

SEP 11 1971

"It is our firm conviction," said the New York State Senate Committee on Crime and Correction in a report earlier this year, "that any penal system which falls short of affording to its prison inmates the fundamental dignities to which all human beings are entitled, demeans our society and threatens its future safety."

The report stemmed from a work stoppage by hundreds of inmates at Attica prison protesting conditions there, as well as from repeated rioting and disturbances at the Tombs, Auburn and Napanoch. Its accent was on the need for "humanizing detention facilities and procedures."

The new rioting at Attica this weekend which has made a shambles of that prison and exposed its personnel to great danger testifies to the accuracy of the diagnosis—and to the necessity for acting on its prescription.

After tons of reports deploring prison conditions in this state and elsewhere across the country and after hundreds of prison disturbances, from Soledad and San Quentin in California to Moundsville in West Virginia and now again Attica near Buffalo in this state, the authorities have not responded with correction reforms that come close to meeting the need.

There can, of course, be no excuse for the beating of correction officers by prisoners on the rampage at Attica. At the same time, there can also be no excuse for society's continued neglect of its prisons. The demands being made by Attica's inmates are no more radical than decent food, good medical care, adequate recreational opportunities, better rehabilitation programs. These are things that ought to have been provided long ago.

New York State has moved to some degree on the problem. The last session of the State Legislature did approve a measure restoring to a prisoner his right to register and vote after the expiration of his maximum sentence or his release from parole. Other measures, however, failed of enactment. A model speedy-trial bill recommended by Senator John Dunne, chairman of the correction committee, passed the Senate but not the Assembly.

Current prison unrest across the country, coupled with recidivism rates that run higher than 50 per cent for some institutions, suggests that there is a crime in present punishment procedures and that prisons are schools for lawlessness rather than the reverse.

Within prisons, as at Attica, confinement in a cramped cell seems to be the preferred penal policy. Almost every report investigating prison conditions anywhere in the country has concluded with a similar set of recommendations for intensifying rehabilitation efforts, expanding job-training programs, liberalizing visiting privileges, increasing educational choices. It is past time to act on them.