

# Dorchester Penitentiary- Where A Guard Is A Screw

On November 19th last, a group of Senior Psychology students from U.P.E.I. had the experience of visiting the regional maximum security penitentiary at Dorchester, New Brunswick. Initial interest in this visit was triggered by a number of problems, insights and questions emerging from a Special Studies course in psychology, in which three of the above-mentioned students had been pursuing an investigation into the psychological dimensions of crime, punishment and rehabilitation. The visit included a general tour of the physical facilities of the institution encounters with a number of prison officials, and a lengthy discussion with four randomly-chosen inmates.

The awe-inspiring iron-clad doors opened to expose us to the physical and psychological realities of prison life. All of us had a moment of doubt, hesitation - call it fear. Not being accustomed to having guards lock and unlock every door one had to pass through, we immediately began to experience some of that uneasiness, helplessness and loss of freedom that we frequently associate "in theory" with life behind bars. We, however, were there for a purpose, a purpose singularly different from that for which an inmate is admitted and "processed"; on this we could rely; because of this, we could still breathe without the thumping of our hearts being heard above the voice of our guide. For us, there was no change of clothing, no finger prints required, no picture-taking, no frisking, but simply the identification of each visiting member of the group, a security check for weapons and a caution to be exercised throughout the visit. After this initial check, one noted an unusual deep silence settle over everyone while we waited to pass through a second no less impressive set of thick iron bars, into the prison proper on our way to the board room. For the next two hours, the chief and only practising psychologist (for an inmate population of 375) acted as our guide and introduced us to the Canadian Penal System as a whole, to Dorchester Penitentiary in particular, to his departmental responsibilities, to the various programs offered, and to the day-to-day mechanics of life in such an institution. It was during this briefing period that

we discovered that this prison is equipped with ten or so classification officers (counselors) who, on the average, have a case load of about 35 inmates each, a load which hardly allows for adequate time during the course of a week for each inmate. This shortage of manpower, it would seem, has always been and continues to be a serious impediment to that type of personal help which the inmates so desperately need in Dorchester as in other similar institutions.

We were then taken on a general tour of the institution, a tour which brought us to "the yard", the work shops, the library, the visitors' lounge, the gym, etc. We were appalled to learn that 200 men had to assemble in what appeared to be a very small, inadequate area for recreation purposes. Each corner of the gym supp-



ported a large metal cage which kept the guards secure from and yet within range of the inmate population...

One of the experiences which deeply touched all of us was a tour of an average cell block. Though certainly adequate for overnight accommodations it was our impression that over an extended period of time, such cells could certainly drive their occupants to despair. The sparse furnishings included a foam mattress bed, a toilet (at the foot of the bed) wash basin, a small table. Personal articles such as pictures, photographs, cards etc. decorated the otherwise naked walls. Space was obviously at a premium; even "pacing the floor" within one's cell couldn't be contemplated. At certain times during the day, however, the inmates could freely congregate in a corridor adjacent to the cell block and

thereby indulge in some form of exercise or dialogue. It later became our understanding (from the inmates) that the cell block which we were exposed to was not typical of all cell-blocks in the prison. The high-light of the day was undoubtedly an indepth conversation with four inmates. Upon their own admission, they introduced themselves to us (with numbers and other interesting nick names) as two convicted murderers, one convicted attempted murder, and one armed-robber escapee. The dialogue, to our amazement, was very easy; though superficial at first it soon reached an intensity rarely seen under such circumstances. We communicated on what seemed to be a personal level. The topics covered included the concept of rehabilitation, prison life, officials, problems of adjustment, society's

attitudes towards rehabilitation, trust, etc., etc.

The following constitutes a cross section of the typical reactions, members of our group have had to the comments and observations made by the inmates during the course of our discussion as well as to the visit as a whole.

1. Before this visit we thought we had a fair knowledge of life behind bars; since our visit, we realize that we have much more to learn.

2. The group, as a whole, experienced a sense of hopelessness and resentment towards society and the "system" on the part of the inmates. It is our understanding from them, and certain prison officials that the institution does not regard rehabilitation of its inmates as its prime goal, rather it is that of protecting society.

3. We feel that the realism and the logic used by the inmates in assessing the "system" should be questioned.

4. The concept of rehabilitation aroused such deep and strong reactions from the inmates, that fundamental changes in its substance from and application would seem warranted if it is to serve a useful purpose in this type of setting. The inmates did feel that any form of rehabilitation was nonexistent.

5. The physical facilities did not impress us as being anywhere near adequate. The metallic gray contrasted with the uninspiring sterilized corridors, left little for the imagination and creativity of their occupants.

6. The automated strategy of herding the inmates to the food shoot was followed by the consumatory response of the inmates in their own cells.

7. It was our impression that the inmates, upon completing their sentences had little or nothing to look forward to regarding job opportunities, family life, social security other than naked "freedom". Programs such as the Seventh Step Program, devised by Bill Sands; might be of some help in facilitating the transition from prison life to an effective social reintegration.

8. To the inmate, the guard is a screw, one who by nature and role can be temperamental abusive, and intolerant. Our contacts with the guards were limited and could not deny or substantiate the afore said allegations.

9. It is our strong feeling that more deliberate attempts should be made by outsiders like us to discover and understand what is going on behind the walls: such self contained worlds are all too often taken for granted and dismissed from our ordinary calendar-of-events: to the extent that they are protecting us and isolating us from a segment of the population which society deems unacceptable we usually forget that they exist.

10. Despite the activities available to the inmates, the general atmosphere was one of boredom, and frustration, which usually aroused tension among the inmate population.

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