Fort Dix: A Long-term Prisoner's Description

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A dated (2003) article describing all aspects of living as a prisoner in the Fort Dix Federal Prison, including a physical description of the institution, a typical day's structure, and how prisoners may serve their time.

Coming to prison can be quite a shock, especially for one who doesn't know what to expect. Is there massive chaos and violence? Is one constantly struggling to survive? Are guards abusive? Are there opportunities to advance oneself? Actually, the answer to these questions depends a lot on where one is confined.

When I was first arrested, in 1987, I didn't know anyone who'd been to prison and had no idea of what was to come. Since then I've been confined for long stretches of time in four different facilities. And I've learned a lot about growing through confinement.

I spent my first years as a prisoner of USP Atlanta. Then I transferred to a medium-security facility at FCI McKean, in Bradford PA. After that I transferred to Fairton, New Jersey, where I was held for only a few months before my security level dropped and I was transferred to the low-security facility at Ft. Dix, New Jersey.

I've been incarcerated since 1987, and I've been held in a high-security prison, in medium-security prisons, and since 1996, in a low-security prison. I can tell you that the level of freedom and anxiety is markedly different as one moves lower in security.

Custody and Classification

I've described life in the penitentiary and medium-security prisons in other essays published elsewhere on this web site. Lower-security facilities are much less volatile, though not immune from violence and disturbance. Minimum-security prison camp is the only level I have not experienced. I do not expect to move to a minimum-security facility until sometime after 2006 comes, as prisoners must be within seven years of their release date for camp placement.

Prison camps, I'm told, are much more tranquil and provide prisoners with an environment more conducive for growth.

The Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Program Statement 5100.071 the Security Designation and Custody Classification Manual determines a prisoner's security level and the type of facility in which he (or she) will be confined. The manual is available on the BOP's website at www.bop.gov. Case Managers are responsible for processing this security score, but a prisoner can use the manual to develop an idea of his security level. I provide extensive information on prisoner classifications at MichaelSantos.net.

Requesting Transfers

Prisoners may request a transfer from one facility to another, but it is not always easy to accomplish. The BOP rules hold that a prisoner must be confined in a particular facility for 18 months before he becomes eligible for transfer. After he has served 18 months, he may request his unit team to submit him for a transfer to a particular facility, but he makes his request with a degree of risk.

Through the remainder of this article I will describe what one who is designated to Fort Dix can expect to find. I hope that I cover most aspects of "Prison Life" at this facility, but I expect that I will leave many questions unanswered.

The Prison Environment

FCI Fort Dix is a large prison, confining over 4,000 prisoners in total, but the institution is divided into two separate compounds, East and West, with each side holding approximately 2,000 prisoners. Since 1996, I've been confined at Fort Dix East, and the descriptions I provide are based on my personal experience and observations as a prisoner in this facility.

One of the weirder aspects of life in prison is the peculiar relationship between staff and prisoners. I was twenty-three when I began serving my sentence, younger than most prisoners and staff members. When I was younger, it felt normal to address staff members as Mr. this or

Ms. that. I was new in prison, most staff members were older than I was, and it seemed appropriate to address them formally. Now I'm nearly forty, about the same age as the staff members around me, and I've lived among them everyday for nearly sixteen years. Despite our proximity, as a prisoner I'm always required to address staff members as Mr.___ or Ms.___; prisoners are not allowed to use first names.

Indeed, for security reasons, prisoners are not authorized to develop close ties with staff members. We may talk with each other every day, but rules and custom prevent us from ever becoming friends. To staff members, we're inmates. However "inmate" doesn't really capture the essence of life behind these fences. It is a life void of women, children, intimacy, and incentive. It is oppressive, structured along Marxist principals, more closely resembling communism than anything else I've known as a citizen of the West. We are not "inmates" in this system. We are prisoners of it.

The Housing Unit

The prisoners are assigned to individual housing units-large, three-story brick buildings that hold approximately 350 prisoners each. For prisoners, the nice things about the buildings are that they were not designed to be prisons at all. Instead, the buildings at Fort Dix were designed for use as military barracks. This portion of the Fort Dix Army Base was converted into a federal prison in the early 1990s. Essentially, it resembles a small city laid out in a rectangular form, with four parallel rows of rectangular buildings stretching about 600 yards (estimated) from end to end. It has a doublewide fence-separated by coils of glistening razor wire-that surrounds the entire perimeter of the prison. It is a total institution.

Each of the housing units is identically constructed. The first floor of these buildings is a large common area separated into several individual rooms that are used for specific purposes. One room is the officer's quarter, kind of like the central processing unit of each building. The officers assigned to each building usually work in one of three, eight-hour shifts. They are

responsible for keeping the building in order, and for routinely counting the prisoners assigned to their respective units.

The first floor also holds two laundry rooms and five separate rooms for television viewing. One of the television rooms is designated for Spanish programs, three others are for general television viewing, and one is designated for sports programming. The first floor also has an exercise room, complete with a pull-up/dip bar, a Universal gym, two stair masters and a stationary bicycle. It's a large room, also containing a pool table. Another large room holds three microwaves, which the prisoners assigned to the building, are allowed to use. Finally, the first floor contains eight telephones for inmate use.

Besides the common areas, the first floor also has one wing with seven two-man rooms where inmates with medical problems are assigned. The wing on the other end of the building is designated as an administrative area, where the unit manager, case managers, and counselors (unit team) keep their offices.

On each end of the building, a stairway leads to the upper two floors, which are used for prisoner housing. A long hallway spans the length of the rectangular-shaped building, and individual rooms are positioned on both sides of the hallway. Most of the prisoners are assigned to one of the twelve twelve-man rooms that are positioned along the middle stretch of the building. On each far end, the wings of the building, there are eight two-man rooms where prisoners who have seniority in the institution and have clean disciplinary records can request assignment. Generally, in order to be assigned to a two-man room, a prisoner must have been at Fort Dix for about thirty-six months, the last twelve of which were spent without receiving a disciplinary infraction.

The twelve-man rooms measure about twenty feet long by twenty-five feet wide. Each room is filled with six military-style metal bunk beds and twelve wall lockers in which each prisoner must keep all of his belongings. The rooms were designed and built with four large

windows that open for fresh air. For some reason, though, the warden determined that two windows in each room should be sealed off with plywood, so now, each twelve-man room has two windows instead of the original four.

The rooms have heat, but no air conditioning; hot South Jersey summers can be brutal. Electrical outlets are available and prisoners are authorized to purchase small fans in the commissary they can use to provide a breeze. The rooms also have one table which the prisoners assigned to the room can share for writing, eating, playing table games, or whatever. Each prisoner is assigned one metal folding chair that he may use anywhere in the building.

The room to which one is assigned is one of the most important factors of an individual's confinement. The prisoner will reside with eleven other men, all of whom likely will be strangers to each other. There are bound to be conflicting personalities in each room, as prisoners are assigned to their quarters at random by staff members who don't know or care about the backgrounds or values of the other people assigned to a room. When one prisoner leaves, for whatever reason, administrators fill the bed with one of the new prisoners who arrive at Fort Dix each day.

Structure of the Day

We can mark 6:00 a.m. as the beginning of the day at Fort Dix. On weekdays, assuming all is going right, that is the time prisoners will hear some morning-watch staff member announce that the dining room has opened for the morning meal and that the compound has opened. On weekends and holidays, the announcement doesn't come until 6:30 a.m. However, if there is a bad institutional census count, if fog limits visibility, or if the custodial staff anticipates some type of problem among the prisoners, the announcement may be delayed indefinitely. Prisoners are required to remain in their buildings until someone announces over the loudspeaker system that the compound has opened.

The Fort Dix housing units do not have locks on the doors separating the dormitory rooms from the common areas. The reason for this absence of locks if that Fort Dix is a low-security institution. The rooms in which prisoners sleep do not come equipped with bathrooms. By leaving the doors unlocked, prisoners are free to walk through the common hallways to the bathrooms at their will. Since the unit officer who controls the building is stationed on the first floor, and the prisoner rooms are located on the second and third floors, some prisoners visit in the common hallways during the evening hours. According to the inmate handbook, though, prisoners are supposed to remain in their assigned rooms between 11:30 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. In practice, however, prisoners only need to be in their rooms during institutional census counts.

Around 5:45 a.m., a lot of activity begins in the units. Each floor has four community bathrooms: two large bathrooms with seven sinks and toilets, and two smaller bathrooms with two sinks and toilets. The large bathrooms have a single shower room and the small bathrooms have double shower rooms. Because well over 300 men are assigned to the top two floors of the housing units, the bathrooms frequently are full and prisoners must wait in a line to use them.

As long as the 5:00 a.m. census count has cleared, prisoners can move downstairs and wait for the announcement that the compound has opened. Some will watch television, some will exercise in the recreation room, but most go downstairs and congregate around the building's exterior doors and wait for the announcement. When the announcement comes, scores of prisoners come out of every housing unit and rush toward the dining rooms and recreation areas. I'm estimating that between 80 and 100 prisoners are waiting at the door of each building prior to the morning's announcement. As soon as they're able, five- to six-hundred prisoners are moving on the compound; the rest of the prisoners remain in the units, trying to get a bit more sleep.

Between 6:00 a.m. and 7:30 a.m., the prison is pretty much opened to the inmate population. Although prisoners never are authorized to enter a housing unit other than the one to which they are assigned, the prisoners may walk around the compound or meet in some of the

common areas that are open. In the early morning, between 6:00 and 7:30, only the dining rooms and the gymnasium are open.

Several prisoners exercise early in the morning. A few prisoners begin their days running around the track, many more walk, and quite a few will train with weights. In the gym, an indoor and an outdoor weight area is available, a full-size basketball court, a racquetball court, and several stationary bicycles, treadmills, and stair-master machines are provided for prisoner use as well.

Work Call

The complexity of the prison changes at 7:30 a.m. each weekday. Essentially, the prison converts from an open compound to one that is controlled much more tightly. Officers will unplug the television sets, all but one telephone in each unit will become disconnected, and staff members will begin making rounds to the inmate rooms ordering the prisoners to get up, make their beds and clean the rooms.

The workday for most inmates begins at 7:30 a.m. They may be assigned to any of a number of work details. Several hundred prisoners work in UNICOR, the large prison factory with operations in most every federal prison. Here at Fort Dix, UNICOR operates a computer repair factory, a factory that refurbishes toner cartridges, a factory that manufactures mailbags, and a couple of other divisions. As I understand it, approximately 25 percent of the Fort Dix population works at UNICOR.

Besides the factory, prisoners may be assigned to Central Maintenance Services (CMS), where they are responsible for performing electrical, plumbing, and construction services for the institution. They may be assigned to food services, where they will prepare and serve the food or clean the cooking areas and dining rooms. Prisoners may work for landscaping, education, health services, or they may be assigned as clerks or orderlies who perform janitorial services. Most of

the prisoners work between 7:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m., but some are assigned to work details requiring them to perform their duties in the afternoon or evening hours.

Like everything else in prison, a prisoner's pay is based on time in a position, seniority-not an individual's competence or efforts to excel. The longer one stays in a position, usually, the less work he will be required to perform and the more money he will be paid for doing it.

I'm not trying to imply that prisoners are paid a fair wage for their labors, because they're not. It's just that those with seniority earn relatively more than others. At UNICOR, the lowest pay grade is .23 per hour, or $1.84 for a day's work. The highest pay grade in UNICOR is premium pay, which comes to $1.35 per hour, or $10.80 per day. Prisoners who don't work in UNICOR are paid according to a different pay scale, one that is significantly lower. Most prisoners earn less than $25 per month.

In addition to long terms of incarceration, most prisoners also were sentenced to pay monetary fines. The BOP requires that prisoners participate in its Financial Responsibility Program (FRP) in order to receive "privileges" such as access to the telephone, commissary, and preferred housing. UNICOR workers must "agree" to pay half of their wages toward their fines; others usually pay a minimum of $25 per quarter. Sometimes, the fine payment exceeds the amount of money a prisoner earns at his prison job. In order for me to meet my fine payments, I must rely on family members to supplement my $5.25 monthly salary.

A prisoner needs the small amount of money he earns to purchase not only "luxury" items, like food and athletic clothing. But he also is required to purchase his own cosmetics, aspirins, stamps, telephone credits, and other items necessary to live in prison. Strict rules prohibit prisoners from "conducting a business" or "providing anything of value to another inmate," but many prisoners are forced to disregard these rules and perform services for other prisoners, like ironing or cleaning rooms, in order to supplement their meager earnings on prison work details.

Programs

Besides work details, several programs begin after 7:30 a.m. Classes begin in education for those inmates struggling to earn their high school equivalency certificates. Some courses are available from a local community college. Arts and crafts programs are offered by other prisoners. Psychology and counseling services also begin at this time.

Call Out Sheet

In order to participate in programs, the prisoners must formally enroll. Once enrolled, the prisoners will be placed on a call-out sheet, which enables them to leave their housing unit or job detail to access the program. The call-out sheet, which is published every day, details the area of the institution where individual prisoners are scheduled to report at a given time. Prisoners must look at the call-out sheet instructions every day; if they fail to follow the call-out instructions, they are subject to receiving disciplinary infractions.

Pass System

If a prisoner wants to leave the housing unit after 8:00 a.m., but is not on the call-out sheet and not scheduled to be working at that time, he must request a pass from the unit officer. The pass authorizes the prisoner to walk around the Fort Dix compound, to participate in education or recreation activities, or to sit at one of the tables outside. If a prisoner moves to one of these areas without a pass, he may receive a disciplinary infraction for being "out of bounds." Theoretically, the passes last for two hours. In practice, though, prisoners have until 10:30 to return the passes to the unit officer.

About 10:45 a.m., the compound is again cleared as the staff members begin preparations for the mid-day meal. Prisoners must return to their housing units or assigned work details and wait for the section to which they're assigned (either their living unit or work detail) to be called for lunch. Because the population of Fort Dix is so large, and there are only two food-service buildings, the institution controls the quantity of prisoners flowing into the building. It does this

by releasing the prisoners by sections. The prisoners assigned to the prison factory are the first to be released to the dining room. After UNICOR, the other work details are allowed to proceed. Then the housing units are released in accordance with their scoring on the weekly sanitation inspection; those units receiving the highest score for unit cleanliness are released first.

After 10:45 a.m. inmates are allowed to watch television, and at 11:00 a.m., all the inmate telephones become operational for one hour. At Noon, most of the phones will be disconnected again, with only one inmate telephone remaining operational in each unit.

By 1:00 p.m. the noon meal will be "terminated," and the compound will close again. This means that prisoners must obtain a pass to leave their housing units unless their names have been placed on the call-out sheets directing them to participate in one of the many programs available in the institution. Again, the pass lasts for two hours, but usually prisoners are okay if they return the pass before 3:30 p.m.

Afternoon Recall and Census Counts

Another "institutional recall" occurs everyday, without exception, at 3:30 p.m. At that time the compound is cleared of all inmates. Most return to their assigned housing units, but a few are scheduled to work then time and must report to their work details to prepare for the 4:00 p.m. "stand-up count."

At 4:00 p.m., in every federal prison across the country, staff members conduct an institution census count. Prisons conduct various counts throughout the day, but the 4:00 p.m. count is different in that all prisoners must physically stand for this census. During the other counts, which occur at 10:00 p.m.; 12:00 a.m.; 3:00 a.m.; and 5:00 a.m., the prisoners are required to be in their rooms or appropriate area, but they may be sleeping or sitting; they must stand only for the 4:00 p.m. count everyday, or for counts when a special problem exists in the institution. These special counts occur infrequently, only a few times each year.

After the 4:00 p.m. count clears, usually about 4:30 p.m., the prisoners are allowed to leave their rooms and proceed to the first floor, where the evening activities will begin. All of the telephones will then be turned on, and they remain on until 11:30 p.m. The first activity will be "mail call," where a staff member distributes mail. All the prisoners in the building will crowd in one of the large television rooms and listen over the cacophony as the officer screams out names as he pulls mail from a bag. The mail first enters the institution through a central mailroom. Staff members open every envelope to inspect for contraband, then route the mail to the inmates in their respective housing units through a staff member.

Once the mail has been distributed, the units will be systematically released to the dining room. Again, those units who scored highest on the weekly sanitation inspection win the privilege of eating first.

After the units are released for the evening meal, the compound is open. No passes are necessary to move around, and several hundred prisoners freely walk around the track, exercise, play cards, chess, and other games, watch television, or do what they want within the limits of the rules. Several classes are available during the evening hours, some of which are taught by prisoners who have special skills to offer. The prison is like an open community, with 2,000 men roaming inside this cage. It remains open until 9:30 p.m., when the final institution recall for each day occurs.

After 9:30 p.m. the day pretty much winds down. At 10:00 p.m. the prisoners must again return to their rooms for a census count, and that count usually does not clear until after 10:30. Then the inmates may move to the first floor again to watch television, use the telephone, or visit with others. Then, at 11:30 they once again return to their rooms where they are supposed to remain until the following morning's 5:00 a.m. count clears, at which time the routine begins again, day after day, year after year, decade after decade.

Food Service and Commissary

As mentioned above, Fort Dix provides three meals each day through its food services unit. Staff members issue "meal cards" to each prisoner prior to the beginning of every month. The prisoners must bring these meal cards with them to the dining room for every meal. They proceed through a long cafeteria-style line; pick up a tray, and other prisoners who work in food service will pass them a plate with the day's meal. A staff member, standing toward the end of the line, will ask for the prisoner's meal card, and then mark the card to indicate the prisoner has received his meal.

Besides the meal that is served on the main line, food services also offers a salad bar and a hot bar, which usually contains beans and rice, from which prisoners can take unrationed meals without their meal cards. A beverage bar exists also that dispenses sodas and water; for the morning meals milk is available.

Prisoners who want to supplement the food served by the institution may purchase goods from the commissary. Each prisoner is allowed to shop one day per week and may spend up to $290 per month. The commissary sells canned fish, dehydrated rice and beans, pasta, soups, athletic clothing, sneakers, radios, watches, and a few other items that make prison a bit easier. The prisoners may use the microwaves in the units to heat their food, or they may bring it to the dining room to add to their meals. Also, Fort Dix offers several vending machines that sell sandwiches, sodas, and snacks to the prisoner population. To use the vending machine, prisoner use a debit/ID card that they can refill by purchasing credits in the commissary. Many prisoners avoid the food services department altogether, obtaining their food from the commissary and vending machines.

Again, prisoners are allowed to shop in the commissary only one day each week. Commissary shoppers must turn in a preprinted list of the items they wish to purchase on their designated shopping day. The list must be turned in to the commissary between the hours of

11:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m. When the prisoner turns in his shopping list, he will be given a shopping number from the commissary staff worker. The number will indicate the prisoner's place in line once it begins filling the prisoner orders, after the clearing of the 4:00 p.m. count. Usually, the commissary begins calling numbers about 5:00 p.m., and it fills its last orders, on most days, before 7:00 p.m.

Telephone Use

Besides spending money on commissary items and vending machine credits, prisoners also need money to use the Inmate Telephone System (ITS). Prisoners may use the telephone for up to 300 minutes per month. They may pay for the calls or call collect, but they should know that punishments for telephone violations are severe.

In order to use the telephone system, prisoners must be assigned a Personal Identification Number from his unit team. The prisoner also must submit a list of phone numbers that he wishes to call. A staff member will review the numbers, then, if appropriate, the staff member will enter those numbers in to the ITS, thereby making them accessible for the prisoner to call. The prisoner must purchase credits in the ITS, and when he makes a call, his ITS account will be charged twenty cents per minute for long-distance calls placed in the U.S., notwithstanding the competitive low prices that people beyond prison fences pay to use the telephone. Local calls cost ninety cents for a fifteen-minute call.

When the prisoner places a call, the receiving party will hear a pre-recorded message stating that the call originates from a federal prison. The party will be required to press the number five in order to accept the call, or, the party may press the numbers seven, seven, in order to ensure the number is removed from the list of approved numbers that the inmate is allowed to call. If seven, seven is pressed by the receiving party, even if it's done accidentally, the prisoner and the party whom he wishes to call must formally request the prisoner's unit team to add the number to the list again. It is not an easy process.

If the party accepts the call by pressing the number five when instructed by the recording, the call will begin. Two times during the call, a message will interrupt the conversation indicating that "this call is from a federal prison." The call will be terminated after a maximum of 15 minutes. Once the call is terminated, the prisoner must wait one hour before his telephone account will become activated again.

Telephone Sanctions

The Inmate Telephone System is very strictly controlled. Inmates who are found to have abused or misused the phone system are subject to severe disciplinary procedures. Indeed, any infraction related to the telephone will result in punishments that are among the greatest in the BOP's substantial arsenal.

Three-way phone calls are prohibited. If an inmate is found to have used the ITS in a three-way call at Fort Dix, he may be subject to one-year's loss of phone time; one year's loss of visiting; one year's loss of commissary privileges. If an inmate is found to have made two three-way phone calls, his punishment is increased dramatically. I've heard of prisoners who received five-year's loss of phone, visiting, and commissary. Prisoners who are convicted of abusing the phone system a third time, I've heard, lose the privilege of using the phone, commissary, or receiving visits for the remainder of the prisoner's sentence, regardless of how much time he has remaining to serve.

I've met another prisoner who received the one-year sanctions because he used the phone at 9:20 p.m. This prisoner was assigned to a work detail that finished at 9:30 p.m., so he wasn't supposed to use the phone until after 9:30 p.m. His supervisor released him ten minutes early, though, and the prisoner's wife was in the process of leaving him. He was distraught and placed a call to her. Because he used the phone ten minutes before his work detail concluded, he is prohibited from using the phone, commissary, or visiting for one year. For some reason, the BOP "correctional" officers deem these draconian sentences necessary to foster rehabilitation. To this

prisoner, they just seem mean spirited. But then again, it wasn't compassion that drove disciplinary hearing officers to seek employment in the BOP.

Three-way calls and using the phone during inappropriate hours are bright-line infractions. More ambiguous infractions have to do with an individual's actual conversation on the phone. If the person monitoring the ITS determines that an individual is discussing business over the phone, that individual may receive a disciplinary infraction for unauthorized use of the telephone and for conducting a business.

But what is defined as conducting a business? I have had difficulty finding a conclusive answer to this question. My case manager told me that, as she understands the rule, any advice that I provide which someone else could use to make money could be construed as "conducting a business." I also heard that providing someone with advice on how they can solve business problems-even though the advice provider receives no form of compensation-may be construed as running a business. If a prisoner discusses the relative value of something, he may receive a disciplinary infraction for running a business. In essence, the conducting a business rule is loosely defined, but penalties for violating it may result in loss of contact with the community for substantial periods.

Avoiding Obstacles While Preparing For Release

The possibility of receiving a disciplinary infraction for "conducting a business" is a great source of anxiety for me. Every time I use the telephone, my family discusses their activities with me, and most of their activities revolve around the business world. Indeed, about everyone with whom I communicate over the phone is involved in some type of business, and our conversations frequently turn to steps they can implement to manage their businesses more efficiently.

Being a long-term prisoner, it is imperative that I take advantage of every opportunity to keep abreast of developments in the business world. Unless something changes, I will be nearly

50 years old when I am released from prison. I do not write this to elicit sympathy, but to state a fact. Virtually all of my adult life will have been spent behind prison fences, and I will have had no experience as a jobholder.

If I don't nurture my ties to the world of commerce, I will leave prison with no experience other than being a prisoner. On the other hand, if I continue my endeavors to understand business models, I may prepare myself to bring something of value to potential employers upon my release. And as a convicted felon who will have spent the past 27 years in prison, I will need something to distinguish myself.

Prisoner Dilemmas

This is one example of the long-term prisoner dilemma: does he abide by the letter and spirit of all prison rules, or does he determine what steps he needs to take to prepare himself for the challenges he will face upon release, prison rules notwithstanding? Sometimes it's not so easy to determine what is the "right" course of action. One might abide by every rule, but leave prison after decades of incarceration with no experience other than living in confinement. Or one might choose to prepare himself for the obstacles he will encounter after release, recognizing that at times he may violate the spirit, if not the letter, of prison rules. Choosing this latter course of action brings risks of severe punishment in the process.

Deciding how one is going to spend his time is an individual choice that every prisoner must make on his own. In making this choice, he should recognize that his future success or failure might be the direct result of the choices he makes on how he will serve his sentence. When evaluating prison rules, I always choose my course of action according to what I believe will contribute best to my preparations for release.

It would seem that legitimate business discussions would foster law-abiding, taxpaying contributions to society upon ones release from prison. And since such discussions do not threaten the security or orderly running of an institution, it baffles me as to why prison officials

punish those who discuss business. Nevertheless, these are the rules as they've been explained to me.

Unit Team

The unit team is like a mini-administration that operates in each living unit. A unit team comprises a unit manager, a case manager, and a counselor. The unit manager oversees the operations of the entire unit; the case manager is responsible for monitoring the prisoner's progress throughout his sentence, and, among other things, is responsible for initiating inmate transfer requests and community matters. The counselor does no counseling of which this writer is aware, but instead is responsible for room changes, telephone and visiting lists, and unit sanitation. The unit team also acts as a kind of kangaroo court when a prisoner receives a disciplinary infraction.

I do not use the term "kangaroo court" pejoratively; I use it consistent with its dictionary definition: "a mock court in which the principles of law and justice are disregarded or perverted." Indeed, although the prisoner faces severe sanctions for a disciplinary infraction-some that may result in more time behind prison fences-that will effect his life in prison, he is not allowed a right to counsel, a right to cross examine his accusers, to obtain discovery materials and review evidence against him, or to present an effective defense. In essence, if charged, a finding of guilt and sanctions likely will follow.

Knowing that any type of disciplinary infraction is a problem without a likely solution, it is best to avoid activities that increase one's exposure to such risks. It's not always possible, because although a prisoner can control his own behavior, he cannot control the behavior of those around him.

In any event, a prisoner must be prepared to accept responsibility for his own actions. He should not rely on principals of fairness as understood by legitimate judicial authority when proceeding through disciplinary proceedings in prison. As a prisoner, one always is presumed to

be guilty, and this is another reason that prisoners must choose their behavior carefully; although a prisoner has no means of earning relief from his sentence through merit, he can lengthen his stay in prison significantly and under more onerous conditions if his unit team convicts him of violating prison rules.

Disciplinary Proceedings

The Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) codifies a listing of offenses that prisoners can be found guilty of committing while serving their sentences. These offenses are separated by four severity levels, with those falling in the 100-series level being of the greatest category, and 400-series offenses being of the low-moderate category. For example, a series 100 incident report would be killing; a series 400-incident report would be possession of property belonging to another person.

A prisoner who is charged with violating one of the prison rules will be issued an incident report within 24 hours of the time the staff member becomes aware of the infraction. Usually, the prisoner will be called to the lieutenant's office and informed of his Miranda rights when he is issued his incident report.

After he's been read his Miranda rights, the lieutenant will read the prisoner the incident report and then ask the prisoner whether he has any comment. Whatever the prisoner says will be recorded on the incident report. During that meeting in the lieutenant's office, the prisoner has the right to make a statement and to call witnesses whom the prisoner believes may exonerate him from wrongdoing. It is the only opportunity the prisoner has to make a defensive statement or to call witness.

After listening to the prisoner, the lieutenant may dismiss the incident report, or, more likely, refer it to the unit team for further processing. Sometimes, depending on the seriousness of the charge, the prisoner will be handcuffed and escorted to segregation immediately upon being charged.

Unit Disciplinary Committee

The unit team will hold a hearing in the inmate's presence and make a finding of guilty or not guilty. If the infraction is of a greatest or high severity rating, though, the unit team will forward the incident report to the Disciplinary Hearing Officer (DHO), who is responsible for adjudicating and dispensing punishments of these more serious offenses.

For serious offenses, the prisoner would receive charges of new criminal conduct and prosecuted in the federal courts. In my experience, though, I've seen such charges happen rarely. Much more common sanctions include time in segregation, loss of privileges within the institution, and loss of good time (Since late 1987, prisoners receive 54 days of good time each year. They can lose this good time through disciplinary violations.).

Also, disciplinary infractions have an impact on an individual's custody classification; the more disciplinary infractions a prisoner receives, the higher his security level will rise. If a prisoner's security level is boosted too high, he will be transferred from Fort Dix to a higher-security institution.

If a prisoner is involved in an activity, which he doesn't know whether the BOP allows, he ought to write to the BOP attorney at the Northeast Regional Office in Philadelphia for clarification of a rule. It is better to take this precautionary step and obtain a formal, written opinion before action is taken. That way, a prisoner will know exactly what he is doing, and this step may save the prisoner from disciplinary action-which can be severe.

Administrative Remedy Procedures

Prisoners who are found guilty of violating prison rules may appeal their convictions through the administrative remedy procedures. Indeed, prisoners may use these procedures any time they have a grievance with the BOP.

Except for appealing disciplinary infractions, which do not require attempts at informal resolution, in order to initiate the administrative remedy process, the prisoner must first attempt

to resolve the matter verbally. If he cannot resolve the matter to his satisfaction, he must request a BP-8 form from his counselor, which documents a final attempt to resolve the matter informally.

The first step at formal resolution is filing a BP-9 form. Upon filing this official complaint, the warden or the warden's designee is supposed to investigate the matter and respond in writing to the prisoner's charge. If the answer to the BP-9 is unsatisfactory, the prisoner may proceed further by filing a BP-10, which is filed with the Regional Office of the BOP. And finally, if the prisoner remains unsatisfied with the answer he received on his BP-10, he may file his last administrative complaint by requesting a BP-11 form, which is filed with the BOP's Central Office in Washington, DC.

All of these administrative remedy procedures are strictly controlled with time limits and copy requirements that must be observed in all filings. Essentially, by proceeding through administrative remedy, the prisoner is building a formal, legal record. All procedures must be followed or risk dismissal of the complaint. The prisoner must recognize that in initiating an administrative remedy procedure, the BOP becomes his adversary and will use all of its power and resources to defend its actions. A prisoner is well advised not to take the administrative remedy procedure lightly, as the BOP will respond with all the formality and seriousness a legal proceeding deserves.

After a prisoner has exhausted his administrative procedures, he may choose to continue his complaint in federal court.

Visiting

Visiting at Ft. Dix is like visiting at a train station or airport. The room is large, with rows of theater-style seating. Well, the chairs are not comfortable like those in a theater, but they're placed side-by-side, so after a few hours of conversation, one's neck becomes strained from being turned for so long. Prison administrators believe this type of seating arrangement is

necessary in order to preserve security in the institution. Sometimes, during the summer months, outdoor visiting is available.

After being pat searched and checked in by an officer, prisoners enter the visiting room to sit with their guests. Vending machines are available that sell sandwiches, drinks, coffee, ice cream, and snacks. Prisoners cannot purchase any of these items, but their visitors may purchase them and eat them with the prisoner. Video cameras that are placed in the ceiling randomly and surreptitiously record all activities in the visiting room, and at least two prison guards are present during the prison's visiting hours. They monitor the visits from a raised platform, making sure that no questionable behavior occurs.

After the visit ends, the prisoner checks out with the guard and is stripped, searched, and checked out before he is allowed to leave the visiting area. Prisoners are allowed to visit for 30 hours each month, but on weekends and holidays, every hour counts as two against a prisoner's 30-hour allotment of visiting hours.

Chapel Services

Fort Dix employs chaplains from several faiths, and it brings in others on a contract basis to tend to the spiritual and religious needs of the prisoners. Services are scheduled regularly, and prisoners form several study and worship groups among themselves. The chapel also maintains its own library with literature, scholarly books, and videotapes that the prisoners may use. Also, the chaplain helps prisoners of specific faiths meet special dietary needs and procure accessories that facilitate their respective religions.

Psychology

Fort Dix also employs a few psychologists who offer counseling on an individual basis. Most of the programs focus on substance abuse and alternatives to violence. Several prisoners also participate in group therapy programs under the sponsorship of psychology. In addition, it

also operates a suicide-watch program, through which it monitors the progress of inmates with suicidal tendencies.

One of Psychology's most popular programs, the 40-hour drug program, helps participants understand the dangers of drug abuse. It also prepares them for a more comprehensive 500-hour drug education program, which can result in a 12-month sentence reduction for qualified graduates.

Health Services

Health service is an area that receives perhaps the most frequent amount of complaints in federal prison. Prisoners complain about access to medical personnel who will treat them for their illnesses. Seeing a doctor is difficult, and a dentist worse. With so many prisoners on this compound, finding sufficient medical care is not easy.

In order to see someone from medical services, prisoners must proceed through a sick-call procedure through which they make an appointment. They may not see a doctor or a physician's assistant for a few days after their initial visit. And sick call is not available seven days each week. Prison is a good place to remain healthy, because even visiting the health services department can be a cause for increased stress. As a long-term prisoner, I've tried to avoid this area of the prison.

Education

The education department at FCI Fort Dix provides inmates with an opportunity to educate themselves. It offers remedial courses that help prisoners prepare for the high school equivalency exam; college courses that may lead to a two-year degree from a local community college, vocational programs; and Adult Continuing Education (ACE) courses that other prisoners with special skills teach. Besides the formal courses that are available, prisoners may enroll in independent study programs through correspondence schools. The education

department maintains a library that holds approximately 5,000 books; it also participates in the inter-library loan program through which prisoners may request books from community libraries.

The education department is responsible for maintaining the inmate law library through which prisoners are able to research legal statutes and case law decisions. The law library may be inadequate to prepare a complete legal defense, but it offers the basic tools necessary to understand the different aspects of an individual's case; many prisoners have been successful in finding relief from their sentences through diligent work using resources available in the prison law library.

A typing room is available, complete with between ten and twenty typewriters, depending on how many are working at a given time; prisoners must purchase their own ribbons in the commissary. No computer or Internet access is available to prisoners.

It takes persistence and a high tolerance for frustrations to educate oneself in prison, but some prisoners have completed courses that led to graduate degrees during their confinement. One simply must be goal oriented, disciplined, and committed. Those who have these virtues can use the resources available through the education department to prepare themselves for a better life upon their release from prison.

Other Prisoner Perspectives

In an effort to present my readers with a more complete description of life as a prisoner of Fort Dix, I shared my monograph with several others who are confined with me here. I was surprised by the response I received from many.

One prisoner told me he thought my description portrayed the operations of the BOP in a far too favorable light. I told him that my goal was to present an accurate, objective, and unbiased narrative of what a prisoner at Fort Dix can expect. He told me that although the description is accurate, it is incomplete. "Your description," he said, "missed all the bullshit that

we have to put up with." He and others were referring to the regular invasions of our daily life, and the complications of group living.

Perhaps the long time I've served has desensitized me. I've come to accept the problems that others describe as a normal part of life in here. After listening to the other prisoners, I came to realize that I did leave out many of the complaints I've heard over the years, and in an effort to bring you a more thorough picture, I'm going to provide some of the details that the other prisoners said I missed.

"For one thing, the bathrooms are filthy." The top two floors of the building have only eight bathrooms; a total of 14 toilets, 14 sinks, and six showers. Well over 300 men are assigned to live on these top two floors; it works out to one toilet and sink for every 20 men, one shower for every 50 men.

The rooms constantly reek of urine and waste, and the stench frequently permeates the entire floor. What's worse, the building was designed with adequate ventilation through the windows, but some bright correctional mind had 50 percent of the windows in each building sealed. On the first floor, every bathroom window was sealed with concrete blocks, so that no fresh air can come in. Because we are only prisoners, no explanation was given for the reasons the windows were sealed, but every one feels the consequences of the change. It's unsanitary.

Another troubling aspect that I did not describe completely was the frustration associated with the telephone. Again, over 300 men are assigned to each building, and each building has a total of eight telephones for inmate use. Nevertheless, every weekday between 7:30 a.m. and 11:00 a.m., and again between 12:00 p.m. and 3:45 p.m., all but one of these phones is turned off.

The line to use the telephone sometimes reaches more than ten-people long; the prisoners wait in line despite there being seven other phones available, but disconnected during these hours. "Why are they disconnected? What sense does this make?" The one thing these long lines

foster is further frustrations among desperate men. Many problems in prison revolve around the telephone, and some prisoners believe administrators are provoking them.

Besides the telephone, frequent arguments erupt over the use of microwaves in the units. Each unit has a maximum of three microwaves (when they're working) that all 300+ prisoners must share. All prisoners don't cook all the time, but during the evenings and on weekends, the lines to use these microwaves can be unbearable. Prisoners don't understand why more microwaves aren't provided; if there were more available, they reason, prisoners wouldn't have to argue and fight amongst each other in their struggle to use them.

The microwaves are important because of the problems with food service. I mentioned earlier that Fort Dix uses a meal-card system, which means that each meal is rationed; consistent with Marxist principals, every man receives the same amount. A 300-pound man is fed the same as a 100-pound man. Fort Dix also offers a salad bar and a hot bar, but that salad bar doesn't offer much. "I never see an onion or a tomato on the line," one prisoner told me. "And by the time the last unit is allowed to eat, whatever was on the salad bar has already been eaten."

Another thing that really irks some prisoners is that all of the extra food that is made in the kitchen is thrown away. It's never distributed to the prisoners who remain hungry after having finished what they describe as stingy portions. "All these hungry men and they're (kitchen staff) throwing food in the garbage."

Besides the food problems in the "chow hall," another aggravation is the exposure to disciplinary problems. In the dining room, prisoners sit at four-man tables, frequently among others whom they don't know. Some of these people have friends who work in the kitchen bring them "unauthorized" food. But everyone sitting at the table will be punished if a staff member sees the "unauthorized" food. In order to avoid these potential problems, some prisoners choose to use the microwaves in the unit to prepare the food they've purchased in the commissary.

Although they may avoid potential problems in the dining room, they expose themselves to problems with other prisoners around the overused microwaves.

Too many census counts are another problem. Some guards who count during the middle of the night take a sadistic pleasure in waking prisoners from a sound sleep. They will burn a flashlight directly into the prisoner's eyes while he is sleeping; some will hit the prisoner's bed to make the prisoner move. Not all officers do this, but some do it regularly. Once the prisoner wakes, the guard moves on without comment.

Those late night counts occur seven days each week. Other problems occur when a fight breaks out in the institution. With 2,000 men living in close quarters, fights are inevitable. But when they happen, staff members pass every room and order each prisoner to remove his shirt and stand bare skinned for inspection. It doesn't matter whether the prisoner had been asleep. When these special counts happen, the prisoner must stand for inspection like a piece of meat. All humanity is ignored for the examination by the guards.

Prisoners must grow accustomed to standing for inspection, as every time they proceed to a visit, they must do so knowing that they will be strip-searched on the way out of the visiting room. But the prisoners remind me to write that it's not just a strip search, it's a degrading, dehumanizing ritual the prisoner must endure after each visit.

After stripping, the prisoner must stand in front of a guard, naked. The prisoner shows his hands, both sides, raises his arms, then runs his fingers through his hair. He must open his mouth so the prison guard can look inside. The prisoner is ordered to stick his tongue out, bend back his lips. The prisoner must lift his genitals, then turn around. He's commanded to bend over and spread his butt apart, sometimes to squat; one wonders what female prisoners must endure. Finally, the prisoner is told to lift the bottoms of his feet so the guard can see his soles. Only after this inspection is the prisoner allowed to get dressed and leave.

Besides the physical degradations and humiliations done in the name of "security," prisoners also are forced to endure a constant badgering to their psyche. They're spoken to in a patronizing manner, are always suspect of wrongdoing, and discouraged from accomplishing personal goals. They're told to study, but their books are confiscated. One prisoner who has built a record as an outstanding college student told me that he was in the dining room sitting at a table where others were eating a piece of chicken. Chicken was not being served in the dining room that evening. All four prisoners were taken to segregation. While he was in the "hole," staff members confiscated his college books. Two months have passed and he has not had his books returned. "I'm tired of these mind games," the prisoner said. "I'd rather be taken outside and shot."

Prisoners are upset because they are given sentences of multiple years, sometimes multiple decades, and are deprived of opportunities to earn a decent wage. They have children and families who depend upon them, but they have no way to contribute to their lives financially. The meager money that prisoners do earn is divided into paying toward their monetary fines and to purchase the things they need to live in prison. Further, prisoners are charged higher prices for everything than citizens pay for the same things in the community. As a captive audience, prisoners feel they're exploited at every turn. The level of tension and frustration behind these fences sometimes runs exceedingly high.

Conclusion

If the beginning portion of this paper described a prison that didn't sound so bad, it's because as a long-term prisoner, I've already adjusted to the difficulties of prison life that continue to plague my fellow prisoners. I have no expectations in the prison system, and have learned to take whatever comes. But I remember going through the same frustrating periods that the others with whom I spoke describe. They're pissed off, angry because they feel their lives passing by them, their families growing apart from them, and their perceived lack of control over

their own destinies. Some prisoners overcome these obstacles, but our country's high recidivism rates suggest that they bury most.

Every man has a natural urge to live free, so frustration perhaps is a logical consequence to incarceration. Nevertheless, the prisoners with whom I spoke sense that administrators aggravate their tensions by making life more difficult than it needs to be.

Dennis Luther, a former BOP warden who retired a few years back used to say, "People are sent to prison as punishment, not for punishment." Many of the men with whom I spoke complain that at Fort Dix, some of the seemingly nonsensical rules and policies frustrate their time further, and that the condescending tendencies of some staff members make them angry.

Now that I'm in my second decade of incarceration, I don't notice these aggravations so much. They bother me for a time, but for the most part, I've learned to take a deep breath and move on. I tend to see the prison more in terms of what I can accomplish despite it, rather than feeling victimized about what it's doing to me. Perhaps it's a sign that I've become what all people in prison dread becoming: an institutionalized prisoner.