

Prisoners

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Mission of the Federal Bureau of Prisons

It is the mission of the Federal Bureau of Prisons to protect society by confining offenders in the controlled environments of prison and community-based facilities that are safe, humane, and appropriately secure, and that provide work and other self-improvement opportunities to assist offenders in becoming law-abiding citizens.

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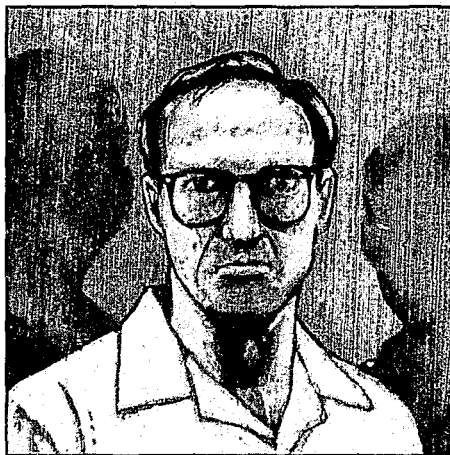


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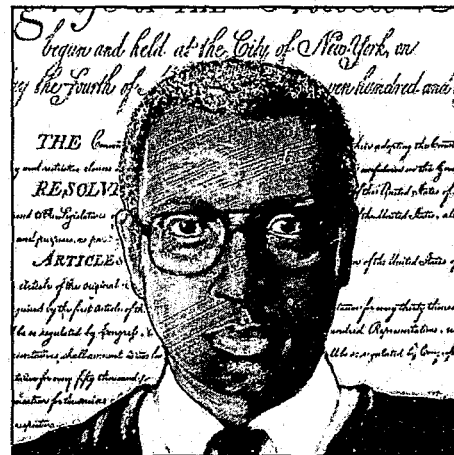
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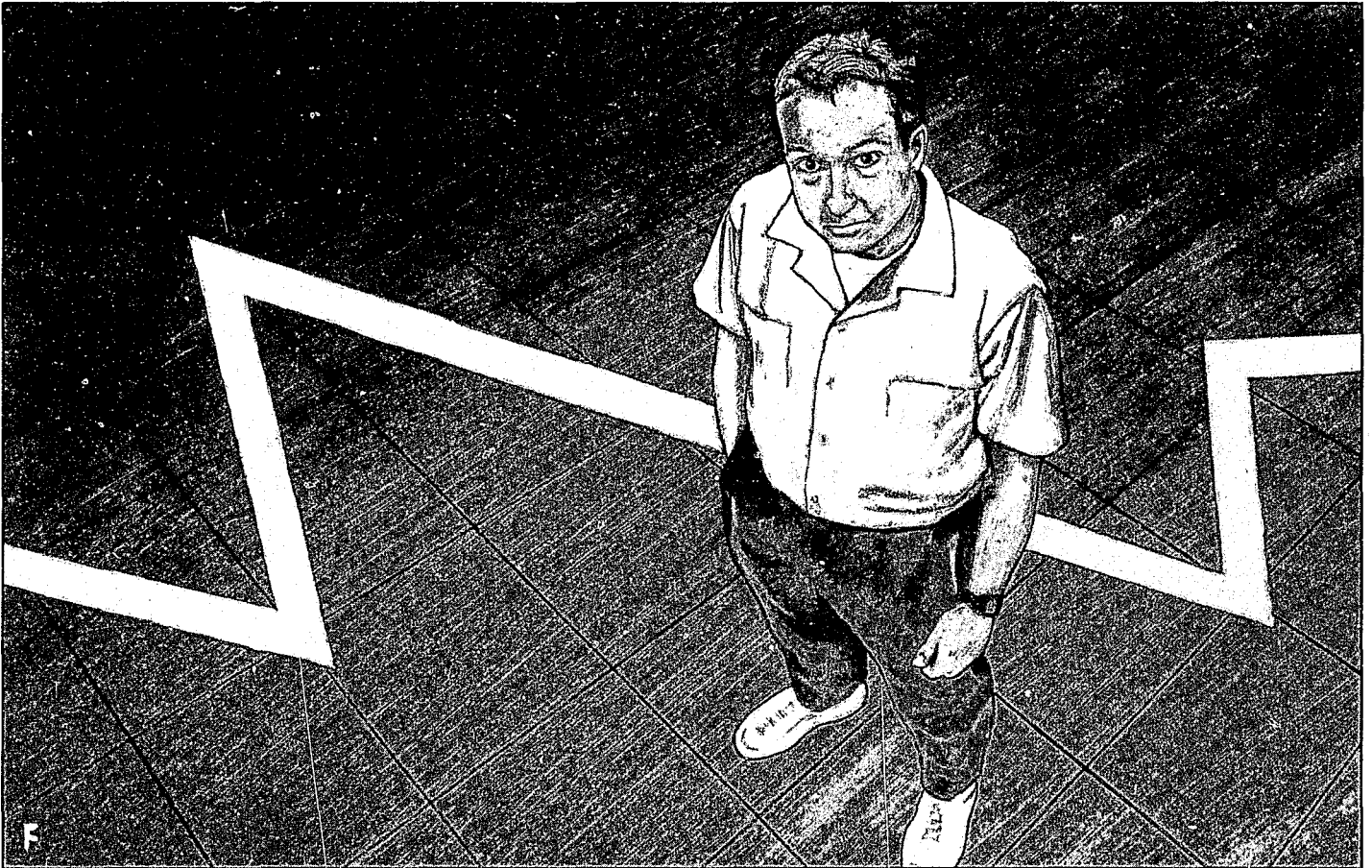
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An Era of Change

Evolving strategies of control in the Bureau of Prisons



Loren Karacki

When one considers the types of individuals corrections handles, it seems unlikely that any prison system can operate totally free of violent and disruptive behavior for an extended period. The objective, therefore, is to minimize such untoward events while maintaining good overall control and striving to achieve other goals and objectives appropriate for that system.

In the case of the Federal Prison System, a historical review of violence and disruptive behavior indicates that we are currently enjoying a decline in the

frequency of such incidents. For example, inmate murders, which peaked during FY 1974-77 when the annual murder rate averaged 59.9 per 100,000 inmates, averaged 14.4 per 100,000 per year for FY 1986-89. The inmate suicide rate has declined as well in recent years, from 41.8 per 100,000 inmates in FY 80 to 23.5 per 100,000 per year for FY 1982-89. Similarly, inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults have decreased since the early 1980's.

It is postulated that much of the reduction in violent and disruptive behavior in the Bureau in recent years is attributable to the system of control that has evolved in the agency over the past few decades and will carry it into the next century.

This article reviews the history of violent and disruptive behavior in the Bureau of Prisons and considers the Bureau's effort to deal with violence in its facilities by addressing how the current system of control has evolved over the last 25 years or so.

Violent and disruptive behavior

A review of violence and disruptive behavior involving Federal prisoners reveals that, in general, rates for inmate homicides and suicides and inmate-on-inmate and inmate-on-staff assaults have all decreased since the early 80's. Disruptive behavior—involving five or more inmates—has been on the decline

as well, when the increase in the inmate population since the early 1970's is taken into account.

Inmate murders

Figure 1 presents information on the rate of inmate murders per 100,000 population* in the Bureau for FY 1946-89. Rates are averaged annually over 4-year periods.

During FY 1946-61, the rate of inmate murders in Bureau facilities was rather low, ranging from 2.3 per 100,000 inmates in FY 1958-61 to 5.7 per 100,000 in FY 1950-53. During this period, the Bureau averaged less than one murder per year. The murder rate then began to climb, reaching 8.7 during FY 1962-65 and 42.3 during FY 1966-69, before declining to 22.3 for FY 1970-73.

The murder rate reached its highest level during FY 1974-81, when it averaged 59.9 for the first 4 years (FY 1974-77) and 57.5 for the second 4 years (FY 1978-81). In this 8-year period, there was an average of 15 murders per year in Bureau facilities.

the last 4 years, while still above the rate set for FY 1946-65, is at least approaching the low rates for the post-World War II period.

Inmate suicides

Figure 2 provides information on the rate of inmate suicides in Bureau facilities for FY 1971-89. The figure shows that, at least initially, the inmate suicide rate was

observation using, in some instances, trained inmate "companions" to assist in suicide watches.

In FY 1982, the year the suicide prevention policy was implemented, the suicide rate for Federal prisons was 39.7 per 100,000 inmates. In the 11 years prior to FY 1982, the rate averaged 29.0, while in the 7 years since 1982, the rate has been 23.5.

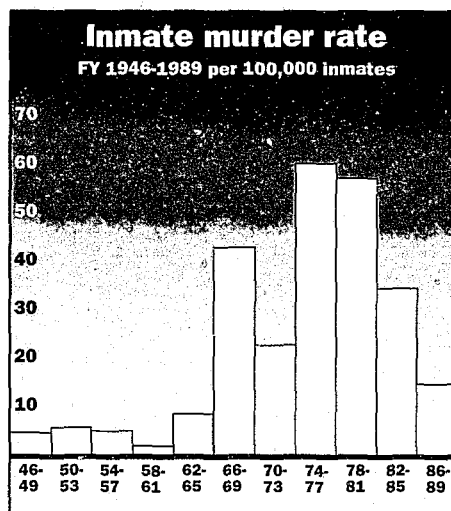


Figure 1

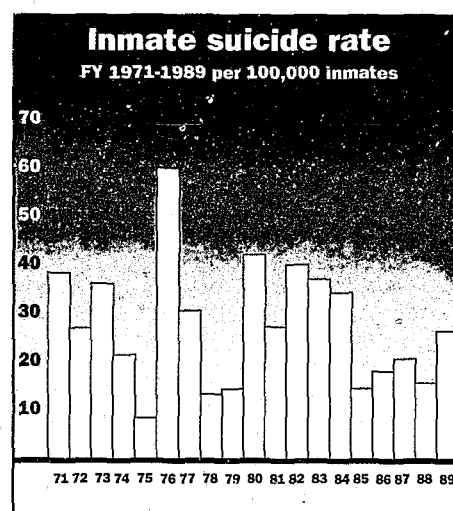


Figure 2

subject to wide fluctuations over time. For example, in FY 1975, the suicide rate was 8.7 per 100,000 inmates. The suicide rate then jumped to 59.5 in FY 1976, only to fall to 31.3 in FY 1977 and 13.6 in FY 1978.

More recently, the suicide rate appears to have somewhat stabilized and generally to have declined from the 41.8 figure in FY 1980. According to Schimmel et al. (1989:20), the decrease in the suicide rate closely corresponds to the mid-1982 implementation of a "comprehensive suicide prevention effort involving increased staff training and attempts to better identify suicidal inmates." Through this approach, inmates who are identified as suicidal receive continuous

Assaults on inmates and staff

Figure 3 (on page 26) presents information concerning both inmate-on-staff and inmate-on-inmate assaults for FY 1969-89. In the case of inmate-on-inmate assaults, the figure shows that, in general, the assault rate has been declining from a high of 21.6 per 10,000 inmates in FY 1970 to a low of 6.8 in FY 1988. This decrease, however, has not been consistent over time; in particular, the rate increased from 10.4 in FY 1978 to 14.5 in FY 1979 and 16.2 in FY 1980 and remained at that higher level in FY 1981 (14.5) and FY 1982 (14.0) before again resuming a decline.

*Current population is 63,000, an all-time high for the Federal system.

In the case of assaults on staff, the rate in FY 1969 was a very low 3.3 per 10,000 inmates and then trended upward until it peaked in FY 1980 at 12.8 before declining to where the rate for FY 1989 matched the rate for FY 1969. Unlike earlier years, when the assault rate on staff remained fairly low while the assault rate on inmates was high, in recent years there has been a conver-

Among inmate-on-staff assaults, since FY 1975 fewer than 20 percent (19.2 percent) have been with a weapon.

Violence rate summaries

Figure 4 provides summary information on rates for inmate homicides and suicides and inmate assaults on staff and inmates. The figure shows that while the

involving five or more inmates, with the exception of assaults by a group of inmates on another inmate. This includes work stoppages, food strikes, and other organized demonstrations or acts of resistance. Also included are disturbances, riots, fights, or mass escape attempts, as well as an occasional arson fire or commissary break-in as long as five or more inmates participated.

This analysis shows that during 1970-73, there was an average of 23 prison unrest situations per year. For the 3-year period covering FY 1985, '87, and '88,* the per-year average was 24, or only slightly higher than the earlier period, despite a substantial increase in the population over the ensuing years. During 1970-73, the average population of the Bureau was somewhat more than 21,000, while during FY 1986-89, the population averaged more than 43,000.

By type of prison unrest, there has been a substantial decrease between the two reporting periods in inmate work stoppages and racial disturbances/fights. During 1970-73, there were 37 work stoppages and 18 racial disturbances/fights. During FY 1985, '87, and '88, only six work stoppages and one racial fight were reported. In contrast, during 1970-73, there were 10 food strikes, while the figure for FY 1985, '87, and '88 increased to 17. It appears that food strikes have replaced work stoppages as the most common form of group demonstration; this shift has continued to the present as well (Karacki, April 1989).

*Information for FY '86 was excluded because of initial concerns about the accuracy of information, which showed FY '86 to be remarkably incident-free. A second information source appears to confirm the original finding for FY '86, but it nonetheless was decided to exclude this year from the analysis.

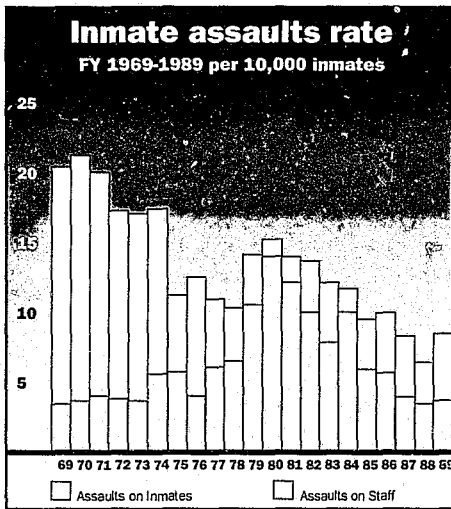


Figure 3

gence of the two rates. They now appear to run in tandem, with the assault rate on staff somewhat lower than the assault rate on inmates. Whether this is an artifact of data collection methods or reflects the actual situation in Federal prisons over time is difficult to say.

Recently, information on assaults has been further broken down into assaults with and without weapons. With respect to inmate-on-inmate assaults, since FY 1976, 60.4 percent of all assaults have been with weapons. For the last 2 years, however, fewer than half of inmate-on-inmate assaults have been with weapons.

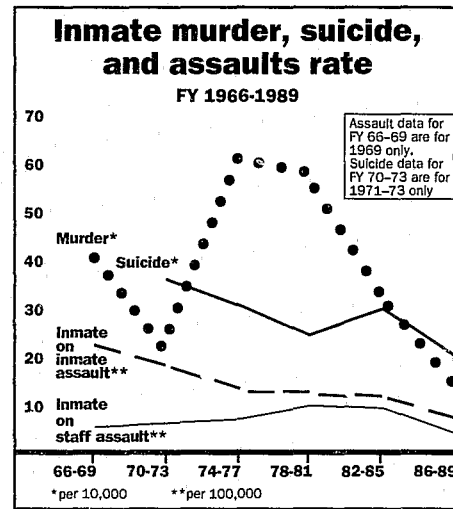


Figure 4

various rates may have moved in somewhat different directions in the past, recently all four have assumed a downward course, indicating that violence in Federal prisons has been on the decrease. In the case of inmate homicides, the decline has been pronounced, while the decrease in assault rates has been less dramatic. Nonetheless, the direction for all four rates is obviously down; the clear indication is that the level of violence in Federal prisons has decreased since at least FY 1982-85, if not sooner.

Major prison infractions

An effort was also made to obtain information on major prison infractions since 1970. For tabulation purposes, a major prison infraction was defined as any concerted act of rule violation

It is important to note that of the 72 incidents of prison unrest identified during FY 1985, '87, and '88, 29, or 40.3 percent, involved Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) detainees, mostly Mariel Cubans (28 of 29) confined at the U.S. Penitentiary in Atlanta or elsewhere. The number of unrest situations involving Mariel Cuban detainees is far out of proportion to their numbers in the Bureau and points to the enormous difficulties in managing this population. Had these individuals not been in Bureau confinement, the average number of unrest situations for FY '85, '87, and '88 would have been only 14.7 per year, instead of the actual figure of 24.

The shift in correctional objectives

As mentioned, much of the reduction of violent and disruptive behavior in the Bureau in recent years may be attributable to the system of control that has evolved over several decades and is now firmly in place. During this period, the Bureau wholeheartedly endorsed offender rehabilitation as its primary objective, only to later pull back to a more balanced view of corrections of which rehabilitation is but one part.

The impetus for the rehabilitative effort occurred mostly in the 1960's, but extended into the 1970's as well. During that period, the Bureau expanded upon an already existing reliance on prison industries to increase vocational and educational offerings and to introduce various forms of individual and group therapy and counseling. The inmate classification system was expanded and refined and individual programs of treatment and training were devised for inmates. Unit management, by which case managers and counselors are

assigned to work in living units in close daily contact with inmates, was adopted, and a "human relations" approach to dealing with the inmate population was pursued.

Federal halfway houses were opened, work and study release programs initiated, inmate furloughs encouraged, citizen volunteer activities promoted, and

common interests identified. One also less frequently encountered inmates whose level of alienation was so extreme as to virtually guarantee their self-destruction upon release from prison.

Despite these positive changes, by the mid-70's many Bureau administrators had begun to seriously question various programs and activities then under way. Much of this concern stemmed from the evident inability of these new approaches to show greater rehabilitative effectiveness.

Contributing to this view was the experience at the highly experimental Robert F. Kennedy Youth Center (now the Federal Correctional Institution, Morgantown, West Virginia), where an abundance of programs, dedicated and well-trained staff, and liberal interpretations of Bureau policies and practices failed to produce a measurably lower recidivism rate vis-a-vis a more traditional operation. Similar failures were reported for a wide range of rehabilitative efforts, including drug treatment programs, halfway house operations, and work/study release.

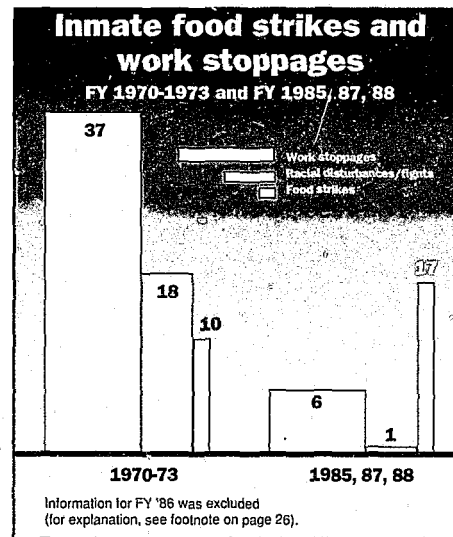


Figure 5

inmate advisory groups endorsed. Alcatraz, which to many represented an unenlightened past, was closed; new facilities, offering a more open environment, better physical conditions, and greater hope, were put into operation.

The distinction between the free community and the prison became blurred as inmates and free citizens moved back and forth between the two environments through programs of work/study release, furloughs, and citizen volunteerism. One saw at many facilities a substantial weakening of the so-called "inmate code," which had previously served to limit contact between staff and inmates, as the lines of communication between the two groups were opened and more

Once these approaches were stripped of their rehabilitative appeal, many of their pitfalls became apparent. For example, in the haste to establish rapport and offer assistance, staff were seen as susceptible to overidentifying with inmates. Likewise, along with its positive aspects, work release was seen as providing opportunities for criminal activities, and study release for sexual trysts. Increased volunteer programs often meant greater problems with contraband; inmate advisory groups were subject to the influence and control of negative inmate elements. As one warden put it, "I think all the moves we have made towards a more humane environment are good, necessary moves, but I have the feeling

that they have also contributed to an erosion of sound security procedures" (Taylor, 1976). Before long, the Kennedy Youth Center and other such operations were required to "join the Bureau" and be subject to the same policies and procedures as other Bureau operations.

The failure to demonstrate rehabilitative effectiveness contributed to a general

"change agents" to "change facilitators." Unit management evolved from a treatment strategy, with each unit having its own treatment routine, to a management device for operating institutions, devoid of treatment aspects. Counseling declined substantially, work/study release was virtually eliminated, and Federal halfway houses were closed. Inmate advisory groups were prohibited.

rehabilitative efforts tended to obscure many positive changes occurring in the 1970's, which have become vital to the operation of the Bureau today. For example, due to initiatives launched in the '60's and '70's, staff are now better trained and more professionally dedicated, the inmate classification system has been expanded and refined, physical plants are in place that incorporate "new generation" design features, health care has improved, and a myriad of other changes, both major and minor, make today's correctional environment better than in the past.

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disillusionment with rehabilitation as the primary (almost sole) purpose of confinement and led to a shift in the Bureau's goals and objectives. By the mid-1970's, there existed a more balanced view of correctional institutions that emphasized retribution, deterrence, and incapacitation along with rehabilitation, and asserted that if rehabilitation is to occur, it must be self-motivated and not forced, as was the attitude in the past (Carlson, March 1976; Spring 1976). As part of this overall redefinition, correctional staff came to redefine their roles from that of

While some of these changes were attributable to budgetary restraints and cutbacks and others to community objections and concerns, the failure to demonstrate rehabilitative effectiveness and the resulting shifts in correctional goals and priorities made these once highly favored programs vulnerable to reduction or elimination.

To some, this shift away from rehabilitation represented an abandonment of correctional ideals—a backward step. Others contended that these changes provided a more realistic assessment of the capabilities of prison systems. Moreover, the shortcomings of the

A new operating philosophy

Perhaps the most notable accomplishment of the past 2 decades has been the success Bureau administrators have had in largely replacing one form of offender control with another, less oppressive form. Starting from a rather narrow custodial perspective, there has evolved an operating philosophy that holds that as long as appropriate perimeter security is maintained and internal controls over tools, keys, and inmate movement are exercised, a fairly open and relaxed atmosphere can be promoted within the institution. Many factors contribute to this overall approach to institutional management, but among the more critical are:

- A sound classification system that matches inmates with appropriate institutions according to security and program needs.
- Positive relationships between staff and inmates, based on a "human relations" approach.
- Sufficient programs and activities such as work, vocational training, education, and recreation to occupy inmate time and attention.

Historically, prisons have sought to maintain control over inmates through reliance upon what Etzioni (1961) has called coercive power—the application of highly restricted means that ultimately rest on the exercise of force. In practice, coercive power takes many forms. There are, first of all, the constraints built into an institution's physical design—perimeter walls and inmate cells, for example. Numerous rules and regulations specify what offenders can and cannot do and serve to delimit relationships between offenders and staff. Various techniques for handling offenders contribute to maintaining good security, such as regular inmate counts, regimentation, surveillance, and frequent searches and shakedowns. There are punishments for rule violators, such as segregation and loss of "good time." Finally, staff may use inmates themselves through reliance on an informant or "snitch" system or through the exchange of power and prestige with a segment of the inmate population in return for guarantees of control.

In the Bureau, one of the keys to exercising good inmate control in the early 60's was "security consciousness," by which custodial staff mentally maintained running counts of inmates in their charge, while devoting themselves to identifying potential security problems. This preoccupation with security matters all but precluded casual and friendly contact with inmates. Indeed, one of the worst fates that could befall an officer was to be "conned" by an inmate (i.e., fall for an inmate sob story that is later proven false), and an accepted way to avoid this predicament was to hold communication with inmates to a bare minimum.

The problem with the coercive model when operating an institution is that

while it may be fairly effective for maintaining control, it tends to produce alienated inmates who are highly negative in outlook and resist change, thus defeating efforts at rehabilitation. With the advent of the rehabilitative era, an issue confronting administrators became providing a system of control that was effective yet conducive to treatment and training efforts.

As rehabilitation became more of a priority within the Bureau, the agency moved to promote institutional control through a human relations approach to dealing with offenders...treat inmates with consideration and respect, and they will respond in kind.

As rehabilitation became more of a priority within the Bureau, the agency moved to promote institutional control through a human relations approach to dealing with offenders. An attempt was made to reduce the social distance that separated staff and inmates and to move away from a heavy reliance on rules and regulations in favor of a more informal, less authoritarian approach based upon interpersonal contact. The creation of the counselor role and the establishment of unit management, which placed unit managers, counselors, and caseworkers in inmate living units, were instrumental

steps in this direction. So was the elimination of the old nickel-gray uniform for line staff in favor of the more casual gray slacks and blue sport coat. The underlying premise of this approach was that if you treat inmates with consideration and respect, they will respond in kind. Critical to this notion was the belief that one can achieve both humane objectives and custodial purposes through a single approach to handling inmates.

While the effort to achieve greater rehabilitative success through a human relations approach may have failed, the attempt to establish a new operating philosophy for Bureau facilities met with more success. We can follow the implementation of this new philosophy by briefly considering the history of unit management—the primary vehicle for the human relations approach. In contrast to past practices of assigning only one or two custodial staff to handle large numbers of inmates in living units, unit management places additional staff in these units who are able to enter into close working relationships with inmates, focus on both custodial and noncustodial issues, and, by their presence, increase surveillance.

Following initial development at the National Training School for Boys in Washington, D.C., unit management was first fully implemented at the Kennedy Youth Center (KYC), Morgantown, West Virginia, in 1969. Unit management initially was viewed as both a treatment and management device. Reflecting the treatment dimension, each living unit at KYC had a program component designed especially for the inmate behavioral type assigned to that unit. At that time, several other institutions also operated drug abuse program units, which were staffed

along the lines specified for unit management. In 1972, unit management was initiated at FCI Fort Worth and FCI Seagoville. By mid-1976 it had been fully implemented at all Bureau institutions except penitentiaries, where special drug or alcohol abuse units operated on a unit management basis.

Surveys of staff and inmates at many of these facilities found a positive change in institutional social climate scale measures, supporting the conclusion that unit management is "a better way to manage a correctional institution" (Lansing, Bogan, and Karacki, 1977). Assaults on inmates and staff decreased following implementation of unit management (Rowe et al., 1976). However, efforts to relate unit management to post-release outcomes were unsuccessful (Karacki, Schmidt, and Cavior, 1972).

By the time unit management was applied at the penitentiary level, it had shed many of its rehabilitative trappings and was perceived more clearly as a device for better institutional management. Indeed, its application at Lewisburg, Atlanta, and Marion was prompted by custodial crises at these facilities. First Lewisburg and then Atlanta were besieged by a series of inmate murders and other difficulties in the mid-'70's, while the emergence of Marion in the late '70's as the highest security level institution in the Bureau led to a concentration of violent inmates that threatened the foundations of the institution. The introduction of unit management at these facilities was in response to these problems.

In considering the operation of unit management at the penitentiary level, two points can be made. First, unit management by no means totally replaces more traditional approaches to

custody. On the contrary, its introduction to these penitentiaries was in the context of broader efforts to tighten up and restore order—better procedures for inmate accountability, more frequent searches and shakedowns, and so forth. Unit management complements and "softens" other custodial approaches, mainly through improving staff-inmate relations and increasing communication.

Surveys of staff and inmates at many facilities found a positive change in institutional social climate scale measures, supporting the conclusion that unit management is "a better way to manage a correctional institution."

Second, for all its apparent success, it is also evident that limits exist as to how successful unit management and the human relations approach can be in working with an inmate population. In the case of Lewisburg, a substantial improvement in institutional functioning was reported by Smith and Fenton (1978), which was largely attributed to the effect of unit management. At Atlanta in the mid-'70's, evaluative efforts were sidetracked by the decision, later rescinded, to close the institution; however, there is at least some suggestion that unit management contributed to improved conditions. But at Marion, the Bureau's highest security institution, which houses the most violent Federal offenders, we must note the failure of

unit management and the human relations approach.

Unit management was introduced at Marion in January 1981. At the time, the institution was already operating on a highly restricted basis, including the elimination of prison industries and most evening activities. Under these more controlled conditions, the institution managed to function fairly well, although by the end of 1981 the rate of incident reports began to climb and eventually exceeded the rate prior to the imposition of these greater controls. When efforts to relax controls at Marion were initiated in early 1983, the institution experienced a series of disruptive events, ending with the declaration of a state of emergency and the current highly restrictive operation.

The philosophy of promoting an open and relaxed atmosphere failed when, confronted by a large concentration of highly alienated and hostile inmates and inmates doing "gang-time," staff-inmate relations seriously deteriorated and institutional programs and activities were either eliminated or drastically cut back. The present high-security operation at Marion is acknowledgment of this failure and of the necessity to rely upon traditional modes of control to handle such a dangerous and volatile population.

Concluding comments

Our brief analysis of violence in the Bureau has taken several directions. First of all, violence appears to have been greatest during the late '70's and early '80's, while more recently it has been on the decline. There are also indications that when major incidents are examined, their number relative to the total prison population has decreased between the early '70's and recent years.

Second, when we look at pockets of violence in the Bureau, our attention is drawn to Lewisburg and Atlanta in the '70's and Marion into the '80's. Various actions were taken by staff to better control the situation at these institutions, prominent among them implementation of the unit management system.

We have also described how the Bureau was swept up into the rehabilitative tide of the '60's and '70's and how, out of the excesses of this period, there emerged a more open system for operating Federal prisons, based in large part on a human relations approach, best exemplified by unit management.

While we regard the emergence of this new system for institutional management and the recent decrease in violence as related events, it is unlikely that any statistically strong historical ties can be demonstrated between them. In part, this is because the past 2 decades have been a history of both the success and failure of this new management approach as staff have come to recognize its inherent strengths and limitations.

In addition, other forces were at play in this period, impinging upon corrections and greatly confounding matters. In particular, we again refer to the dominant role played by the rehabilitative effort, which generally liberalized Bureau operations and improved conditions but also produced many false starts that affected security. Mention should also be made of the greater involvement of the judiciary in prison administration and the changing demographics and offense characteristics of Federal prisoners over time as possible other factors related to changes in prison violence.

What is important is that after years of transition, the Bureau now has in place an effective system for managing its inmate population. It recognizes that the vast majority of inmates will respond favorably to a management approach that draws upon principles of humane care and positive interpersonal contact to promote a fairly open and relaxed institutional environment. Yet it also

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takes into account that there are inmates for whom the human relations approach does not work and whose seriously disruptive behavior at least temporarily requires greater security. Barring major changes in society or in the makeup of the inmate population, the present system for operating institutions, if properly directed, should successfully carry the Bureau well into the next century.

Among the major challenges currently facing the Bureau are the problems of serious crowding throughout the system and the growing number of drug-related gang members. These factors can potentially undermine the good order of Federal prisons and contribute to an

increase in violence and unrest; however, there is little to indicate that such an increase has actually begun to occur. Nonetheless, the need exists to constantly monitor ongoing operations in the event that violence and unrest do begin to increase, so that underlying factors can be identified and appropriate action taken. ■

Loren Karacki is a Senior Research Analyst in the Office of Research and Evaluation, Federal Bureau of Prisons.

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