America: Two snapshots of the brutal society

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The "business" of incarceration

Officials from the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections have temporarily taken over management of a privately run 620-bed juvenile prison following the resignation of warden David Bonnette.

Located in the northeast corner of the state, near the Mississippi border, Tallulah Correction Center for Youth is a for-profit prison run by Trans-American Development Associates. The warden resigned after 12 inmates filed a lawsuit asserting that offenders are frequently beaten by guards or assaulted by other inmates who have been bribed by corrections officers. A series of investigative reports have revealed abusive and inhuman treatment of young people housed there.

According to the reports, juvenile detainees received no education at the facility, lacked proper diet and were given no professional assistance for mental problems. Those allegedly beaten had bruises over many parts of their bodies. Such horrors, unfortunately, are no longer the exception, but are occurring more frequently as private companies take control of state institutions and run them to maximize profits.

The owners of Trans-American reportedly have close ties to former Governor Edwin W. Edwards. In an effort to reassure the company and all concerned, Richard Stalder, secretary of the Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections, returned Bonnette to his former post at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola.

The poor told: "Set up a sprinkler ... sleep outside on your porch"

Michigan welfare recipients to be denied air-conditioning

Michigan Governor John Engler is expected to sign into law a state budget containing a provision prohibiting state funds to be used to install, maintain or repair air-conditioning--including both central and room units--for families receiving welfare payments. Only those recipients over the age of 55, or those with a "certified medical condition" requiring air-conditioning, would be exempt from the ban.

Sen. David Jaye (R-Washington Twp.), a well-known right-winger who authored the provision, said: "Taxpayers are required to feed, clothe and educate welfare recipients, they shouldn't be forced to refrigerate them, too." A paragraph calling for the ban on air-conditioning funds is part of Michigan's $1 billion "Family Independence Agency" 1998-99 budget, which would go into effect October 1. It would be the first such ban in the US.

Following more than 130 heat-related deaths across the southern US in recent weeks due to drought and heat, the measures seem particularly vindictive. Opponents of the legislation note that many landlords may interpret "maintenance" of air-conditioning as operation of systems or units that are included in tenants' monthly rent, and cut off cooling altogether. Under these conditions, small children, pregnant women and those who cannot obtain a medical waiver will be most endangered.

Sen. Jaye's advice? "There are other ways to keep cool. You can set up a sprinkler, use a box fan, sleep outside on your porch." Ridiculous advice for residents living in poor, working class areas who are in many cases afraid to sleep at night with their windows open, for fear of theft or violence.

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