

The Black Inmates

Rebellion in the Prisons

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As long as there have been prisons, prisons have been no place to be somebody.

Inmates have shouted for centuries that prison food is bad, guards are brutal and innocent men are jailed.

Prison complaints have changed little,

but some prisoners have changed a lot. A new element in the prison equation is the black "political" prisoner.

One view of the new black prisoner is held by New York city's deputy commissioner of correction, Ben Malcolm:

"He has been led to believe by a lot of people, a lot of so-called liberals, that he has been victimized by the society and he is more difficult to handle, he is more difficult to deal with.

"He will commit a crime against his peers in the community and feel a certain amount of justification," said Malcolm, the correction department's highest ranking black man.

EX-PRISONER

Another view is expressed by a former prisoner — Clif-

ford Rollins, or Jabali, who left California's Soledad prison last January after serving 10 years for armed robbery and murder:

"No longer do they (black prisoners) play the sycophant's game of 'pleasing the powers.' They are in tune with contemporary social and political scenes in the free world; they take an interest in elevating their perception, have principles and are morally and ethically alive," he said.

An inmate in California's Tehachapi prison, Wendell Wade — who was awaiting his second trial stemming from the 1968 Oakland police-Black Panther shoot-out in which a Panther was killed — has said:

"The majority (of black prisoners) realize that they were merely trying to survive, in the way(s) that they were able to when captured.

"They don't feel guilty; indeed, in their minds they aren't guilty. Many are willing to move for freedom if the opportunity presents itself."

ARTICLES

Both men were writing in separate articles in the April-May 1971 issue of the Black Scholar magazine, a San Francisco-based journal of black studies and re-

search. The magazine devoted the entire issue to the subject of black prisoners.

The concept that black prisoners are political prisoners has won adherents in and out of jails across the nation.

An important element in the prison situation is the fact that there are in the nation's jails increasing numbers of black men and women.

In the nation's federal prison system last year, there were 20,000 inmates and 24.5 per cent of these were black.

In interviews with the New York Times, many black correction officials and psychiatrists, former inmates, and lawyers associated with penology contended that black people were not more criminally inclined than white people, but that black men and women were more likely to be in prison than white men and women in numbers exceeding their proportion in the population.

Several black correction officials interviewed point out that there is no question that many black prisoners are guilty of the crimes for which they were imprisoned.

The black scholar's editor, Professor Robert Chrisman, of San Francisco State College, wrote in his magazine:

"It is of course obvious that mugging, theft, pimping and shooting dope are not themselves political actions, particularly when the victims are most often other black people.

"To maintain that all black offenders are by their actions politically correct, is a dangerous romanticism."

"Black anti-social behavior," Chrisman continued, "must be seen in and of its own terms and corrected for enhancement of the black community."

POLITICAL

But, he said, there is a political aspect. "All black prisoners are . . . political prisoners, for their condition derives from the political inequity of black people in America. A black prisoner's crime may or may not have been a political action against the state, but the state's action against him is always political."

There are in prison a grow-

ing number of aggressive, assertive black males. And many of them are trying to learn and to analyze their situation.

"A great majority in prison see that education and books are the best way to spend their time," said John Burton. A former inmate, Burton is now deputy director of Project Manhood Foundation, a group here, which helps discharged inmates move into society.

PROCESS

"The man takes a book," Burton said, "and reads slowly, page by page. And he analyzes. He passes the book on to a fellow inmate even after he has read just four or five pages.

"And then they compare notes. 'What did you see? What did you get out of this? What did you get out of that? What did you get out of this?'"

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