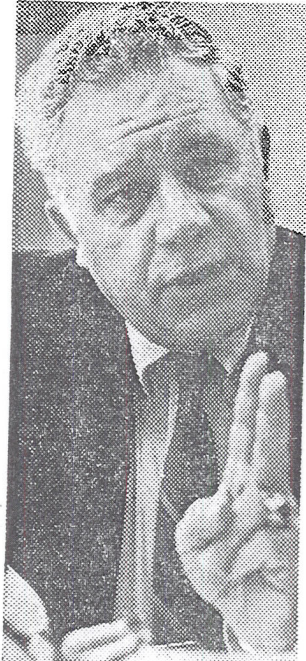


# Overcrowding of Tombs Worse Than at 1970 Riot

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BY ROSE BLUMENTHAL



George F. McGrath, city's  
Commissioner of Correction.

Nearly a year after inmates of the Tombs took over the prison to protest overcrowding and other conditions, it is more overcrowded than it was on the eve of the October riots, the worst in the city's history.

At the beginning of last week, the number of inmates in the Manhattan House of Detention for Men—known as the Tombs—stood at 1,459, according to its warden, Albert Glick, who had to be called at home last weekend for instructions on where to put new arrivals.

That figure was 43 more than the population of 1,416 registered there before the prisoner revolt spread from the Queens House of Detention to the Tombs on Oct. 2, 1970.

At hearings before the City

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Board of Correction last week, Commissioner of Correction George F. McGrath was asked what his department would do, in view of the prison overcrowding, in the event of widespread disturbances involving mass arrests.

"Without going into this in detail, for obvious reasons," he said, "we have a plan for the use of an armory."

Many prisoners—interviewed last week with only the correction department's condition that their names and case specifics be withheld—showed more dissatisfaction with their treatment before they came to the Tombs than with conditions inside the jail. They charged, for example, that they had been framed by the police, and complained about interminable court delays and bail practices that they contended discriminate against the poor.

## Complain About 'Towels'

In the jail during a reporter's visit last week, prisoners on the ninth floor held up bits of filthy rags for him to see. They said the rags were the only towels they had. One inmate came out of a dingy shower stall and dried himself with toilet paper.

Mr. Glick said that the men had been given towels but that they had torn them up.

On the fourth floor, where most homosexual prisoners are quartered—for their own protection, it was explained at the correction hearings—guards were clearing a cellblock after a fight involving the affections of one of the inmates.

In the library, a 30-year-old black inmate said he had waited three months before being allowed to read the law text he hoped would help him fight his drug-possession case. He was even more upset, he said, by the lack of any rehabilitation program at the facility.

## Complain About Food

On the screened-in roof, where inmates played basketball or just sat around for their recreation period, prisoners complained about being served what they insisted was dog food and powdered milk and eggs.

In an infirmary for addict-prisoners undergoing detoxification through the methadone program, a 21-year-old black inmate complained that it took several days and a lawyer's

protest to get him medical attention for an abscessed side and for syphilis. Now, he said, he has to be taken to Rikers Island for X-rays because, he said, there was no functioning machine in the Tombs.

On the positive side, many prisoners had praise for the methadone program, begun here last March by Dr. Vincent P. Dole of Rockefeller University.

Addicts who are brought in now do not have to go through the agony of withdrawal—a leading cause of prison suicides—but are weaned away from heroin dependency in a week's program.

## New Project Planned

So far, according to Mr. Glick, 6,618 inmates have been detoxified there.

Dr. Dole's latest project, which will formally begin tomorrow, is a survey of inmates assigned Legal Aid lawyers to determine whose criminal record is minor enough to convince a judge that those inmates may be released in their own custody pending trial.

With about 70 per cent of the city's 11,000 prison inmates unconvicted detainees awaiting trial, Dr. Dole estimates he could thin the prison population by up to two-thirds if the courts would cooperate.

Meanwhile, Dr. Dole testified to the correction board Wednesday, the treatment of many prisoners in the city's jails "is in my opinion a greater crime than the crimes many are in jail for."

Some witnesses at the correction hearings testified that the overcrowding could be overcome to some degree by more efficient prison administration and that other factors—such as good-quality medical care—were even more important to inmates.

Prisoner overcrowding was repeatedly cited at the correction hearings as a nightmarish problem for the city's vast penal system.

In fact, the overcrowding since the riots—depending on which day's figures are quoted—is even worse than the figures suggest, because at least 30 cells were destroyed in the five-day revolt and have not been restored.

As a result, the capacity of the prison now is 900 prisoners, down from 932 before last October. With the current daily prison population averaging about 1,400—late last week it was 1,366—the Tombs is filled to more than 150 per cent of capacity.

After the October riots, the population of the Tombs, at 125 White Street, declined through seasonal variations and court speed-ups to a low

of 1,164 last April. Then it started to rise again. Last Monday's figure of 1,459 represented the year's peak.

Although the rise is to some extent seasonal, the widespread official expectation is that the number will continue to grow—especially in view of current anticorruption and antiprostitution campaigns.

"When they clean the streets that's fine, but we get them," Warden Glick said.

Even now, as the jail's population grows, facilities deteriorate. "We have a guy," Mr. Glick said, "who has 'karate-d' five or six toilet bowls, reducing our toilet facilities. He also hurt his hand. But Bellevue won't take him."

Last Aug. 28 another prisoner died of still-unexplained causes in one of the city's jails—the 26th death in a city prison here this year.

#### McGrath Testifies

Although the prisoner—Hector Nevarez Mejias, 21 years old, of 12 Vernon Avenue, Brooklyn, said to have been a drug addict—was found dead in his cell in the Brooklyn House of Detention on Aug. 28, a day after his arrest, Commissioner of Correction Geore F. McGrath made no mention of the death in testimony last Tuesday and Wednesday at hearings before the City Board of Correction.

The board is looking into recent deaths this year in the city's jails, including eight suicides.

Commissioner McGrath, in his testimony, put the number of deaths at 25.

William J. vanden Heuvel,

chairman of the Board of Correction, said he had not been informed about the death, although the Correction Department is supposed to keep the board, a citizen watchdog agency, informed.

A spokesman for the department said, "There's no question thing." He said the Commissioner was waiting to report the death until the cause of death had been established by the Medical Examiner. The police and the Brooklyn District Attorney had been informed immediately and were investigating, he said.

The Commissioner, asked about the prisoner deaths during a television interview yesterday, said that prison suicides had actually declined since 1967, when 11 inmates took their own lives. Although "we are dealing with many more people now," Mr. McGrath said on the WCBS-TV program "Public Hearing," that eight prisoners had committed suicide this year.

Mr. McGrath said that one factor in the prisoner death rate was the generally poor health of most inmates when they were admitted.

"We get a clientele which is in bad health to begin with," he said. "Over 50 per cent are addicts and are highly disturbed and suicide-prone."

Medical care in the city's prisons, he said, was "clearly inadequate." There are only 11 full-time physicians for the 200,000 prisoners who pass through the system each year, he said. But he added that the death rate was declining, with 42 deaths last year, 46 in 1969, and 70 in 1963.