



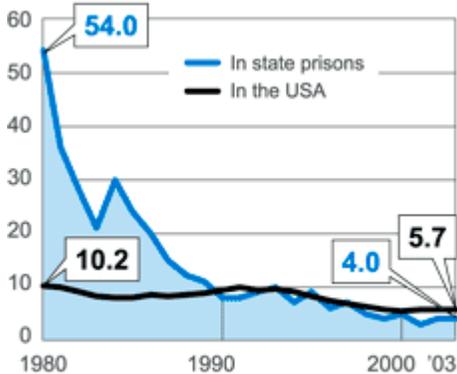
Wardens across the nation are succeeding in driving down the violence in prisons, including by changing security measures. Pictured is Greene Correctional Facility in Cossackie, N.Y.

By Denise DeVore, for USA TODAY

Updated 8/24/2008 5:04 PM

SAFER IN PRISON

Homicide rates in state prisons have fallen over the past three decades. (Homicide rate per 100,000)



Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics

By Julie Snider, USA TODAY

States work to curb prison violence

By Alan Gomez, USA TODAY

Serving time in prison isn't supposed to be easy. Surviving prison should be.

That wasn't the case during much of the 1970s and '80s, during which time a prison riot in Attica, N.Y., left 43 dead and a riot in Santa Fe left 33 dead.

As recently as 1980, the murder rate in prison was nearly five times as great as in the general population.

"It was certainly a rougher time, where your emphasis was more on reprisal, retribution, punishment," said Shelby County (Tenn.) Sheriff Mark Luttrell, a former warden at three federal prisons and a member of the Commission on Safety and Abuse in America's Prisons. "We were a rudderless ship there for years and years without oversight."

Faced with such staggering figures, corrections officers around the country quietly began changing their tactics. One by one, they took new approaches to handling gangs, using solitary confinement and dealing with inmates' mental-health issues.

The result: From 2000 to 2003, the last year for which statistics are available, the homicide rate in prison remained below the national average, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

"We finally decided to take back control of our prisons," said Sergio Molina, a 22-year corrections officer in the Illinois Department of Corrections and a former warden.

Like other government agencies, corrections departments are facing budget shortfalls that have led to staff shortages and overcrowding. The worst case is in California, where Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger says they have 100,000 prison beds to hold more than 170,000 inmates. Yet prison homicides have maintained a steady, downward trend, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Bert Useem, a sociology professor at Purdue University in Indiana who



By Denise DeVore, for USA TODAY

New York state prisons Commissioner Brian Fischer has focused on dealing with inmates' anger

has studied the issue, said there was no national drive to combat prison violence. Wardens each saw the violence in their prisons and decided to try new approaches.

"I think the forecast (of continuing violence) itself played a role in moving people to take seriously the problem of violence in prison," Useem said.

Although wardens across the country have adopted a variety of programs to spark a decline in prison murders, some general tactics have emerged:

- Gang violence inside prisons has long been a major source of homicides, said Michelle Lyons with the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. In the mid-1980s, Texas began pulling confirmed gang members out of the general population and placing them in solitary confinement, Lyons said. The drop in murders was almost immediate.

"It correlates almost directly with when we started segregating all the gang members," she said.

In 1984-85, Texas had 52 homicides in its prisons, Lyons said. Since 2000, there have been 36.

Other states are now using similar practices in dealing with gang members. In Illinois, corrections officials separate gang leaders from the general prison population.

"We've basically cut the head off that monster," Molina said. "They may not have been the ones perpetrating the violence, but they were involved in calling the shots."

- Corrections officials also changed security measures to combat violence.

Maximum-security cells used to have curtains for privacy, but Molina said those were removed to eliminate the secrecy needed to commit violent acts. Inmates can no longer wear personal clothing, which eliminates the ability to identify one another through gang colors.

Guards closely monitor cell and work assignments to ensure that groups of violent offenders are kept apart.

- New York State Department of Correctional Services Commissioner Brian Fischer said prison officials rarely considered that inmates committing violent acts were suffering from mental problems. So he focused on that while serving as warden of Sing Sing Correctional Facility and later as department commissioner.

"We've been more successful nationally dealing with the anger that many people come to prison with," Fischer said. He instituted group therapy programs and anger-management classes, which helped give inmates — and guards — a better understanding of why they became violent.

He said studies have found that most violent acts for inmates come in the first five years of their incarceration as they struggle to adjust to prison life, and the last five, when they experience anxiety about returning to society.

Understanding those kinds of issues has helped New York's prisons go from an average of three murders a year in the 1990s to one murder a year in the 2000s.

"There was a recognition that we just can't continue to do what we always did before, and that is put them all together and pretend that they all get along," Fischer said.

Posted 8/21/2008 10:17 PM

Updated 8/24/2008 5:04 PM