

State prisons face overpopulation

Associated Press
ELLIS PRISON FARM, Tex. — When William Harrison came back to the "old neighborhood," he found lots of changes and now he's scared to death.

The "old neighborhood" is the Ellis Unit of the Texas prison system. Harrison, a convicted murderer and three-time loser, is now worried about his safety.

The reason he worries, says Harrison, is that the Ellis unit, like most prison units in Texas, is bursting at the seams with inmates. More are arriving every day.

The more prisoners are jammed into this red-brick penal village north of Huntsville, the more trouble erupts. It follows a maxim of penal life that when prisons are overcrowded, it's the prisoners who suffer.

There are more cases of fighting now, says Harrison, an Odessa man who served here in 1967-69 and two years in the Ramsey Unit before that.

There are also more incidents involving weapons. I'm in more fear of my personal security now than the way it was before.

He paused a moment, then added: "You try not to think about things like that in a place like this, though."

However, Texas Department of Corrections officials think about it and they're worried, too.

They're worried about how they will handle an inmate population that is growing faster than even the most gloomy forecasts had predicted. They're worried about how they will feed, house and protect a prison that is exploding at the rate of more than 2,000 inmates a year, including spurts of up to 500 new inmates a month. The inmate population here has increased 42 per cent in the last six years.

Already, at several units, one-man cells are now two-man cells and three-man cells hold four inmates. Day rooms designed for 75 men must somehow accommodate 110. Laundries must operate round the clock. The food service is straining to keep up.

Land needed to grow the crops, livestock and fiber to feed and clothe the inmates will soon not be producing enough. More acreage is needed.

"We have a rated bed capacity in our 15 units of 19,504," said James Estelle, Texas Department of Corrections TDC director. "If the trend continues, by the end of the year we'll have more than 21,000. And

there's no let up in sight."

In many respects, the Texas prison system is lucky. In the "sun-belt" — the fastest growing part of the country — some prisons are at the saturation level. In Florida, more than 200 inmates are housed in tents. In Louisiana, prison officials plan to turn a ship into a floating prison. Alabama is under court order not to confine any more inmates in its prisons.

The TDC says it is run more economically than any other prison system in the country. Its average daily cost per inmate for food — 73 cents — is the envy of scores of states where the cost is \$3 a day or more.

The rate of those who return to prison in Texas is lower than other states. Recidivism is about 33 per cent, compared to many states where the rate of prison returnees is 60 per cent or greater.

However, overcrowding could change the picture for the state's prison system.

Estelle says nobody is sure why prison populations in the south have exploded. How can the trend be reversed if its cause is unknown, he said.

Among the possible causes:
 ✓ The general population increase. But Texas' population is growing only 25 per cent as fast as its prison population.
 ✓ The mood of the "free world community."

"Juries set the punishment in this state and people may have reached their tolerance level for crimes. They're giving longer and tougher sentences," Estelle said.

✓ Court pressure on county jails. Both Dallas and Harris counties are under federal court orders to improve jail conditions and reduce inmate population.

"The word has gotten around," said one prison official, and county sheriffs are dumping inmates on the TDC. After one recent court action against the Dallas jail, an official said, a neighboring county leased a bus and started hauling county prisoners to Huntsville.

"It's cheaper to buy or rent a bus than to build a new county jail," a state official said.

✓ The post-war baby boom. Nationally, about 76.4 per cent of all arrests are of persons less than 24 years of age. Currently, more than 50 per cent of the Texas inmates are under 30.

✓ Limited use of parole and probation. Some prison officials say an inadequate budget cuts down on the

number of prisoners who can be paroled.

"The TDC could be stabilized at 19,000 to 20,000 inmates," Estelle said. "It would mean the parole board would have to grant more paroles. And I'm not talking about a wholesale release of violent inmates."

A vigorous parole system in New York, which has a population roughly one-third larger than Texas, has helped keep the prison population there to 15,000, about 5,000 fewer than in Texas. Illinois, with about the same population as Texas, has 7,000 prison inmates.

For inmate Harrison and for hundreds of other prisoners, the most dramatic effect of prison crowding is in the cells, their homes in the penal neighborhood.

Most cells are smaller than a walk-in closet. One-man cells measure four feet wide, 10 feet long and nine feet high. For a bed, a metal shelf hangs on one wall, about 18 inches off the floor. It's covered with a thin mattress. A commode, with no lid, a small sink, a mirror and a bookshelf complete the appointments.

For a second prisoner in such a cell, another bed shelf above the first is bolted to the wall.

Texas' prison population has expanded so swiftly that in some units there are not enough bed shelves.

"We've had to put mattresses on the floor in some cells," said Bobby Morgan, warden of the Ferguson Unit, a prison farm north of Huntsville.

The Ferguson unit has caught the brunt of the inmate population boom. The prison farm handles ages 17 to 22, age of most first offenders. The unit was designed for 1,050 inmates. Currently it holds 1,756.

The result is "the inmates don't get as much individual attention as

they once did," Morgan said.

For their own protection, the inmates are evaluated and separated. The weak and homosexual are placed in cell blocks away from the strong.

With crowded conditions, the separations cannot be as precise, Morgan added.

The result: more fights, more homosexual abuse. Strength is the law among the lawless.

Once Morgan had a "spillway." When his inmates reached age 22 or became too mature for Ferguson, they were transferred to other units.

"We don't have that spillway anymore," he said. "The other units are filled up, too."

Morgan says what is needed is more liberal parole policy.

"If kids get a dose of this prison, it doesn't take long for them to wake up," Morgan said. "If a kid's going to wake up, he'll do it in a year as well as in two years."

Morgan, Ellis Warden R. M. Cousins and other prison officials also notice a difference nowadays in the inmates' attitudes.

"To put it into prison language, they're sorrier," Morgan said. "They're weaker, but more militant. They have less respect for authority. They're not as scared, or at least they put up a bolder front."

Cousins, whose prison includes death row and a population of nothing but high security risks, said the inmates now are "bolder. They're resenting authority a little more."

Stories in the media about other prisons, where more lenient treatment is afforded, cause many at Ellis "to get all swollen up," Cousins said.

Harrison and another inmate, Robert Farmer, 41, a two-time inmate from Dallas, said they both notice that Ellis prisoners seem "rowdier, louder and more boisterous" than inmates several years ago.

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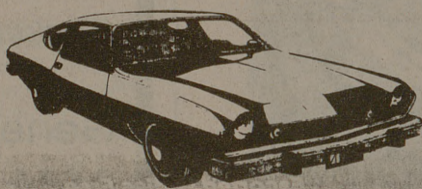
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