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The chaos of our prisons

by James MacLean

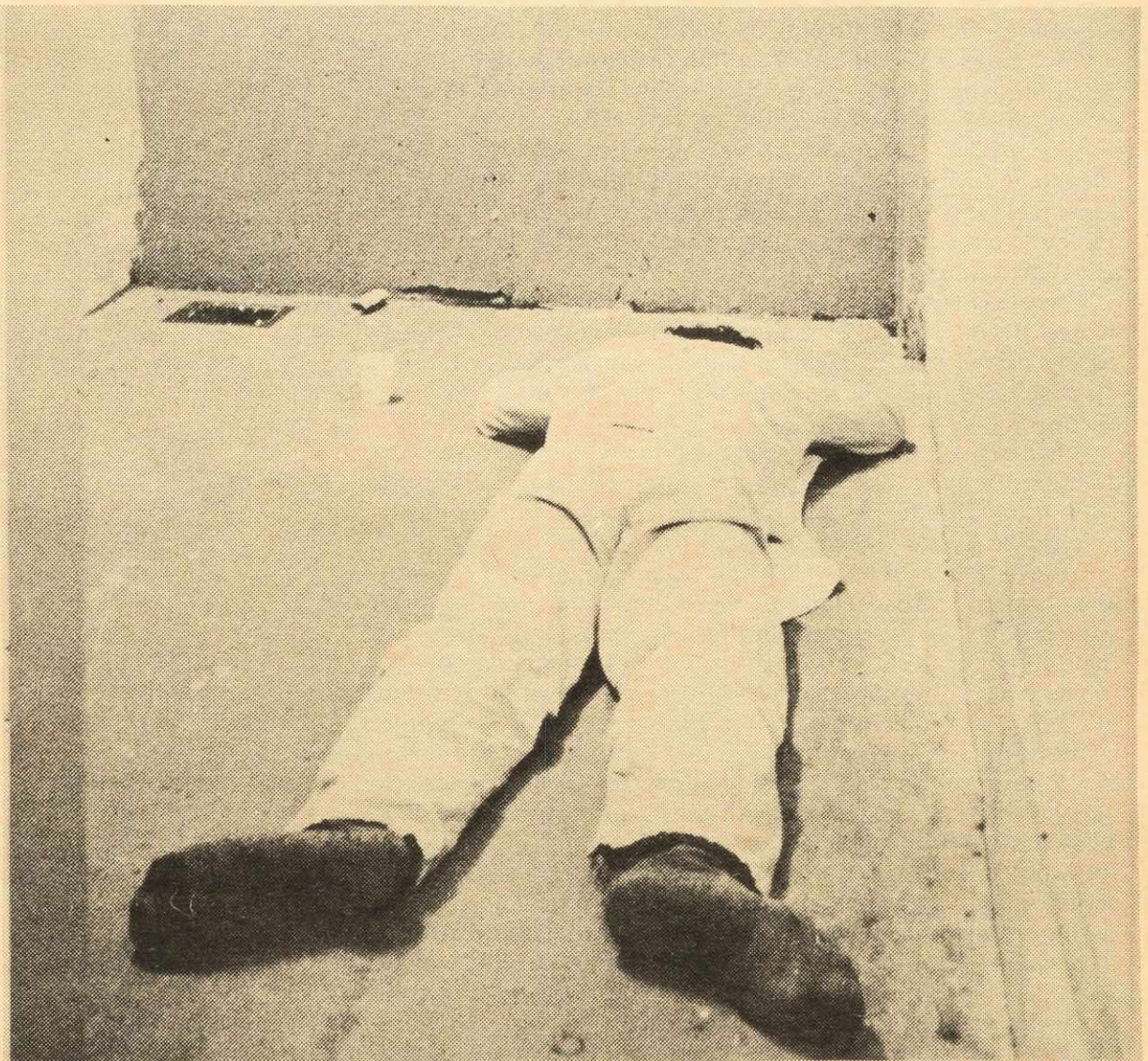
Riots, hostage-takings, shoot-outs, suicides, fires . . . Canada's prison system is in a state of chaos. In Atlantic Canada we had grim reminders of this fact during the summer. On June 21st a tragic fire at the Saint John city jail left twenty-one inmates dead. When thirteen prisoners were shot and wounded by a guard at the Dorchester Penitentiary on September 4th, the inmate population refused to return to their cells. Meanwhile out in Saskatchewan several deaths resulted from prison disturbances at Prince Albert and Regina. Last year there were no fewer than twenty-seven major incidents in Canadian prisons.

Prison riots make the headlines, but there is another frightening reality which we hear much less about: **imprisonment is simply not working as a means of dealing with criminality.** Prisoners are not being reformed, and society is not being protected. This fact was acknowledged in the recently published Report to Parliament by the Sub-Committee on the Penitentiary System in Canada. "Incarceration," the MPs said, "has failed in its two essential purposes—correcting the offender and providing permanent protection to society." That such is the case is amply demonstrated by the high rate of "recidivism", that is, the proportion of former inmates who commit further crimes and end up in jail again. The recidivism rate in Canada is as high as 80 per cent.

A World Unto Themselves

Compared with many other advanced industrial societies, Canada imprisons a large number of people. There are at present about 19,000 adult prisoners in Canada. The annual rate of incarceration is 240 per 100,000, whereas in the United Kingdom it is only 59 per 100,000. All but 450 of the Canadian prisoners are men. About 9,400 inmates are serving sentences of two years or more in federally-administered penitentiaries; the remainder are in provincial jails.

Prisons are a world unto themselves. The inmates are desperately unhappy and as a group are hostile to the most immediate representatives of the oppressive system, the guards. They have their own hierarchy and their own set of rules, which includes giving only the minimum necessary co-operation to those supervising their detention. In general inmates



"The hole." Inmates can be confined to a cell like this for weeks, months, or even years.

and guards see themselves locked into a perpetual state of opposition and confrontation: it is "them against us". Custodial staff and inmates cannot in these circumstances work toward mutually acceptable goals. As journalist Michael Enright has observed, if an inmate "is too friendly with the guards, he becomes the object of hatred or even violence by his fellow inmates. If he conforms too readily to his peers, he opens himself up to harassment from the guards and administration."

Degrading Treatment

The physical conditions of detention vary from one penal institution to another. Probably they are worst in the large, overcrowded federal penitentiaries, some of which still house prisoners in the same quarters used over a century ago. The work, educational, and recreational programmes which have been developed by well-meaning senior administrators have had little positive effect on the overall prison population. In reality the prisons do little more than confine and cause torment. Prisoners are subjected to the most degrading forms of treatment with no recourse to a grievance procedure outside the prison authorities. The Parliamentary Sub-Committee Report described practices which were until recently common at the Millhaven Institution in Kingston, Ontario: "Dogs were let loose on the inmates in the yard and in their cells. Gas was used to punish inmates frequently—in March, 1973, as often as three or four times a week. Inmates who were first shackled, sometimes hands and feet together, were then beaten with clubs, made to crawl on the floor, and finally gassed."

The Report notes that such practices have now given way to less violent forms of harassment, such as unnecessarily waking inmates during the night, adulterating their meals, not allowing them sufficient time to wash, etc. Nevertheless,

The unemployed speak

This article is a transcript of a CBC radio documentary, which was prepared by Susan Perly, and which appeared in August on the national CBC show Sunday Morning. The transcript is reproduced with the permission of Sunday Morning.

Introduction:

In parts of Canada's Maritime provinces, one family in four relies on welfare cheques, or unemployment insurance, in order to get enough money to eat. Some of the most economically depressed areas in this country are here, in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, PEI, and Newfoundland. For the people who live here, the future holds little promise. The Canadian dream has passed them by. This is especially true in the hinterlands

within the hinterlands, in areas like the North Shore of New Brunswick, in areas like Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island.

Cape Breton's unemployment rate is extremely high. The official unemployment rate for the island is called at 14.8 per cent. The actual rate is probably triple that figure.

This summer, Cape Bretoners concerned about unemployment began to publicly protest these facts. Three times, they occupied federal government offices. First, the Post Office; second, the office of Manpower and Immigration; and third, the Canada Works office. The protests were spearheaded by the Committee of Concern for the Unemployed, a loose coalition of unemployed

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