

Pressures Build On Prisons in Time of Change

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Washington's troubled prisons, like so many across the country, are caught in the deepening conflict between prisoners' demands for change and mounting community alarm over the spread of crime.

"What happens in the end is a lot of talk and no action," Preston Sharp, general secretary of the American Corrections Association commented yesterday. "The result is what you're seeing at the jail."

The pressures build from all sides. Inmates look for relief in progressive administrators willing to try new ways to make the institutions less destructive to the people in them. Frightened guards find support from politicians who deplore permissiveness.

The tensions erupt in recurring cycles of riots, strikes and jailbreaks. Over the years here, a succession of congressional investigations and outside surveys have portrayed the situation as bleak.

And still it gets worse.

The squalid 100-year-old D.C. jail, where inmates yesterday seized Kenneth Hardy, director of the corrections department, has filled to twice its capacity in recent years as the number of arrests in the city has grown.

Last winter, after a two-year study, the American Civil Liberties Union called the jail "a filthy example of man's inhumanity to man." The report said that with as many as 1,300 prisoners in a facility built for 550, the jail was one of the five most overcrowded in the country.

In these conditions of intolerable overcrowding, the experts say, outbursts of violence are inevitable.

The jail, said ACLU in the same report, "is a case study in cruel and unusual punishment, in the denial of due process (and) in the failure of justice." The corrections staff, according to the report, "seems indifferent at best to the horror which it presides over."

The brunt of such criticism falls on Kenneth Hardy.

Ironically, it is Hardy, the man the inmates chose as their principal hostage, who has also drawn the abuse for what some critics see as an almost complete collapse of discipline in local prisons.

As director of corrections, he more than anyone else is caught amid the pressures.

"We have been on a compatible course," Robert Montilla, a high-ranking Washington corrections official, said.

"Our prisons are getting more overcrowded. No programs are yet being developed that might improve the situation and give us a chance."

Kenneth Hardy and his associates are reformers in disposition, tending toward rehabilitation as the way to deal with criminals. But public mood is not so forgiving.

ing, nor are many of the prison guards. Tougher prisons are what we need.

"At the same time that expectations for corrections reform are rising," City Councilman Tedson Meyers observed yesterday, "we're getting more of the hardened guys locked up, the ones that are toughest to control."

Yesterday, attention was focused on Washington's jail. But less than a month ago, the trouble was at Lorton reformatory, the city's other major corrections facility and also the scene of innumerable disturbances in the past.

For five days, most of the inmates there struck, seeking, they said, a wide range of improvements: better medical and dental services, improved lighting for visitors, politeness from guards.

The inmates said they were making requests rather than demands. The negotiations were generally peaceful. In the past, some of the requests were more explosive.

This time, Lorton did not explode. Like the D.C. jail, Lorton is badly overcrowded. It has some 1,800 inmates in space for 1,300. The prisoners and guards there have often spoken out, describing their respective conditions as deplorable. Lately, the number of assaults among the prison population, including guards, has risen sharply.

The institution is undergoing a gradual breakdown of control, a Washington Post report concluded last month, and fear is commonplace.

Yesterday, the experts were puzzling over why the inmates at Lorton this time simply made "requests" of Hardy while the inmates at the D.C. jail have threatened to kill him.

The main difference, according to Montilla, is that most of the prisoners at the D.C. jail are there awaiting trial. Their bitterness at being locked up is not tempered by the fact that they have been convicted and must make the best possible situation for themselves.

"They don't want to strike on weekends at Lorton," he said, "because that's when they get visitors. They have things they don't want to lose there. The majority will contain the minority of reckless men."

for better medical services... couldn't be... would be in... being well... "They gambled... they would have... prove the right... community cor... them," said Councilman Meyers. Thirteen half-way houses were opened, but too many prisoners sent there quickly became involved again in crime. The plan faltered. Meanwhile, said Meyers, nothing much had been done to improve the existing facilities. Congress has appropriated funds for a new institution, but construction hasn't even begun. The dispute that must be resolved first is just what kind of prison Washington needs.