

Behind Prison Bars

The Men Without Hope

Prisons are the worst places in California — and the worst places in prison are called "adjustment centers," a euphemism for places that from time immemorial convicts have called "the hole."

Today, Chronicle reporter Tim Findley describes what it's like in these incredible cages, part of a series of articles by Charles Howe and Findley on life behind bars.



By Tim Findley

The young Chicano inmate with blurred, lazy eyes approached from the side almost as if he were stalking me.

"These your shades?" he said, lifting the sunglasses halfway out of the reporter's pocket. "Why don't you get out of here, creep. This ain't no goddamn zoo."

There seems no way to stand outside the seething cages of Soledad's "O" wing adjustment center and avoid the inescapable feeling that it was, indeed, a zoo.

More than once, correctional officers in Soledad and other prisons had referred to inmates confined in the adjustment center as "animals." If anything, the thought constantly came to mind that beasts in a real zoo are better off.

California prison officials have an annoying habit of putting together two-syllable words to describe a one-syllable mess. Prisons are "correctional facilities." Guards are "correctional officers."

And what inmates and staff alike still most often refer to as "the hole" is officially known as "the adjustment center."

Prison in California is like the descending levels of Dante's hell, with the adjustment center almost, but not quite, at the bottom.

In order to get there, an inmate must have broken the law or exhibited deviant behavior in prison itself.

Seven of the state's 13 major penal institutions have adjustment centers. Although the number is

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constantly fluctuating, there are usually over 600 of the state's 24,000 inmates confined in these places.

All the adjustment centers have two things in common: First, an inmate's privileges such as use of the canteen, the library and television are limited or cut off altogether. Second, the men are confined to their individual cells almost continuously — in most cases for 23 hours a day.

Institutions

In some institutions, such as Deuel Vocational Institute and in Soledad's "X" wing, inmates in the adjustment center are allowed a few hours of "shop" — usually an activity of no more consequence than drawing pictures or making ashtrays — a sort of occupational therapy.

In some prisons, like Folsom and San Quentin, AC prisoners are allowed outside the cell for an hour of exercise a day.

"What do we do in here man?" an inmate said. "You really want to know? We masturbate a lot."

"Everything is worse in here, man, everything," said another inmate at Deuel. "I mean some little old chicken argument gets going with some dude, and, man, that mother wants to kill you the next day. It's like recreation, man. We got nothing else to do."

Hatred

Violence and shrieking hatred seem almost cemented into the state's "holes."

"In (Soledad's) 'O' wing, you orient your life to the feelings," said an inmate. In the lockup you revert to all the baser things. It springs up all those things you might normally try to repress, then when you do come out of the AC, you have a hell of a time just trying to adjust to routine prison life."

At Soledad, four correctional officers and one inmate have been attacked and stabbed in the adjustment center already this year.

Usually, adjustment center cells are about six feet by nine feet (not really smaller than "mainline" cells). Most have open bars at the front, reinforced by stretched steel mesh to prevent the inmate from reaching through the bars. In some cases, the cells are fronted with a solid steel door, broken only by a small square window and slot.

Years

Some men have spent years in such confinement.

At times the word game itself muddies the definition of the state's prison "holes."

San Quentin's "B Section," for example, is technically not that institution's adjustment center. It is, however, used to house "problem" inmates who commit disciplinary infractions. It is possibly the worst housing unit in the California penal system.

The grim four-tiered building looks like a monkey cage gone mad.

A chain link fence welded outside the catawalks runs up the entire height of the building, and dried fecal matter cakes part of the fence. Inmates throw feces at passing correctional officers.

During a prisoner strike and demonstration at San Quentin last September 25, several toilets and fixtures were broken by the inmates in "B Section." When Chronicle reporters arrived, several cells on the upper tiers still had no toilets or sinks.

Most men confined in those cells were sleeping on mattresses on the floor. Two half gallon fruit cans, one empty, the other containing fresh water, were provided and emptied once a day.

The cells have since been repaired, but some men lived in those conditions for at least four months.

Since such cell blocks are prisons within prison, the inmate goes through a kind of microcosm of the felony procedure to get there.

Offense

He is charged with an offense by a correctional officer, given a "trial" by a panel of officers and counselors and sentenced — most often to an indeterminate term. The panel that sent him to the hole will eventually decide when he gets out.

At his prison "trial" the inmate faces his accusers alone. He is not allowed a defense attorney. Only the accused man may speak in his own defense.

The inmates — and even some correctional officials — call it a "kangaroo court."

Most hazardous of all for inmates in adjustment centers, however, is what those "courts" put in an inmate's "jacket" or record. A stay in the hole is considered by the Adult Authority a sign of a negative attitude, and will likely mean the man will do more time — perhaps even years more — before he is considered for parole.

"The first thing you lose in the AC is hope," as one inmate put it.

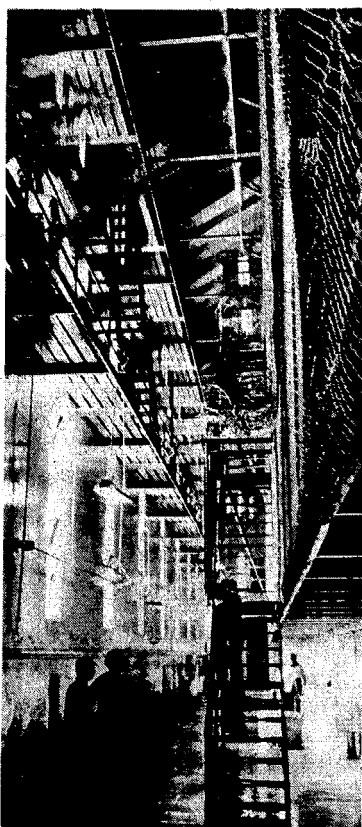
Depth

There is yet one more depth in the descending levels of prison hell.

Even in the adjustment centers — the prison within a prison — there is one more locked box reserved for inmates who cannot adjust even there.

Once it was called "solitary," and it meant a dark hole and a bread and water diet. Now it is called "isolation."

It is a locked cell with double doors that can be blazing with light or pitch dark, depending on how the officer on the tier controls the lights. Inmates in



By Arthur Frisch

Quentin's B Section—a monkey cage gone mad

isolation subsist on a "restricted diet"—many ingredients compressed into something that looks like meatloaf and tastes like paste.

They give it to prisoners who insisted on throwing their trays of food at the officers.

In isolation, a man sleeps on a two-inch thick, non-flammable mattress on a concrete platform. Until a court case two years ago outlawed them, the "isolation" cells were known as "oriental cells," with a small hole in the floor for a toilet, flushed from outside the cell once a day.

Illegal

Although such cells are now illegal in state prisons, (and most have been converted to aluminum toilet-sink combinations) two of San Quentin's isolation cells still are of the "oriental" type.

Until last month, a man could be sent to isolation for 29 days, and most men began their adjustment center confinement in such a cell. An order of Corrections Director Raymond Procunier earlier in February limited that sentence to a maximum of ten days and reserved the decision to put anyone on a "restricted diet" to Procunier alone.

As grim as they are, however, adjustment centers are here to stay.

"The question is not whether there should be adjustment centers," said a San Quentin inmate. "Even we see the need for them. What it is though, is deciding how much punishment is enough and how much freedom you can take away before a man really does become an animal."