

THE FORGOTTEN COP

What would the average citizen say if it were proposed that Police Officers be assigned to a neighborhood which was inhabited by no one but criminals and those Officers would be unarmed, patrol on foot and be heavily outnumbered? I wager that the overwhelming public response would be that the Officers would have to be crazy to accept such an assignment. However, this scenario is being played out in all areas of the country

We are Correctional Officers. Not Guards (who are people that watch school crossings). We work at minimum, medium, and maximum-security correctional facilities. We are empowered by the state to enforce its penal laws, rules, and regulations of the Department of Correctional Services. In short we are Policemen. Our beat is totally inhabited by convicted felons who, by definition, are people who tend to break laws, rules and regulations. We are outnumbered by as many as 50 to 1 at various times of our workday and contrary to popular belief, we work without a side arm. In short, our necks are on the line every minute of every day.

A correctional facility is a very misunderstood environment. The average person has very little knowledge of its workings. Society sends its criminals to Correctional Facilities and as time passes, each criminal's crime fades from our memory until the collective prison population becomes hordes of bad people being warehoused away from decent society in a place where they can cause no further harm. There is also the notion that prison inmates cease to be a problem when they are incarcerated.

Correctional facilities are full of violence perpetrated by the prison population against the prison population and facility staff. Felonies are committed daily but rarely reported. They are called "unusual incidents" and rarely result in criminal prosecution. Discipline is handled internally and, as a rule, the public is rarely informed of these crimes. In the course of maintaining order in these facilities, many Officers have endured the humiliation of having urine and feces thrown on them. Uncounted Correctional Officers have been kicked, bitten, stabbed and slashed with home-made weapons, taken hostage, murdered and even raped in the line of duty, all while being legally mandated to maintain their professional composure and refraining from any retaliation which could be the basis for dismissal from service.

In addition to these obvious dangers, Correctional Officers face hidden dangers in the form of AIDS, Tuberculosis, Hepatitis B and C. Courts are now imposing longer sentences and the prison population is increasing far beyond the systems designated capacity. As the public demands more police on the street, governments everywhere are cutting police in prison where violence reigns supreme, jeopardizing all those working behind prison walls.

Although you will never see us on "911" or "Top Cops" we are Law Enforcement Professionals. We are the "FORGOTTEN COP," hidden from public view, walking a dangerous beat, hoping someday to receive the respect and approval from the public who "WE SILENTLY SERVE."

This piece was written by Donald E. Premo Jr. who is a New York State Corrections Officer.