

Guards are also prisoners in brutal U.S. institutions

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NEW YORK -- Like the policeman, the prison guard is a much-maligned man. To prisoners, they are all "pigs," to many others they represent everything brutal and insensitive in American society. No doubt that view is warranted, in many cases; but as a general indictment it is grossly unfair.

As a result of the uprising at Attica, and the bloody crushing of it, the prison guard is at the moment more in the public eye than ever before. In fact, school children in the once placid town of Attica -- where the prison is the primary employer--have been complaining to reporters that it is untrue that their fathers and brothers are cruel and brutal to prisoners.

Actually, the worst faults of the Attica prison can hardly be laid to its guards: at worst, they are the instruments of an inhuman system, and at best -- as many showed in the aftermath of the uprising -- they may understand more of the prisoner's grim plight than do high state officials.

In the first place, neither at Attica nor elsewhere are guards well-trained for their demanding, difficult and dangerous jobs. To refer to these men as "corrections officers" is an exercise in euphemism. Most qualify for their positions by passing a civil service examination and a physical, not by going through even as much training as most city policemen receive.

Statistics show that most guards have a low level of general education, with 16 per cent of them not having completed high school. They are paid commensurately, with 79 per cent earning less than \$8,000 a year. Thus, it is too much to

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expect that many of these men will have a sophisticated understanding of social issues, or that their handling of prisoners will reflect sensitive psychological approaches. Society just doesn't seek out men of those qualities to guard its prisoners.

Moreover, the prison guard's job is highly dangerous and many of these men -- particularly in a time like the present, when there is widespread unrest among prisoners -- spend their working days and nights in something near terror.

They know that prisoners almost anywhere, if led by determined men, can stage the kind of revolt that erupted at Attica; so guards are constantly subject to being held hostage, as well as to the hourly dangers of working among desperate and hostile men.

At the same time, of course, prisoners are substantially in the power of guards at most times, and since many guards are insensitive and brutal, the prisoners, too, live in fear. Men who fear other men usually come to hate them, so in these vast and gloomy fortresses, where everything is largely hidden from the public, fear and hatred mount in an ever-tightening circle. This hideous atmosphere can almost be touched and felt, as if it were tangible, in many prisons.

So, as a Utah state prison guard told Wallace Turner of The New York Times, the guards are in jail with the prisoners.

It is a situation that is always ripe for violence; and when, as at Attica, there is also present in its most virulent form the racial animosity that so divides American society today, these prisons are little more than explosives waiting to be set off.

Moreover, ample history from the earliest times shows that a master-slave relationship is more corrupting for the master than for the slave. To have absolute power over another human being can bring out the worst in a man -- just as, in some cases, abject slaves have been known to rise to heights of character and nobility. When guards have nagging fears for their own safety, when they are irritated and frustrated by the conditions in which they work, when they find prisoners in their power, with no one to see -- in such cases, even good family men and churchgoers can be corrupted into physical brutality.

None of this is meant to suggest that guards have no personal moral responsibility for their own conduct; nor is it meant as a justification for the excesses that some observers and prisoners allege New York state guards even now are visiting upon the recaptured Attica rebels.

But if American society is going to tolerate a prison system designed primarily to cage animals, and if the men who operate it are going to be recruited from the lowest educational levels, paid the minimum, and pitted physically against the inmates in Darwinian struggle for survival, then nobody should expect much in the way of "corrections" or "rehabilitation."

We get from our guards, that is, just about what we ask and just about what we pay for.

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