon. Fortunately, the device malfunctioned, as the detonator—ground match heads—was moist and would not ignite. In the Marion Control Unit, on October 5, 1989, an inmate made a bomb, again equipped with matches as the detonator. In this case, the bomb did explode, seriously injuring the inmate.

Matches in USP Marion had been a concern for many years. As long ago as 1975, electrician Leonard Norris had examined ways to install a cigarette lighting device in each cell in the Control Unit. The lack of standard radios made it impossible at the time, but in 1983 the penitentiary began to issue a standard radio to all inmates. After the bomb incident, Marion staff initiated a major attempt to develop an alternative to matches.

Electrician Dewey "Deon" Sellars dusted off Mr. Norris's electrical lighter element, now some 15 years old, and developed a method for electrically incorporating it into the radio with a toggle switch, enabling both to function simultaneously—while securing the lighter element and switch sufficiently to render them tamper-proof.



Craig Crawford



*Left: The lighter element (showing the security bolts) and toggle switch installed in the standard radio at USP Marion. Right: Electrician Deon Sellars with a modified radio.*

Mr. Sellars had a working prototype completed within a day. Over time, he created an assembly-line production routine. All radios are examined by Mr. Sellars upon completion and tested for security and safety prior to distribution to inmates. The entire penitentiary was equipped, unit by unit, beginning in November 1989 with the Control Unit, and concluding in March 1991 when B-Unit (the pretransfer unit) was re-equipped.

This device is easily adaptable to almost any correctional setting, draws little electrical current, and is easily repaired. As inmate stockpiles of matches at Marion are reduced through use and shakedowns, a reduction in dangerous instances is already taking place.

The financial cost of Mr. Sellars' "modification" is minimal—\$17 per radio. The elimination of matches from inmate possession significantly improves the safety of the institution. As

Mr. Sellars states when asked about the safety benefits of his idea, "In my mind, if it saves lives, I'm thankful."

While not every security problem is soluble through simple technology such as this, the approach taken by Marion staff to a serious internal management and safety problem shows how initiative and ingenuity can pay off in a low-tech, but highly effective way.

*Frederick W. Apple, Executive Assistant to the Warden at Marion, contributed to this article. For technical information on the radio modification, contact the Warden's Office, U.S. Penitentiary, Marion, Illinois. ■*

*Readers are invited to contribute information about real-world technology solutions to practical prison management problems. Contact the Editor, Federal Prisons Journal.*