

## KIDS BEHIND BARS



# Glittering razor wire is only sparkle in stark surroundings

► Behind the fences, cinder block and metal doors define the atmosphere of "Punk Prison."

The Grand Rapids Press

BALDWIN — From the outside, the Michigan Youth Correctional Facility could be a school — if you look past the watch towers and the rolls of shiny razor wire.

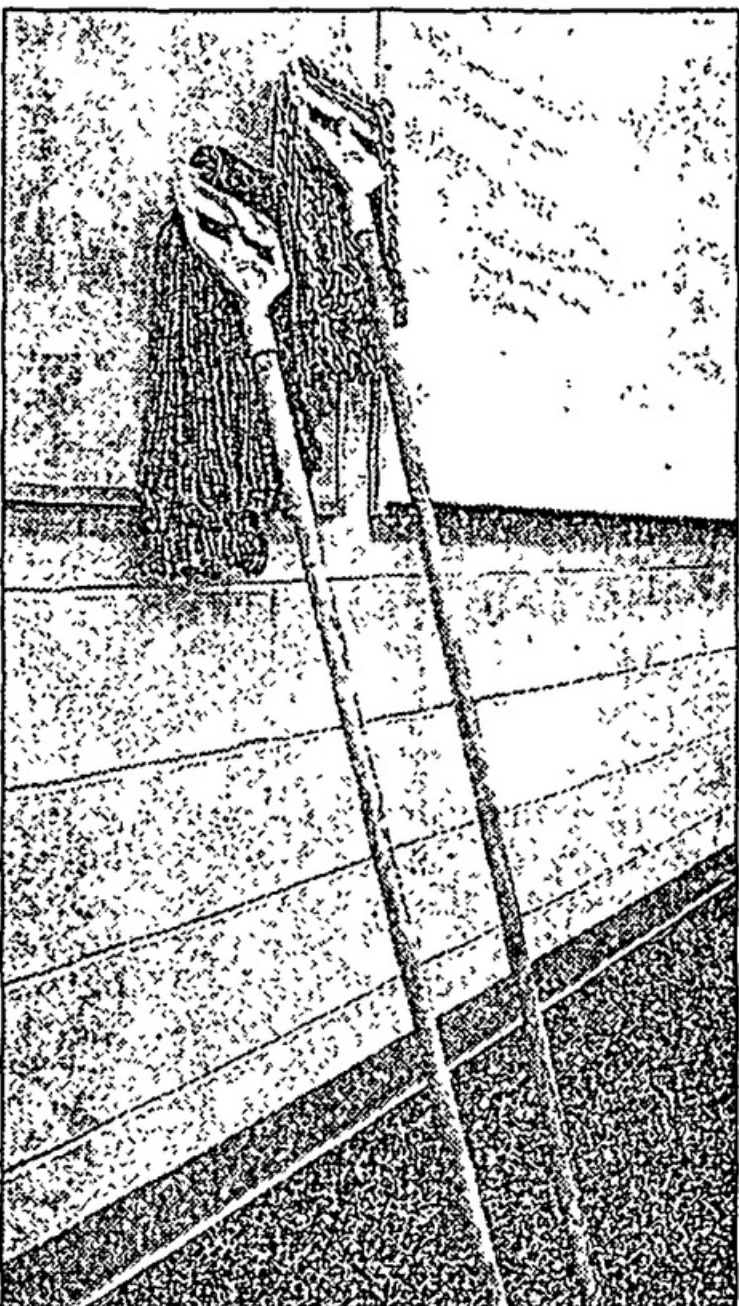
The 163,251-square-foot facility — nicknamed the "Punk Prison" by Gov. John Engler — occupies 100 acres along a gravel road in a pine forest across from a junkyard.

Inside, a visitor first notices the noise. Every voice is followed by an echo, frequently drowned out by the slamming of metal doors. The echoes bounce off cinder-block walls, tall ceilings and shiny floors.

Each of the prison's two housing units is shaped like a daisy, with a control room in the center, where a guard electronically opens and closes cell doors. Five pods sprout like flower petals off each control room. Each pod is two stories with 25 cells. In all but one pod, the cells have two beds.

In most pods, there's one guard and 50 inmates.

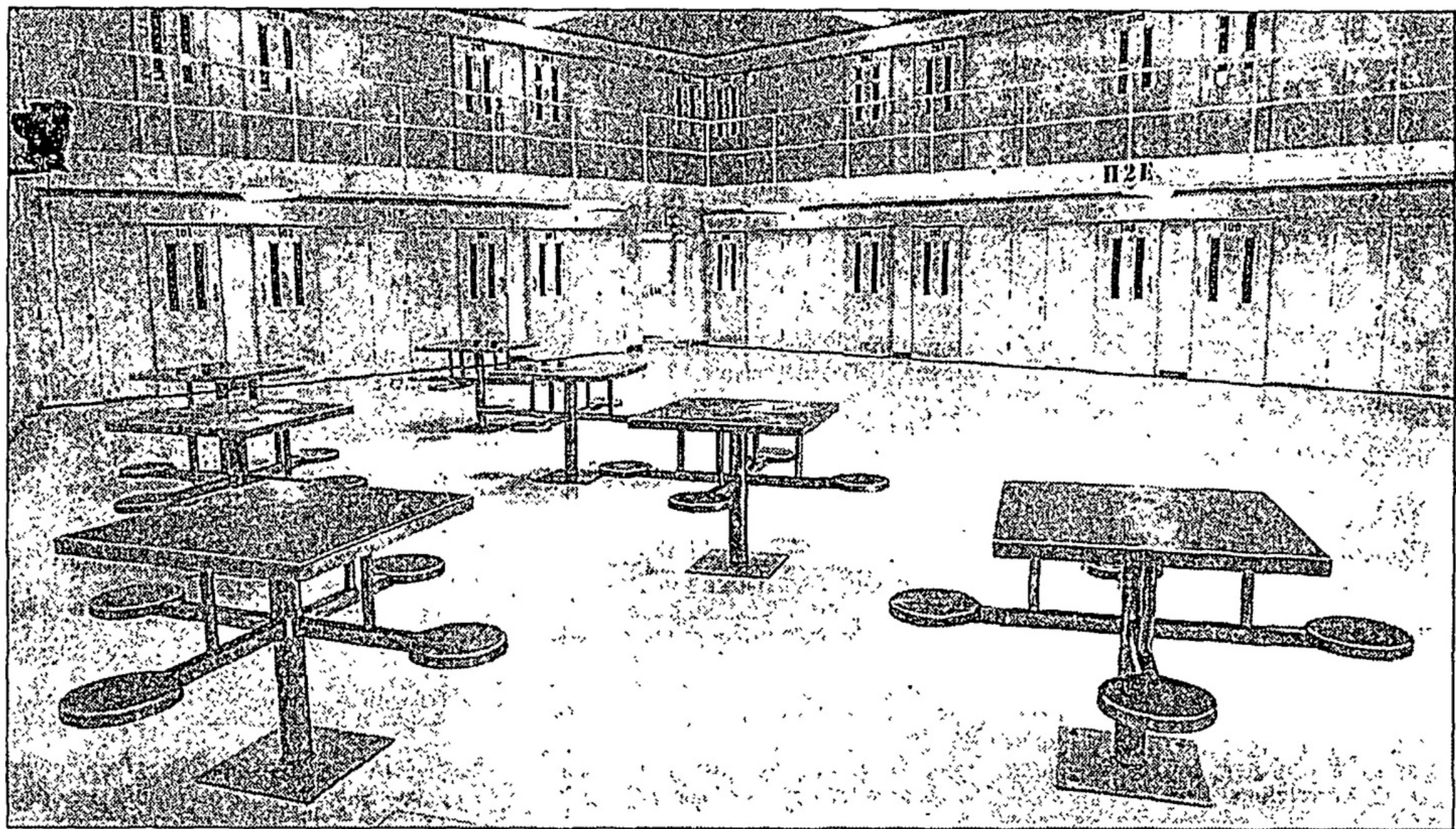
A guard stationed in the corner of each pod uses hand signals to communicate with the control-room guard. After lunch, the guards signal to open the doors.



A janitorial class is the only vocational education at the Baldwin prison, though officials hope to add a computer class.

It's yard time.

For many prisoners, this is as close as they'll get to freedom for years — 45 minutes outside.



These housing pods in the Baldwin youth prison usually house 50 inmates each.

A flat football wobbles in an arc between two inmates. It's been flat since it hit the razor ribbon atop the 16-foot-high fences that surround the yard. The other football is flat, too.

The curled razor ribbon sparkles in the sun liked twisted icicles. Lt. Sharon Whalen, who stands in the yard with inmates, says it looks beautiful in the winter when it's coated with frost.

Some inmates walk in packs around the paved oval track or stand in packs scattered across the football-field sized yard. Their hands are tucked into the front of their prison-issue pants. Baseball caps are turned backwards.

Joshua Jackson, 18, stands on the outside of a circle of a half-dozen prisoners. His white shaved head reflects the sun.

He has his hands deep in his pockets.

Jackson will be locked up until at least 2014, perhaps through 2030, for trying to kill somebody in Berrien County. He likely will serve his next two years here. State law requires prisoners be moved before they turn 20.

He complains to a reporter about the cockroaches. "We just kids; ain't supposed to be no cockroaches."

A guard suggests there wouldn't be cockroaches if the kids weren't such pigs. Jackson tries to join the inmates in the small circle as a photographer starts taking pictures of them. He wants his picture taken for the newspaper. Move, they said, joking that his backside would take up the whole picture. They roll their heads back, laughing.

Guards stand nearby, armed only with radios. From watch towers standing like opposing castles on a chessboard, more guards — with rifles and shotguns — look over these boys. Another armed guard patrols the perimeter in a white Jeep Cherokee.

Inmate David Watkins, 19, of Grand Rapids, is serving 2 to 10 years for fleeing police in a stolen car that crashed and injured two people. He later violated probation when police caught him with three \$10 bags of marijuana and a large knife tucked in the waistband of his jeans. His first parole date is May 2.

At yard time, he complains to a guard that the prison still has no anger-management classes, then shrugs, "It doesn't matter. I'll be leaving here soon."

## PRISON

Young inmates require more patience, warden says

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"the cell doors, creating quite a disturbance, and we got them settled down," Rector testified in court.

Faustino called Rector over to his second-floor cell. He'd been hurt, he told Rector, who noticed a red spot on his face.

As an officer in the control center opened the door to Cell 204, Faustino smashed Rector in the face and ribs with a padlock clenched in his fist. Rector was treated at the prison's medical unit.

Kids are kids

Prison violence is nothing new for Wackenhut, which operates 39 prisons in North America, Europe and Australia. Guards call it "the company."

Since late 1998, inmates at Wackenhut prisons have noted, killed a guard, and stabbed and beaten each other to death. Guards at one of its Texas prisons were indicted in December on charges of sexually assaulting female inmates, and the U.S. Department of Justice recently accused guards at its New Orleans prison of abusing, mistreating and humiliating young inmates.

Martin, the Michigan prison director, said he is aware Wackenhut is getting "whacked" around the country for some of its prisons.

"It concerns me," he said. "That's why we have an on-site monitor (at the youth prison). That's why one person is assigned to oversee the contract. ... That's why nothing gets done unless it comes through me. No additional inmates are going there until I say they're ready for more inmates."

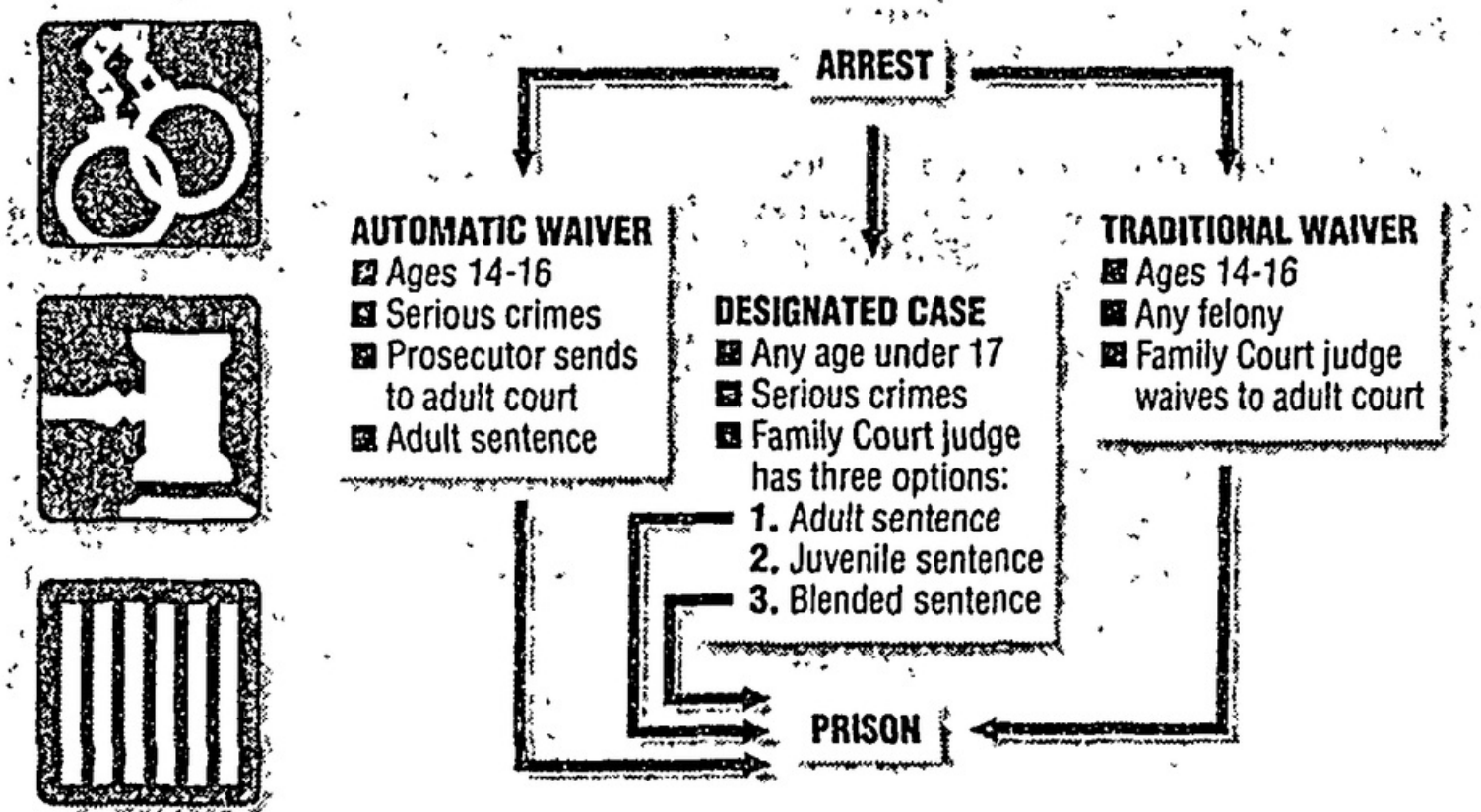
Wackenhut had expected to fill the prison — adding 120 or so inmates — by late March. The state won't send more prisoners there until the company can hire more guards, Martin said.

"If something were to happen (at the youth prison), we'll look back at it and say all the pieces were in place, that we didn't cut the corners because they were a corporation or privatized," Martin said. Youth prison Warden Dave Trippett acknowledged there is more trouble inside the walls — including suicide attempts — than at other state prisons.

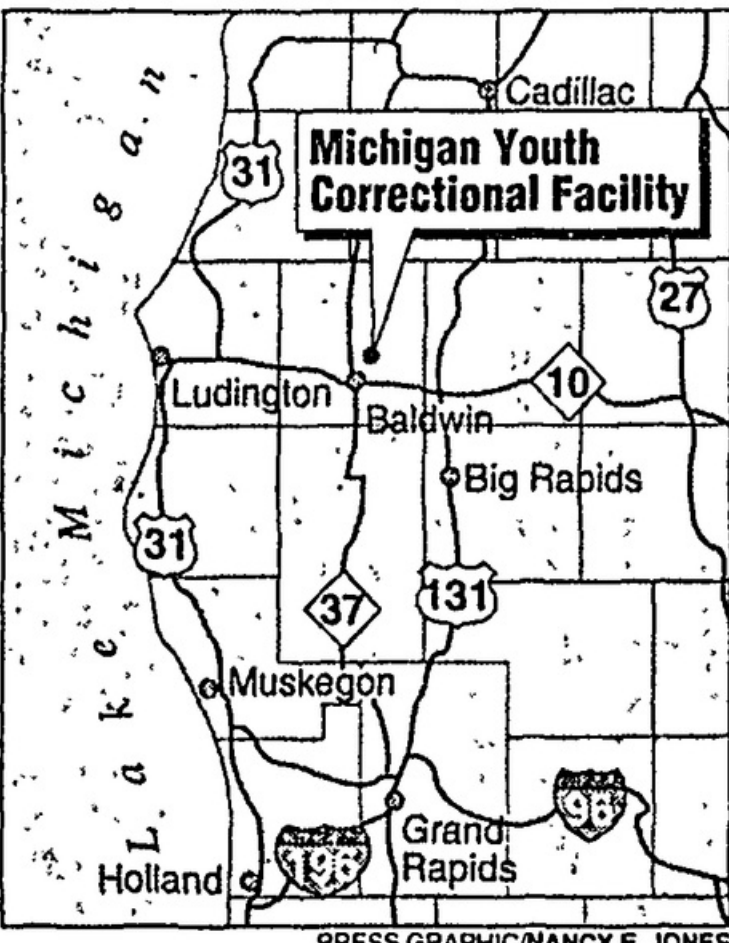
Trippett, a former All-American football player at Hillsdale College, started

### PATHS TO PRISON

A state law that went into effect in 1997 provides three ways for a child to reach the adult prison system. A suspect's age and the seriousness of the offense determine the path.



PRESS GRAPHIC/DIPOLO



PRESS GRAPHIC/NANCY E. JONES

his career in 1972 as a recreation director at Southern Michigan Prison in Jackson. He spent 12 years as a warden at the state's Thumb Correctional Facility in Lapeer. In October, Wackenhut hired him to run the youth prison.

He blamed many of the problems at the youth prison on growing pains. Most of the guards started as rookies, without experience at other prisons. Some quit after finding they didn't like it. He has fired some, about two a month since he started. He wouldn't say why.

"Some of the problems have been that

a lot of people don't come to work," he said. "Some of the attitudes are such that they don't have a good work ethic."

Since the beginning of the year, he said, the prison has settled down. "We're all getting used to each other," he said. "The staff has gained in experience. They've learned how to deal with the guys."

Trippett said the kids at the youth prison are tougher to handle than the older, hard-core criminals at Jackson.

"You've got all those hormones," he said. "They're active. ... You get a lot of people without self-control. Adults are easier to handle. Most of the adults, you can reason with. Here, you're speaking to a child, and kids are kids."

"But you get them alone, away from the crowd, and they're really wimps. Kids always want to show off, but you get 'em alone, and they sit and cry."

Guards sometimes must handle them like kids, he said.

"You've got to take some things you don't normally take," Trippett said. "If they call you an SOB, you might take it the first time. The second time, you write them up for insolence."

"You've got to have a lot of patience with these kids. They've got to learn how to do time."

Trippett replaced former Warden Luella Burke, who quit in October, 10 weeks after the prison opened. She said a recent surgery and the long hours "simply burned me out."

"When you start a new prison, whether

for the state of Michigan or the private sector, you work very long hours," said Burke, 59, who had retired from the state prison system after 21 years, including 12 as a warden. Wackenhut hired her to open the prison.

"Yes, in the private sector, I had more responsibility. It caught up with me," she said.

Fred Parks, executive director of the Michigan Corrections Organization, which represents 11,000 state prison guards, said he's not surprised by the violence at the youth prison.

At other state prisons, young inmates look up to older, experienced inmates — in their 40s, 50s and 60s — and learn how to live behind bars, Parks said.

"They tend to balance each other out," he said.

In Baldwin, 14-year-olds look up to 18- and 19-year-olds.

"At the Punk Prison, you've got 300 youthful, violent offenders. Nobody is there to put a clamp on them, to set the society norms for a prison. In other prisons, older prisoners will tell youthful offenders to sit down, knock it off. It's no different than having an older brother, a parent."

"If they're all of the same vintage, they're not going to learn a lot. They're going to get in a lot of fights."

In October, black inmates beat a white supremacist skinhead in his cell with a padlock swung at the end of a sock. The skinhead had taunted the prisoners by sliding drawings of Nazi swastikas under their cell doors, guards said.

When guards found the skinhead, his body was red and bruised, he was in the door of his cell yelling, "Heil Hitler," along with racial slurs, according to an incident report.

Also in October, a 17-year-old burglar from Kent County groped the buttocks of Marvin Slater, a 19-year-old serving up to 25 years for molesting five children at an Ottawa County trailer park. Two weeks later, guards found Slater in a segregation cell with abrasions on his left wrist. He told a nurse he was considering suicide.

In another case, four 17- and 18-year-old inmates, including a Kent County teen-ager, held down an 18-year-old from Muskegon County and fondled him as he fought to get away.

Gladiator school: Set up to fail

A former high-ranking Wackenhut official said the state of Michigan has set up the Baldwin prison to fail.

In Florida, they're called gladiator schools," said the official, who asked not



**"You're not only throwing the kids away, but you're ultimately throwing away the protection of the public. ... The public might think it's being protected, but it's wrong. These kids will get out."**

EUGENE MOORE  
Oakland County probate judge

to be named. "We're going to take 450 little gladiators, little immature street punks, little gangster wannabes who are constant problems, put them all in one place, and if it works out, good, we're brilliant."

"If it works out bad, we didn't screw it up, privatization did. How can they go wrong?"

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