

PRISON GUARD/
CORRECTIONAL OFFICER

*The Use and Abuse of the
Human Resources of Prisons*

Robert R. Ross

Prison Guard/ Correctional Officer

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Human Resources of Prisons*

compiled and edited by

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*Dedicated to those
correctional officers
who dignify their job
by doing it well.*

About the Editor

Bob Ross is a Professor of Criminology at the University of Ottawa. He received his Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Toronto. Dr. Ross has been a Research Associate for the Human Justice Program at the University of Regina; a Lecturer at Wilfred Laurier University; and an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Waterloo. His experience in criminal justice includes more than ten years as a clinical psychologist in a wide variety of correctional institutions for juveniles and adults and twelve years as Chief Psychologist for the Ontario Government's Ministry of Correctional Services. He has also been a faculty member for the Ontario Department of Education's programs for special education teachers, and Consultant to the Department of Educational Television. Dr. Ross's publications include articles in professional journals in psychology, criminology and corrections, and chapters in several books on corrections and on behavior modification. His other books include: *Self-Mutilation* (with H. B. McKay), D. C. Heath Co., and *Effective Correctional Treatment* (with P. Gendreau), Butterworths Co.

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Preface

Training programs for prison guards have proliferated in correctional agency staff development programs, in university undergraduate and extension programs, and in hundreds of community colleges throughout North America. This book is intended to serve as a text-reader for such courses and for other courses in criminal justice, corrections, sociology, criminology, and psychology which purport to teach about the world of prisons. Teachers and students in these courses have heretofore had to rely on academic literature which systematically neglected a crucial part of the prison — the correctional officer.

This anthology consists of a collection of articles by contributors who have considered the correctional officer an important and legitimate subject for objective study. They have gone against the grain by asserting and demonstrating that the prison guard is a key figure and that the prison cannot be fully understood, or even adequately described, without careful study of the role of the correctional officer. It is intended to serve as a long overdue substitute for more widely publicized and oversimplified descriptions of prison guards, found in media reports and in the biographies of ex-inmates which have created a negative and sensationalized impression of guards. In contrast, the articles in this book are based on objective study of the men and women who guard our prisons. I think that *Prison Guard/Correctional Officer* does justice to the importance and the complexity of the guards' work, and adequately stresses their potential for contributing to prison disruption or to harmony.

The articles were selected to provide the reader with the most penetrating and objective analyses of correctional officers — who they are; what they do; how they are selected; how they control and are controlled in the unique social environment in which they work; why and how they respond to and seek change in their working conditions, their power and their status; and why they leave their jobs.

I make no apology for using the terms "prison guard" and "correctional officer" interchangeably. I recognize that *guarding* is what many officers actually do and my use of the term is intended to convey that I do not consider this essential task to be ignoble. I use the correctional officer title with full realization that in some settings it is only a euphemism, but with sufficient optimism that the term makes explicit some recognition of their wider contribution. Perhaps the new title may signify that there is at least a possibility that their status in the prison hierarchy may be improving.

I wish to thank the contributors and publishers who have allowed their works to be reprinted, particularly those who prepared original materials expressly for this book, those who provided previously unpublished materials, and those who kindly tolerated my editorial suggestions for modifications of their articles.

I particularly wish to thank Dr. Andy Birkenmayer who stimulated and encouraged my research in this and many other areas, and the Ontario Ministry of Correctional Services for continuing support.

I am grateful for the initiative and competence of my secretary, Chi Hoang. The assistance of C. Currie and J. Proctor in compiling reference materials is appreciated.

Finally, I thank countless correctional officers who, while tolerating my pontifications on offenders and their care, helped me to learn about aspects of prison that few who have not walked in the guard's shoes can understand or appreciate.

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Part I

INTRODUCTION

There is extensive literature on prison riots, prison architecture, prison reform, prison management, and on prison programs. There are also many books on prison inmates and prison wardens, but the individual attempting to gain an understanding of prisons by examining the criminological literature would have to search very carefully and very long before he would find much material on prison guards. If knowledge of prisons were to be based exclusively on a sample of the academic literature, even a very large sample, the reader might very well come to believe, so seldom are they discussed, that in prison there are no guards.

Prison guards have long been ignored by social scientists and others who have described the world of prisons. Academic and professional journals in criminology or corrections rarely include articles on correctional officers. Most books on prisons mention the guard only in passing, if at all.

It is remarkable that so little study of the correction officer has been made when one considers how often, and how eloquently, eminent spokesmen on corrections have acknowledged the critical importance of the guard in the functioning of correctional institutions. For example, Sykes (1958: 53) referred to the guard as "the pivotal figure on which the custodial bureaucracy turns." Glaser (1964: 133-134) concluded that "custodial officers can be said to have the greatest total impact everywhere . . ." and are "a major factor in determining the nature of the prison experience of most offenders." The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Justice in its 1967 *Task Force Report on Corrections* asserted:

They may be the most influential persons in institutions simply by virtue of their numbers and their daily intimate contact with offenders. It is a mistake to define them as persons responsible only for control and maintenance. They can, by their attitude and understanding, reinforce or destroy the effectiveness of almost any correctional program.

A conclusion of Thomas' study of the prison officer in the English prison system is that:

. . . the central figure in any prison system is the basic grade uniformed officer and the collective views of officers have a direct

and supreme effect on the working of the system . . . the uniformed officer *IS* the English Prison Service. (Thomas, 1972: 22)

The correctional officer has not always been ignored. In times of trouble he has been the focus of considerable attention. Investigatory committee reports on prison riots and disruptions and journalistic descriptions and analyses of such events frequently focus on the role of the correctional officers. Typically, these lament their lack of training, bemoan the inadequacy of the procedures by which they are selected, and demand improvements in their salaries, their management, their career opportunities and their supervision. Then the dust settles and, once again, they become the invisible men.

There are probably many reasons why the correctional officer has been overlooked. Perhaps the neglect reflects our disdain for people who would work in what is often considered a low paying lack-lustre job in an unattractive work-setting in which one must live in unavoidable proximity to individuals who are often hostile, belligerent, abusive, and sometimes destructive and assaultive. Their job offers little upward mobility, not inconsiderable personal danger, and much boredom. Surely, one might reason, there must be something lacking in a person who would accept such a position. Surely, one might reason, a person who would accept such a job is undeserving of much attention. Perhaps the neglect of the prison guard has been fostered by the fact that, until recently, social scientists who have studied the prison guard have typically focused on the guard's negative qualities — their limited education, inadequate training, and poor salary — and have painted a bleak picture of the possibility of improvement (e.g., Barnes & Teeters, 1943; Tannenbaum, 1922). Perhaps the lack of research reflects the correctional officer's suspiciousness of researchers and their lack of enthusiasm for subjecting themselves to the highly critical scrutiny they have come to expect from "outsiders." Perhaps the lack of research reflects the uncooperativeness of correctional managers who are reluctant to have much attention paid to those who may be eager to condemn them.

When they are not ignored, they are maligned. Investigatory committee reports seldom provide a flattering picture of the correctional officer. Perhaps this is, in part, because their information derives either from inmates who are unlikely to be excessively complimentary in their remarks about those who control them against their will, or from "front-office politicians who are the most articulate spokesmen of anti-staff values" (Glaser, 1964: 116). Correctional officers provide a convenient scapegoat for those who might wish to deflect interest from other salient riot-engendering factors such as inefficient or inappropriate management practices.¹ This is not to suggest that correctional officers have no role in prison disturbances, but only to point out that the literature may present a rather distorted and melodramatic picture of the correctional officers'

work and a somewhat biased sample of opinion about their skills and values.

They are noticed also in treatises on the treatment-custody conflict in which, typically, they are viewed as undereducated, ill-informed, oppositional malcontents and cynics — the Achilles Heel of progressive correctional rehabilitation programs. Often they are blamed for the failure of programs which would have had little chance of success in the first place with or without their support.

The guards have not been ignored by inmates. Most of the written material on prison guards consists of descriptions by inmate and ex-inmate authors. It is fair to say that few of these descriptions present a kind picture of the correctional officer.

For a prisoner, of course, a guard is possibly the lowest imaginable form of humanoid life . . . The intriguing aspect of this view of guards, however, is that no inmate I've ever met came by it through his own experience . . . It's an opinion a prisoner automatically picks up at the door along with his issue of prison clothes and his government-issued toothbrush . . . he understands instinctively . . . that it's wise to establish one's loyalties clearly and that guard-hating is an act which clearly confirms such a loyalty to the inmate cause. It's expressly part of the function of being a prisoner. (Schroeder, 1976: 151-152)

Much of the material that is available presents a stereotypical picture of the guard as a harsh (if not sadistic), power-hungry illiterate — an ignorant, rigid, authoritarian individual who is vigorous only when demanding inmate compliance, when opposing inmate's rights, when criticizing management policies or when scuttling rehabilitation programs. Whereas some prison analysts have described them as thugs, others have viewed them as clones or zombies — an amorphous mass of uniformed automatons, indistinguishable one from the other, performing routine mundane and mindless tasks which anyone could do, which permit no individual excellence, and require no notable skills.

There is another body of literature. It is smaller and much less publicized than the prison exposés and riot autopsies, or the autobiographical accounts of prison life written by prison wardens or prison inmates. This literature has developed through the efforts of a small number of social scientists and others who have paid more than lip-service to the view that correctional officers are an important element in prison management and not merely cogs in the cumbersome machinery of justice. They have judged the correctional officer to be a fitting subject of research in his own right and not merely incidental to the study of inmates. Moreover they have seen fit to look beyond the routine surveillance functions of the guards to examine other equally important aspects of the correctional officer's work which involve exceedingly complex interactions with

inmates, managers, and peers. Rather than merely describing the behavior of the guards in pejoratives, they have gone beyond explanations in terms of "the guard mentality" and tried to understand their behavior by examining it in terms of how it is shaped by the unique social environment of the prison, by "the system," by the contempt or indifference of the public, by the shifting, often conflicting and seldom clearly articulated goals and policy of prison management, and by the behavior of the inmates they are required to guard.

The following chapters comprise a collection of articles selected from that body of literature. The articles were chosen to portray the current state of knowledge about correctional officers — their functions, their selection and training, their organization and their management. It was considered particularly important to include articles which describe the influence that correctional officers exert in the prison environment, how that influence is effected, and what factors determine its direction. A major concern was to include materials which reflected the views of the correctional officer — how *they* perceive the prison world and their role in it. The contributors studied not only the inmates' views, not just the sensationalized Hollywood version, and not just the official management perspective. Part II presents a description of the day-to-day work of the prison guard and how he views his job, his career and the unique environment which imprisons him, shift after shift. Contrasting to the more popular view that the guard is only a "turn-key" performing routine tasks, the articles in Part III document the complexity of the job and emphasize the social service role that correctional officers can, and do perform in their work with inmates. In Part IV two articles are presented which raise questions about what guard-inmate relations would be like if the prisons were manned not by real correctional officers but by laymen. The recent entry of women into the correctional officers corps and the many issues which their participation has raised are discussed in Part V. The selection and training of correctional officers is discussed in Part VI. The final section discusses the impact on correctional officers of various organizational and management approaches in prisons, the unionization of guards, and the establishment of collective bargaining.

Most of the important literature on the correctional officer is either presented as a chapter or is summarized and discussed by one or more of the contributors. Moreover, the reference sections which are provided in many of the following articles provide the interested reader with a comprehensive bibliography on the correctional officer. It is encouraging to be able to assert that, at last, one edited volume cannot exhaust the growing body of literature on the correctional officer.

Notes

1. The role of the correctional officer in riots and the management practices which engender that role has been provocatively discussed in Stotland's (1976) analysis of the Attica riot.

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Part II

THE JOB: THE GUARD'S VIEW

... he knows he is one of 40 men whose function is to suppress thousands.

George Jackson, 1970

The articles in this section present a description of the *actual* work of the guard which is distinctively different from the more popular fictional or sensationalized accounts. The description is based on the perceptions of the guards themselves.

In Chapter 1 Edgar May provides a clear picture of the variety of activities and stresses that comprise one guard's day on the job. The second chapter, also by Edgar May, provides the reader with an unusual view of the guard's work derived from interviews with a number of guards who were invited to express their feelings about inmates, administrators, treatment, brutality, and other topics on which there is a wealth of information on the views of academics, managers, and inmates, but a dearth of information on the guards' conceptions. In the third selection James Jacobs, based on his survey of Illinois prison guards, describes the demographic characteristics of guards, their attitudes toward their job, their future, their supervisors, and their views of the causes of imprisonment and crime. Jacobs' research challenges popular conceptions of guards and their attitudes to offenders and raises some important questions and issues for correctional management.

In Chapter 4, James Jacobs and Harold Retsky (a former guard) discuss some of the factors which influence how the guard views his work and himself, including the lack of promotional opportunities available to him in the paramilitary organization within which he is managed, the conflicting roles he is expected to perform, the nature of the physical environment in which he must work, and the lack of public respect for his job.