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THOMAS A. COUGHLIN III  
COMMISSIONER

WARD DE WITT  
ASSISTANT COMMISSIONER

DIVISION OF PROGRAM PLANNING, RESEARCH AND EVALUATION  
Frank Tracy, Director

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Director of Records and Statistical Analysis

A SURVEY OF INMATE HOMICIDES  
OCCURRING IN PRISON

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Prepared by:

David Aziz  
Program Research Specialist II

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A SURVEY OF INMATE HOMICIDES  
OCCURRING IN PRISON  
SUMMARY

One of the most dramatic measures of the stability of a prison system is the relative frequency of their staff and inmate homicides. This paper briefly examines the occurrence of inmate homicides in five major prison systems in the United States. The comparisons in this paper are between New York State, California, Texas, Florida and the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The survey shows:

- that during the 9 year period of 1976 through 1984 there were 38 inmate homicides occurring in New York State prisons, or an average of four inmate homicides per year. During the same nine year period California state prisons reported 132 inmate homicides. Thus, California had reported 3.5 inmate homicides to every one reported by New York.
- during the six year period of 1979 through 1984 the average annual rate of inmate homicides per 1,000 inmates was .16 for New York prisons; .22 Florida prisons; .34 for Texas prisons; .35 for the Federal Bureau of Prisons; and .43 for California prisons.
- by analyzing the data for both 1983 and 1984, there appeared to be a moderate association between higher staff to inmate ratios and lower numbers of inmate homicides as well as between higher proportions of longterm inmates and higher numbers of inmate homicides.

## INTRODUCTION

The most dramatic measure of the stability of a prison system is the relative frequency of its inmate and staff homicides. The violent deaths of officers and inmates are clear signals that there has been a breakdown in the orderly functioning of the prison. They are demoralizing events and can create a mood of terror which can serve to paralyze the functioning of a facility. Given the fact that many inmates have histories of violence and that the conditions of confinement can serve to precipitate violence it is not unexpected that murders do occur in prison. It is the responsibility of prison administrators to maintain the safety of staff and inmates and their ability to do so will vary with the inmate population size, the proportion of violent inmates, staff size, prison security designations, staffing stability, inmate power disputes as well as a host of other issues.

Consistent and sufficient data on the occurrence of prison homicides has not been readily available across correctional jurisdictions. The Bureau of the Census through its National Prisoners Statistics Project collects self report data from the states on inmate deaths but their definition of inmate deaths has been inconsistent over time and even recently has included accidental deaths with intentional killings. Corrections Compendium has published at least four surveys since 1981 also involving self report data on prison homicides.

## THE DATA SURVEY

By using some diverse sources it is possible to make a comparison of New York State to other jurisdictions on a number of variables including inmate homicides. The information on staff homicides is difficult to obtain so they have not been reported here, but to give some perspective to the New York experience there have only been two New York State officers killed by inmates while on duty since the 1971 Attica rebellion. By comparison in 1983 alone the Federal Bureau of Prisons had at least four officer deaths. During the Attica rebellion one officer was killed by inmates, thus making a total of three officer deaths from 1971 through 1984 in New York while California had nine officers killed between 1971 and 1980.<sup>1/</sup>

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<sup>1/</sup>Source of all New York State data is the Unusual Incident report system maintained by Division of Program Planning, Research and Evaluation of D.O.C.S. Source of Federal Bureau Data was Corrections Compendium, Vol. VIII, No. 3. Survey of Prison Violence and The United States Penitentiary, Marion Illinois Consultant's Report, Committee on the Judiciary, J.S., House of Representatives, 98th Congress, 2nd Session, December 1984. Source of California Data Management Information Section, Policy Planning Division, California Department of Corrections, cited in "The Effects of Determinant Sentencing on Inmate Misconduct in Prisons", by Martin Forst and James Brady, in The Prison Journal, .(p.108).

From 1976 through 1984 there have been thirty-eight reported inmate homicides among the inmates under the custody of New York State D.O.C.S.

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TABLE 1  
NEW YORK STATE D.O.C.S. INMATE HOMICIDES BY YEAR<sup>a/</sup>

1976	-	4
1977	-	5
1978	-	3
1979	-	3
1980	-	3
1981	-	6
1982	-	4
1983	-	3
1984	-	7
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		38

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<sup>a/</sup>Source is D.O.C.S. Report Deaths of the Incarcerated 1976-1984, by Stuart Zausner, Program Research Specialist II.

During that period the average number of homicides was four and the highest number of incidents occurred in 1984 with seven. By comparison Texas had reported 25 inmate homicides during the same year.<sup>2/</sup>

Before examining the inmate homicide data from various jurisdictions it may be instructive to look at some characteristics of those prison systems. The five systems being compared are those of New York, California, Texas, the Federal Bureau of Prisons and Florida. All five prison systems had more than 26,000 inmates as of year end 1984. Table 2 examines the prison population of the five survey jurisdictions. From 1976 through 1984, California reported the largest increase of 98% in its inmate population. The increases for both New York and Texas were similarly between 77% and 87%, while Florida's population rose by 49% and the Federal System reported a 14% increase.

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<sup>2/</sup>The Corrections Yearbook, George and Camille Camp, 1985, p. 18.

TABLE 2  
 UNDER CUSTODY POPULATION BY YEAR<sup>a/</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>New York</u>	<u>California</u>	<u>Texas</u>	<u>Federal Bureau Of Prisons</u>	<u>Florida</u>
1976	17,752	21,088	20,717	28,184	18,093
1977	19,408	19,623	22,980	32,088	19,643
1978	20,187	21,327	25,419	29,803	20,766
1979	20,855	22,628	26,522	26,233	20,133
1980	21,626	24,569	29,812	24,363	20,735
1981	25,499	29,267	31,502	28,133	23,238
1982	27,943	34,459	36,282	29,673	27,830
1983	30,537	39,360	35,259	31,926	26,334
1984	33,136	41,785	36,682	32,153	26,914
Percent Increase					
1976-1984	87%	98%	77%	14%	49%

<sup>a/</sup>Data compiled from the U.S. Justice Department annual reports on state prison populations for December 31 of the relevant calendar year and in 1984 data was supplied by The Corrections Yearbook 1985, pp. 4-7.

Table 3 examines the proportion of the inmate populations from the five sample systems who were lifers and those who had been sentenced to 20 years or more. The only empirical data relating to the propensity of long term inmates to be disproportionately involved in committing inmate homicides comes from a work in progress by this agency on homicides in New York prisons. In that study 18 assailants have been identified and of that group 50% had maximum sentences of 20 years or life while 28% had maximum sentences of 10 years or more. Table 3 shows that for both 1983 and 1984 Texas had the most long termers while New York came in second and California had the lowest percentage of long termers. During that same period, California and the Texas Prisons had the highest number of inmate homicides while Florida and New York had the lowest number. A correlation coefficient between prison homicides and the percentage of long termers in 1983 and 1984 was calculated and there was a small relationship with  $R = .19$  thus indicating some support for the proposition that higher proportions of long termers may be related to increases in prison homicides.

TABLE 3  
PERCENT OF LIFER INMATES AND INMATES  
SENTENCED TO 20 YEARS PLUS IN 1983 AND 1984<sup>a/</sup>

Prison System	Lifers		20+ Years		Combined	
	1983	1984	1983	1984	1983	1984
New York	12.0%	13.8%	6.6%	8.1%	18.6%	21.9%
California	11.3%	11.2%	.7%	2.0%	12.0%	13.2%
Texas	8.9%	8.4%	21.6%	23.4%	30.5%	31.8%
F.B O P.	2.9%	2.8%	10.5%	10.4%	13.4%	13.2%
Florida	8.5%	10.9%	7.7%	11.5%	16.2%	22.4%
U.S. Prisons						
Total Average	8.0%	8.9%	13.4%	13.5%	21.3%	22.4%

<sup>a/</sup>Source: The Corrections Yearbook, by George and Camille Camp, 1983, pp. 15-17.

Table 4 shows the number of inmates per officer in 1983 and 1984 for the five prison systems in question. For example the 2.9 figure for New York State in 1983 indicates that there are almost three inmates for every officer in the New York facilities while the Texas figure for 1983 of 9.0 indicates that there were nine inmates for every officer in Texas. (A correlation coefficient between inmate to staff ratio's and number of homicides for 1983 and 1984 showed a moderate positive relationship where  $R = .30$ )<sup>3/</sup> This finding suggests that an increase in the ability of a correctional agency to supervise its inmates can serve to decrease the number of inmate homicides occurring among inmates in that system. Of course this finding is limited by the fact that only five correctional systems were surveyed for only two twelve month periods. The calculation of these correlation values for each individual calendar year (1983 = .83 while 1984 = .34) shows the variability in this relationship and thus relevant conclusions about the association between these variables should be considered tentative.

TABLE 4  
INMATE TO LINE LEVEL  
NON-SUPERVISORY CORRECTION OFFICERS  
RATIO IN 1983 AND 1984<sup>a/</sup>

Prison System	Number of Inmates Per Staff Member	
	1983	1984
New York D.O.C.S.	2.9	3.2
California	7.1	6.9
Texas	9.0	5.5
Federal Bureau of Prisons	8.7	9.1
Florida	7.6	4.8
U.S. Prisons Total Average	5.8	5.0

<sup>a/</sup>Source: The Corrections Yearbook, by George and Camille Camp, 1983, pp. 46-47.

<sup>3/</sup>From the book Prison Homicide by Sylvester, Reed and Nelson (1973) p. 66 we see that of the 43 prisons where homicides occurred 70% (N=30) occurred in prisons with ratios of inmates to staff higher than four inmates to one staff member.

Tables 5 and 6 provide some dramatic evidence as to the relatively low number of inmate homicides in New York State when compared to the other systems in this study. Table 5, which compares California and New York homicides, shows that the California rate was more than three times the rate of homicides in New York. According to Table 6 the number of inmate homicides in New York has been consistently lower than the number of inmate homicides in prison systems of comparable size.

TABLE 5  
CALIFORNIA AND NEW YORK INMATE HOMICIDES  
BY YEAR<sup>a/</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>California</u>	<u>New York</u>
1976	17	4
1977	16	5
1978	13	3
1979	16	3
1980	13	3
1981	16	6
1982	14	4
1983	11	3
1984	16	7
	<u>132</u>	<u>38</u>

<sup>a/</sup> Source of New York data is the Unusual Incident Reporting System and the Health Services Unit of the Department of Correctional Services. Source for California data is the Census Bureau Reports on National Prisoner Statistics collected from States on Form NPS-1.

TABLE 6  
INMATE HOMICIDES BY YEAR<sup>a/</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>New York</u>	<u>California</u>	<u>Texas</u>	<u>Federal Bureau Of Prisons</u>	<u>Florida</u>
1979	3	16	(N/A)	16	7
1980	3	13	3	7	8
1981	6	16	11	13	4
1982	4	14	12	8	6
1983	3	11	9	11	7
1984	7	16	25	13	1
TOTAL	26	86	60	68	33

<sup>a/</sup> Source of New York data is the Unusual Incident Reporting System and the Health Services Unit of the Department of Correctional Services. Source for other data is the Census Bureau Reports on National Prisoner Statistics collected from States on Form NPS-1.