

# Managing High-Risk Offenders in Prison Dormitory Settings

By James Peguese and Robert Koppel

Almost every correctional facility across the country, be it local or state, has been faced with the problem of insufficient bed space at one time or another. For some of those facilities, there is an even larger problem — dormitory housing. Developed as a construction cost-cutting option, the problem of dormitory housing has grown nationwide. There have been some minor changes in the size of dorms, but, for the most part, they remain unchanged.

One argument for the use of dormitories is that the dormitory setting better lends itself to programming and communal needs. Of course, for the lesser-security or treatment-oriented facilities, this may be true. However, there are many facilities today that were built for one purpose but are now fulfilling another. An example of this is institutions with dormitories being designated maximum security.

A continuing challenge for prison officials operating 19th century prisons with dormitories is the housing of maximum-security inmates. Housing inmates in dormitories is precarious in all institutions, except for those with the lowest security level.

Maryland currently faces such a dilemma, but has developed a way to address it. Built in 1878, the Maryland House of Correction (MHC) is a maximum-security institution with a population of 1,200 inmates and 537 dormitory beds. Approximately 60 percent of the men housed at MHC are murderers. Another 20 percent are there for attempted murder or rape and the remainder are there for other violent crimes.

## Violence in Dorms

Men who have spent their lives honing skills and techniques designed to thwart societal rules and mores flourish in dormitory settings, where they are able to use common areas

and/or the areas of other inmates to conduct their illicit activities. With the large number of inmates in the dorms, they can conceal their activities from the officers. Bathrooms, telephones, pool tables and the like all become potential areas for the concealment of forbidden items such as weapons, drugs, homemade alcohol or other contraband.

There is also an extensive history of violence in dormitories. The violence that occurs in these areas traditionally involves two inmates, but it has not been limited to inmate-on-inmate assaults. Numerous attacks on staff have occurred as well. One such incident at MHC involved a major who was stabbed seven times in 1993 by inmates as he responded to a call for assistance from a fellow officer. On another occasion, an officer was held hostage by inmates attempting to escape in the early 1980s. Still, the majority of inmate assaults are on other inmates. Such assaults are numerous and occasionally result in death. One such incident occurred in 1994 when an inmate's skull was crushed after another inmate repeatedly slammed his head into the concrete floor at MHC.

Also, the relatively benign act of sleeping in the dormitory setting is not without its own risk. More than one inmate at MHC has been stabbed to death as he slept. Another popular means by which inmates housed in dormitories assault one another while others are sleeping is by pouring boiling baby oil on an intended victim.

Consequently, the inmates have learned to adjust to dormitory living. They often sleep fully dressed, including shoes. This practice permits them to wake up out of a sound sleep to defend themselves or run for assistance, as the situation warrants. Many also sleep, summer and winter, with two wool blankets pulled tightly around themselves, completely cover-

ing their bodies. This tactic may prevent a knife from piercing the body or forestall a hot liquid from reaching the body, thereby giving the victim an opportunity to respond to the attack. Another means of self-defense that inmates employ is to join and participate in gangs. Gang membership provides a measure of security for an inmate who would otherwise be alone and vulnerable. For example, gang members often take turns sleeping while one member stays awake to keep a vigilant watch for prowling inmates who might want to harm the sleeping gang members.

As would be expected, the presence of gang activity in a prison presents additional concerns for the administration, particularly in the dormitory setting where there are approximately 100 inmates to provide support to one another. When in large groups, the inmates will act out knowing staff will not be able to identify all those involved, which has happened at MHC. During one such occasion, staff had entered a dorm to remove a popular inmate and approximately 30 inmates surrounded him for support. Needless to say, gang members find this support very advantageous and conducive to criminal activity. So, for example, if custody staff deem it necessary to remove a particular inmate from a dorm, the situation becomes more acute, and frequently requires the use of force, which often results in injury to both staff and inmates.

Due to the problematic nature of dormitories, properly staffing them poses a special challenge for administrators. The dorm is set up for one correctional officer to patrol a catwalk, which overlooks the dorm. Unfortunately, dorms have blind spots, such as bathrooms and showers, that obstruct an officer's view. Administrators have found it necessary to add an additional correctional officer who "roves" the dorms. This

officer is responsible for patrolling inside the dormitory among the inmates. Inmates have limited the effectiveness of this officer, however, by announcing to others via sound or hand signals the presence of the roving officer each time he or she enters the dorm.

## Honor Dorms

Administrators at MHC, with the assistance of the Maryland Division of Correction headquarters staff, came to realize that a small percentage of the inmates confined there accounted for the majority of the problems and developed a solution to the dormitory dilemma — honor dorms. They created honor dorms, theorizing that if the dormitories, which house about 100 men, are to function without all the problems, then they should be filled with less troublesome residents. In order to minimize the violence and other problems posed by dormitories, administrators decided to make them attractive and desirable places to live. This would attract a large number of inmates who would abide by the rules for fear of losing the privilege of living in an honor dorm.

First, the offenders who posed disciplinary problems were moved to cell housing where they would be more easily controlled, and less able to conceal criminal activities and form a unified presence. This tactic had the added benefit of not only breaking up gangs, but it provided the ability to separate and segregate gang leadership. By housing inmates in individual cells, their cohesion and effectiveness are limited. By segregating their leadership to various parts of the institution, their communication is effectively abbreviated, if not, completely stifled. Also, inmates can be removed from individual cells more easily and efficiently than from dorms, often without the use of force.

The plan to attract rule-abiding inmates to dormitory settings began with the name change. One of the seven dorms was designated the honor dorm, which distinguished it and its inhabitants from the other dorms. The selection process for potential residents began when administrators met with a group of inmates who at the time resided in cells. These inmates were largely men who were

employed in the institution and had no recent rule violations. The inmates were then informed of some of the benefits they would receive as members of the honor dorm, including an additional visit each month; additional phone time in the dorm; movies on the weekends in the dorm, eliminating the need to go to the gym to view a film with another 300 inmates; and use of microwaves and coffee pots.

The inmates were told they would be required to sign a contract. They were also told that to be eligible for the dorm they must be infraction free for one year, meaning that they have abided by the rules without any violations for one year prior to being considered for residency in the honor dorm. Also, inmates are required to have an assigned institutional job. The contract and requirements alleviate inmate concerns about living in an open housing unit with other violent (rule-violating) inmates.

The next step was to get staff to buy into the plan. Staff volunteers were requested to work toward the institutional goal of providing a safe living environment for inmates and working environment for staff. The assigned dorm officer is part of a team of three staff members, including a case manager and the security chief. The team evaluates the inmate honor dorm applications and also meets with inmates and informs them of the requirements.

Since the creation of the honor dorm, there has been an immediate decrease in assaults on inmates and none on staff. Serious incidents, which include assaults and drug recoveries, were reduced to zero in the first honor dorm. The inmates assigned to this dorm became proud of their status and even bragged to other inmates in the institution that they were able to leave their lockers unlocked, which is unheard of in the other dorms. The positive response resulted in the creation of a waiting list of inmates who want to live in a nonviolent atmosphere.

Due to the overwhelmingly positive response, the administration decided to convert additional dorms to honor housing. During a four-year period, five of the seven dorms were converted to honor dorms, which has resulted in a significant decrease in the violence in the dorms. The amount of

serious incidents in the honor dorms went from 17 in 1997 to six in 2001. There was also a substantial decrease in the amount of infractions committed by inmates assigned to both the honor housing and the regular housing. Ninety percent of the inmate violations reported by staff involved inmates assigned to regular housing. The results of the honor housing has shown that maximum-security inmates can be housed in dormitory settings and that staff can work in these areas without the constant threat of violence. Also, staff have been able to isolate the violent, high-risk offenders in cell housing where their movements can be controlled at all times. One of the main advantages of the honor dorms is that they enable inmates to change their lifestyles and live out the rest of their sentences in a safe environment.

## Conclusion

Although MHC has experienced positive results due to the use of honor dorms, this situation is far from ideal. This is not an endorsement for dormitory housing in maximum-security facilities. Housing maximum-security inmates inside cells is much safer for all concerned. But as the financial picture across the nation becomes more dismal, many jurisdictions will find themselves crunched for space; inmate populations will continue to rise and the money will not be there to provide adequate bed space. Officials will be forced to develop creative ways to safely house new offenders; creating honor dorms is one solution.

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