

KIDS BEHIND BARS

# Problems at ‘Punk Prison’ — ‘They’re breedin’ killers here’

► *The understaffed facility is ill-equipped to handle — or help — young criminals.*

FIRST IN A SERIES

By Ken Kolker  
The Grand Rapids Press

BALDWIN — Teen-age prisoners armed with imaginary guns stand in a tight circle in the yard.

A prisoner aims a make-believe shotgun at the boy across from him. He pumps. It misfires. His target flinches. He pumps again and again. It misfires both times.

An inmate across the circle pulls an invisible handgun from the waistband of his blue-and-orange prison uniform.

“Bam. I’m going to blow his head off,” he says, then fires it at an inmate’s head. The gunman rolls his head back and laughs.

This is yard time at the state’s first and only private prison, officially known as the Michigan Youth Correctional Facility.

Most violent teen-agers convicted as adults are sent to this maximum-security facility, dubbed the “Punk Prison” when it was proposed by Gov. John Engler.

Under laws in effect since January 1997, judges across Michigan are locking up kids as young as 14 in adult prisons. But not all the inmates are laughing. And neither are the guards.

“They’re breedin’ killers here,” barks an inmate in the yard. “They’re just getting us ready for the Big House.”

A five-month investigation by The Press found that the state prison system is ill-equipped to handle these kids.

In reviewing hundreds of pages of prison documents obtained under the Freedom of Information Act and through interviews with guards and former guards, inmates, their families, victims and prison officials, The Press found that:

- The youth prison — which houses boys and young men under age 20 — is more violent than the state’s six adult maximum-security prisons. Young inmates at the 450-bed prison, which opened in July, attack the guards, attack each other and try to kill themselves.
- At least five guards have suffered serious injuries at the hands of inmates armed with mop handles, broomsticks and padlocks.
- More than a dozen prisoners, including three from Kent County, have tried to kill themselves. They’ve hung themselves with sheets and towels, placed plastic bags over their heads, and slashed their wrists with razor blades and broken glass.
- Corrections officers at the prison, run by a Florida company, complain the prison is so understaffed they’ve been



PRESS PHOTO/CHRIS CLARK

Inmates at Michigan Youth Correctional Facility near Baldwin stand outside during yard time.

PROBLEMS IN THE PUNK PRISON

The Michigan Youth Correctional Facility near Baldwin is a tough place, with 110 serious incidents from when the so-called Punk Prison opened in late July through the end of last year:



Assaults on staff: 17	Sexual assaults: 2
Fights/assaults on inmates: 27	Escape attempt: 1
Suicide attempts: 12	Insolence: 22
Possession of weapons: 5	Others: 20
Drug overdoses: 4	Total critical incidents: 110

Source: Critical incident reports on file at the state Department of Corrections.

INSIDE

- Life on the other side of razor ribbon. **A19**
- Wackenhut Corrections, the Florida company that runs the youth prison, has seen violence at other facilities. **A20**
- Youth prison worker is investigated after being suspected of having sex with inmates. **A20**
- Suicide attempts are common in the youth prison. **A21.**

SERIES AT A GLANCE

**TODAY:** Inmates attack other inmates, they attack guards, and they try to kill themselves. The new Michigan Youth Correctional Facility near Baldwin is more violent than the state’s six adult maximum-security prisons.

**MONDAY:** Guards fear for their lives in the youth prison.

**TUESDAY:** A 15-year-old boy shares a cell with a 20-year-old robber and he’s raped.

**WEDNESDAY:** Nearly three-quarters of the juveniles in prison are minorities. Some cry racism.

**THURSDAY:** Two teen-age killers need help. But are they getting it?

forced to work 70-hour weeks. Guard posts have been left unmanned. Once, they were locked into the prison at the end of their shift and forced to work.

Guards said they’ve witnessed other guards taunting kids into assaulting them. The prison warden acknowledged

firing some guards for “abusing” inmates, including taunting.

“Somebody’s going to get killed,” said former guard Susan Hogenson, the daughter of a retired Mason County sheriff’s deputy. She said the stress of 70-hour weeks forced her to quit in February. “They’re putting the lives of these kids and these officers in danger.”

- A 15-year-old boy serving time for breaking into a home never made it to the youth prison. Instead, he was raped

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