

Prison riot in California

Budget crisis to make inhumane conditions worse

Niall Green
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On Saturday night, August 8, hundreds of inmates of the medium-security Chino Institute for Men in Southern California took part in a riot that wrecked part of the prison.

The rioting began in one of the prison's 200-man reception centers, which process inmates scheduled to be relocated. Fighting then spread to other areas of the prison. Rival groups of prisoners assembled barricades and, having quickly overwhelmed the guards, inmates attacked each other with shards of glass and clubs fashioned from broken tables and beds. After one failed attempt, specially armed prison officers retook control on Sunday morning.

Some 175 inmates were injured in the fighting, with 55 requiring hospitalization. No guards were reported injured. Ten of the state's 33 prisons were put on lockdown following the riot. Around 1,000 prisoners had to be moved from damaged areas of the prison to be housed either in tents or in other already overcrowded facilities.

The 12-hour riot was allegedly sparked by longstanding tensions between black and Hispanic prison gangs. Exacerbating these problems, the prison, like others in the state, was attempting to end the practice of automatically segregating prisoners on the basis of race. The provision of accommodation to prisoners along racial lines has existed in California for over 30 years, having been introduced in an attempt to manage what was even then a massive prison population in which there was a rising toll of deaths and injuries caused by fighting between gangs. Many commentators have pointed out that the practice has increased the power of gangs over "their" respective ethnic groups within prisons.

In 2005 the Supreme Court ordered California to end

the systematic racial segregation of prisoners. But without adequate resources to carry out the change, and with massively overcrowded prisons, racial tensions have only increased.

The events in Chino provide another tragic example of the brutal conditions that exist in the vast penal system in California (and across the United States), which has a prison population of over 145,000 housed in facilities designed to hold just 68,000.

The Chino Institute itself was meant to contain a maximum of 3,000 inmates. At the time of the riots however, 5,900 were incarcerated there. Prison authorities and the state were warned in a November 2007 report by Texas State Department of Corrections Director Wayne Scott that the facility was dangerously overcrowded.

Don Specter, a California prisoners' rights attorney, recently said of the prison, "There's just too many prisoners in that building, too few staff, and some of the staff can't even see because there are walls separating the prisoners from the staff. There's no possible way you can provide adequate security in those kind of units."

An August 10 article in the *New York Times* reported that inspections conducted since 2006 revealed that the facility had, in addition to a history of "dangerous overcrowding and riots...a record of poor maintenance [and] shoddy safety protocols."

The state of California has one of the highest incarceration rates in the world. However, its rate is normal by the US average of 509 prison inmates per 100,000 residents in the country, according to 2008 figures from the Department of Justice. Including people held in local jails, this figure rises to around 750 for every 100,000 in the US general population.

Across the United States one in every 18 adult males

is either in federal, state or local prison or being monitored on probation or parole. This represents a huge increase in the number of people within the corrections systems over the past two decades, despite a 25 percent drop in recorded crime between 1988 and 2008.

The US has just 5 percent of the world's population but nearly one-quarter of its prisoners and the situation for minorities is especially bad. According to the US Bureau of Justice Statistics, as of June 2008, blacks were almost five times more likely than whites and three times more likely than Hispanics to be in jail.

The hellish conditions and meager training programs in California's prisons are set to get worse as the state government plans to cut \$1.2 billion from the corrections budget. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has committed to cutting the number of prison staff by 5,000 and eliminating almost all of the already inadequate education, training and support services for inmates.

The prison cuts arrive in the middle of a deep budget crisis. The state has an estimated total shortfall of \$40 billion over the 2008-2010 period brought on by the collapse in revenues from income and property taxes caused by the recession combined with the unwillingness of outside investors to continue purchasing state bonds and other securities. More than \$16 billion in cuts to social spending for fiscal year 2009-2010 alone were implemented in July by Schwarzenegger in collaboration with state Democrats and Republicans.

A federal three-judge court ruled earlier this month that overcrowding and poor quality health facilities caused or contributed to one avoidable inmate death in California every week. As a result, the panel demanded that California cut its prison population by 40,000 over the next two years, citing the Eighth Amendment's prohibition of cruel or unusual treatment. The Schwarzenegger administration has proposed cutting inmate numbers by 27,000 in order to save money.

Barry Krisberg, president of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in Oakland, said the riot at Chino was symptomatic of the problems in the state's prison system, a situation that was going to get worse due to impending cuts.

"There are proposals to eliminate all programs including reducing visiting days for inmates

participating in programs," Krisberg commented. "But if you isolate these men from their families and cut down even the most basic educational and counseling programs, you're going to create more idleness, and this is what happens."

The vast network of prisons in America provides enormous profits for private companies, which either run facilities outright or benefit from providing services such as catering. The US spends \$60 billion per year on prisons, generating huge revenues for three companies in particular, Corrections Corporation of America, GEO Group, and Cornell Companies. Corrections Corporation of America saw its operating income increase by over \$300 million in 2008 to \$1.6 billion.



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