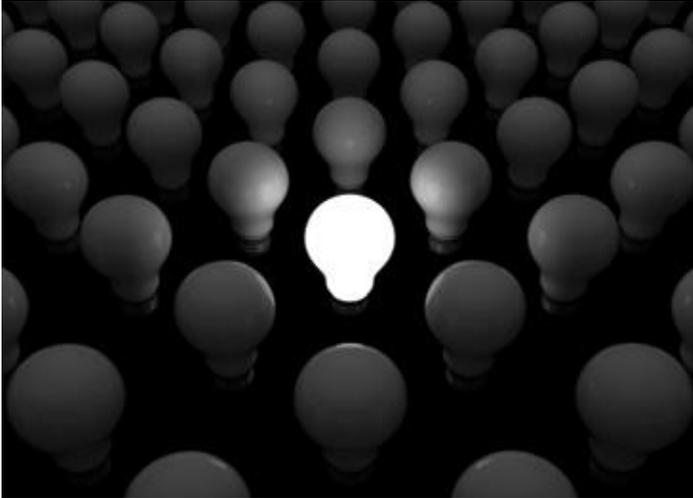


## Behind the walls

By Brian Dawe

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*Editor's note: Corrections veteran, Brian Dawe, provides a hard and realistic look at the challenges COs face today. This article was previously published in American Cop magazine.*

Most of what the public believes about correctional officers comes from old Jimmy Cagney movies, ridiculous and brutal shows like HBO's "OZ," or the highly popular "Prison Break." Prison movies such as "The Shawshank Redemption" and "Alcatraz" often portray us as crueler than the inmates themselves. More often than not some malicious "guard" or

unscrupulous warden is the ultimate bad guy in these depictions.

The only movie I have seen in the past 30 years that even came close to portraying us with any accuracy was "The Green Mile", and even then the most despicable person in that movie was a CO. I find it sadly ironic that only in a story written by the nation's premiere horror writer are we portrayed with any sense of truthfulness. Only in a horror movie, in someone's worst nightmare, are we the "good guys." This is an image that has done more damage to my profession than most people realize or care to admit.

When I was growing up, like most kids my friends and I often spent our days playing cowboys and Indians, soldier, fireman, and cops and robbers. Yet, never once can I recall locking my friends in the basement and playing correctional officer. In fact, after over 23 years working in corrections I can honestly say I have never met anyone in my line of work who planned to become a CO.

That, I believe, is one of the reasons why my profession is one of the most misunderstood and under appreciated in the nation. We often come to it by way of economic necessity, after a military career, or as a stepping stone to other more "respected" careers in law enforcement.

Our military men and women, our police officers and our firefighters are all highly visible members of the public safety community. Our parents taught us to respect the police, to admire our firefighters and to honor the military. No one ever mentioned how we should feel about correctional officers, except, of course, Hollywood and the headline seeking media.

I contend that rather than being looked upon as the doormat of the law enforcement matrix we should be hailed as the backbone. The men and women who do our job are the unseen heroes of law enforcement. Everyday we go to work in a society where all the citizens are felons, and we do it mostly unarmed, undermanned, ill-equipped and often with inadequate training.

Each year in this nation more than 33,000 COs are assaulted. In the last year, records were released on the prosecution rates of those assaults; it was revealed that only 10.9 percent resulted in prosecutions. Yet more than 20 percent of the officers assaulted required medical attention. How loud would the public outcry be if only one in ten assaults on our city streets were prosecuted when the assailant was clearly identified

What would the morale be like in our police departments if only one in ten assaults of our nation's police officers were prosecuted? What would our communities be like if the criminal element knew they had only a one in ten chance of being prosecuted, even if we knew who they were and could prove they committed the assault?

The number and severity of the assaults we are seeing behind the walls has dramatically increased in the past decade. In the past six years, 47 of our brothers and sisters have died in the line of duty. With continued overcrowding, understaffing and the advent of more and more violent gang members being incarcerated, it's only going to continue to get worse. Nevertheless, assaults are hardly the only problem we face.

Behind the walls, the AIDS/HIV rate is more than three times higher than on the streets. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that at year end 2003, there were 23,659 inmates who tested positive for HIV, with nearly 6,000 confirmed cases of full blown AIDS. Yet in many jurisdictions officers are denied access to inmate medical histories— even if they have come in contact with bodily fluids as a result of performing their jobs. From 1996 to 2001, we saw a 958 percent increase in the number of inmates detected with TB, and currently more than 25 percent of the inmate population is estimated to be infected with Hepatitis C.

As a result of budget cuts and the closing of many state mental institutions, more than, 200,000 inmates now in our care suffer from major depression and the National Commission on Correctional Health estimates that anywhere from 22,000 to 44,000 are schizophrenic.

Regardless of these horrendous conditions we work under, every day more than 400,000 of us punch the clock and go to work in our nation's hellholes. At some of our facilities, raincoats have become standard issue behind the walls to protect us from being "gassed." (In prison parlance being "gassed" is when an inmate combines urine, feces, semen, vomit, mucus, blood and whatever other bodily fluid they can collect and throw it in our faces.)

Is it any wonder that as a result of these conditions we have the second highest mortality rate of any occupation in the nation, or that on average our last birthday is our 58th, and that we have a 39 percent higher risk of suicide than any other profession? You'd think it couldn't get much worse, but it does.

One of the most depressing issues facing my profession today, and one that illustrates just how far we have yet to go, is the lack of recognition and respect we receive from our own brothers and sisters in the law enforcement community. In Colorado, the Law Enforcement Memorial Committee refuses to allow the names of correctional officers who have been killed in the line of duty to be placed on the law enforcement memorial wall. What happened? Did the inmates all of a sudden become good guys when they went to jail? The same convicts that murdered their fellow officers also murder mine. Why is it any different?

There are many who believe that correctional officers are not law enforcement officers. I wonder if they

would be willing to deal with hundreds of convicted murderers, rapists, child molesters, gang-bangers and armed robbers with nothing but a side handle baton. In the housing unit where I worked in Massachusetts I alone oversaw 44 convicted felons.

For protection I had my training, a one way radio, and a pen. In Pennsylvania one of the most powerful police organizations in the nation actively sought, and indeed did help to kill, legislation that would have granted Peace Officer status to Pennsylvania State correctional officers. If passed, the bill would have meant better training, better equipment and more recognition for those Correctional Officers. Why the opposition?

We have a deep respect in my profession for the police in our communities; it is unfortunate that this respect is all too often not reciprocated. Nevertheless, it's not all bad news. As is evident by the recognition we receive from the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund and their Chairman Craig Floyd, we are making progress. The NLEOMF does recognize and memorialize COs killed in the line of duty each year in Washington, DC at their annual memorial service.

It is my hope that many of you who have read this article, and who find yourself at odds with the contention that we are an important part of the public safety matrix and law enforcement community, will think long and hard about that misconception.

We ask that you remember this: we know the police catch them, but COs are the ones who keep them. It's all about protecting the public, and we are all in this together.

*Brian Dawe is co-founder of the American Correctional Officer Intelligence Network. He also is a founding member of Corrections USA and served as their Executive Director until August, 2006. He has been in corrections for more than 24 years, and served as a Massachusetts CO from 1982 to 1998. Dawe co-founded the Massachusetts Correctional Officers Federated Union where he served on the statewide Executive Board for nine years, and served as Grievance Coordinator, Executive Secretary and Vice President. He can be reached at [ACOIN1@aol.com](mailto:ACOIN1@aol.com).*

Other articles by Dawe:

[Turning off the hot wire, 12/13/07](http://www.corrections.com/news/article/17333) <http://www.corrections.com/news/article/17333>