

KIDS BEHIND BARS

PRISON *Guard-inmate ratio is at the bottom*

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As part of its five-month investigation of the treatment of juveniles in state prisons, The Press interviewed guards and former guards who complained that the youth prison is dangerously understaffed.

At the state's six maximum-security prisons, guards are outnumbered 2 to 1 by the inmates. But at the youth prison, it's 3 to 1.

Guards said they've been forced to work long hours — sometimes 70 to 80 hours a week. Two or three guard posts routinely are left vacant, they said. One day, the prison locked the guards in, refusing to let them leave, they said.

Some guards have taken out their frustrations on prisoners, taunting them into fighting, guards have told The Press.

Guards cited safety concerns, long hours and low pay when they voted by a 3-to-1 ratio on April 21 to form a union, said guard Kevin McDaniels, president of the new independent Professional Corrections Officers Association.

Wackenhut Corrections Corp. of Florida opened the \$39 million prison in July and runs it for the state Department of Corrections. The prison is one of 39 the company operates in the United States and abroad.

Prison Warden Dave Trippett acknowledged guards sometimes work long hours, but he denied guard posts are left unstaffed. He said guards have not complained to him about the response time of back-up officers.

"They're there within seconds, 30 at the most," Trippett said. "When there's a problem, 20 seconds is like 20 minutes to an officer."

State Corrections Director Bill Martin said the shortage of guards has not put lives in danger. He said the youth prison doesn't need as many guards as the maximum-security prisons, in part because of its design.

But he acknowledged refusing to send more prisoners there until Wackenhut can hire more guards.

"There are two things you have to concern yourself with: the safety of their staff and the safety of the prisoners," Martin said. "And until I'm satisfied both those things are in place, they're not going to get more."

The prison has promised to hire 118 guards at \$23,500 a year and 201 people in all, including kitchen workers, secretaries and administrators. But only 100 guards work there now.

There were 330 prisoners by mid-April. Wackenhut had hoped to fill the 450-bed prison by the end of March.

The prison's warden said he's fired about two guards a month — for everything from taunting inmates to failing to show up for work. Other guards have quit. He won't say how many.

"They were unhappy. It wasn't the job they really wanted," Trippett said. "It takes a certain type of person to deal with prisoners. Not a lot of people can do it."

At first a blessing

Hogenson, 39, couldn't believe her luck when the state announced plans for the prison. She has an associate's degree in corrections from West Shore Community College in Scottville and worked for several years with juvenile delinquents.

She supervised female juvenile prisoners for Mason County and was in charge of a community service program for juveniles. She also was office manager at the alternative high school.

And she needed the money. She's a single mother with two children and lives on a farm near Ludington.

For the Baldwin area, the prison was a blessing, the biggest employer in the state's poorest county.

Hogenson started at \$10.79 an hour, working up to \$12.03. By contrast, the state pays its new guards \$12.84 an hour, then raises that to \$15.23 an hour.

Hogenson was among 78 corrections officers who started training in April 1999 — three months before the prison opened. They took six weeks of state Department of Corrections classes.

After that, they moved into the prison for six weeks of training, without prisoners.

Soon, she was working long hours. She kept her own records in pocket-sized spiral notebooks. The week of Nov. 8 was typical, she said:

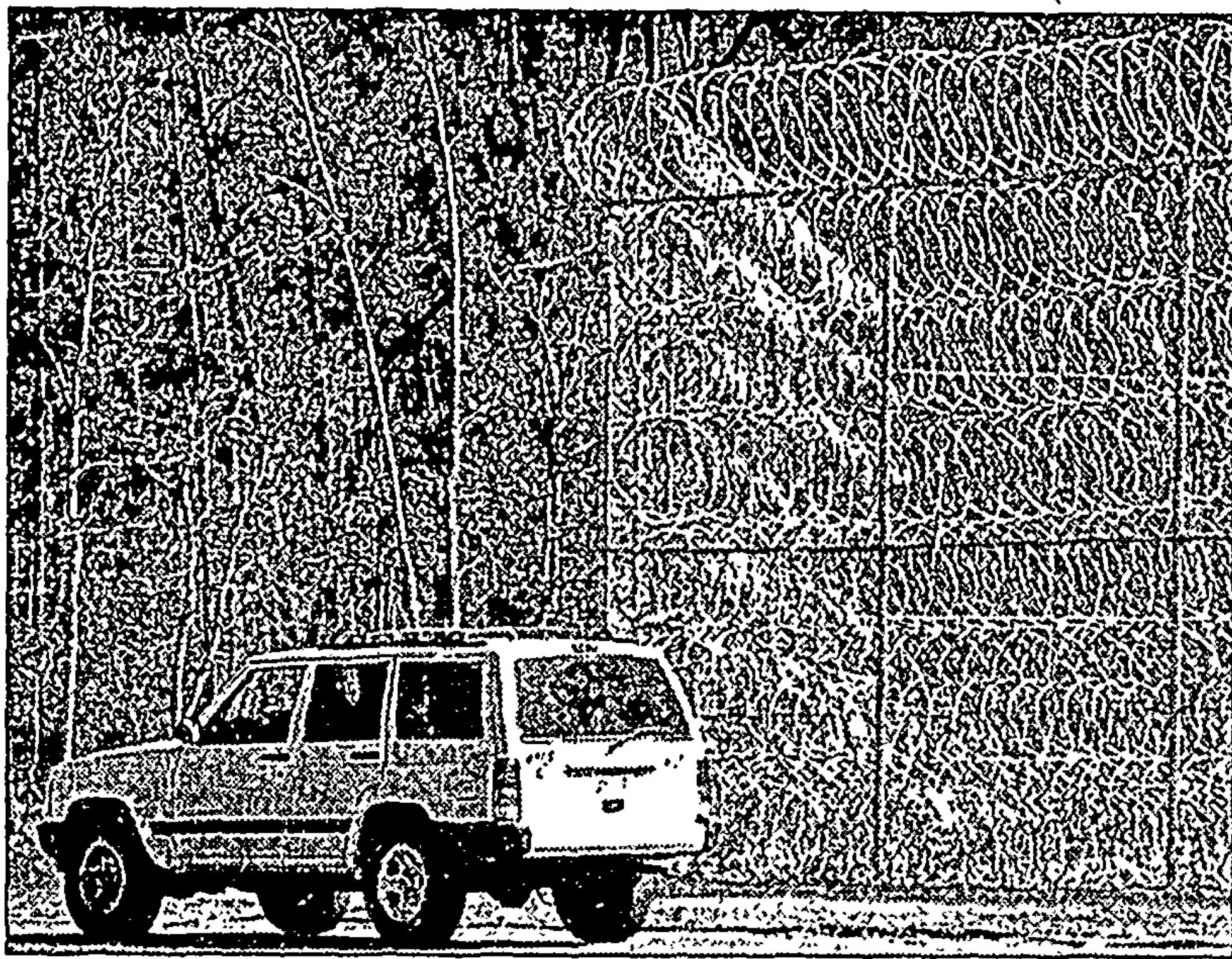
12 hours Monday;
16.5 hours Tuesday;
off Wednesday;
12 hours Thursday;
12 hours Friday;
12 hours Saturday;
12 hours Sunday.
Total: 74.5 hours.

"That was pretty much a regular week," she said.

A pay stub shows she worked 46 hours of overtime over a two-week period in late October. She said the overtime was mandatory.

At state-run prisons, guards can be ordered to work overtime if others call in sick, but they can't work more than 62 hours a week and can't work mandatory overtime two days in a row, unless there's an emergency.

After Hogenson had a bleeding



PRESS PHOTOS/CHRIS CLARK

A guard vehicle circles the outside of the Baldwin youth prison.

“It takes a certain type of person to deal with prisoners. Not a lot of people can do it.”

DAVE TRIPPETT
warden

ulcer and gall bladder surgery, her doctor and her father told her to quit. She left in February.

Locking up the guards

Former guard Stephanie Striker, 25, said she quit in October and filed for unemployment, claiming she left because of unsafe working conditions, including mandatory 12-hour days.

The state Unemployment Agency ordered the prison to pay unemployment benefits, she said. A supervisor at the office in Fremont said she couldn't confirm this due to confidentiality.

Striker also started working at the prison when it opened, leaving her job as a security officer at the juvenile detention center in Ottawa County.

Striker said she often failed to make the required searches of cells for contraband and weapons because no guards were available to back her up. "There just wasn't the time for it," she said.

Guards said the prison was so short-staffed one day that it refused to let officers leave.

"They locked the gates and refused to give us our keys, so we couldn't leave," said a guard, who asked that his name not be used. Officers turn over their car keys to a control center when they start their day.

The warden said the incident involved only one female guard, who was ordered to stay until they could find enough guards to

permission to leave.

"I moved clear up here from Texas to work up here. I worked in tough prisons before, but nothing that dangerous."

Former Lt. James King, also a shift supervisor, moved with Rector to Baldwin. He and Rector are cousins.

Like Rector, he was assaulted. An inmate struck him repeatedly with a mop handle in August, sending him to the hospital, according to prison reports obtained by The Press through the state Freedom of Information Act.

He said he quit in January out of frustration, about a week after three attempted suicides by inmates. Records show three attempts the morning of Dec. 27.

The attempts were in the segregation unit, where he had just two guards instead of three, he said. Kids were flooding the unit with water from fire sprinkler heads.

"They knew they could do whatever they wanted," he said of the inmates. "They know we don't have the staff to take care of problems."

The head of the union representing the state's 11,000 prison guards said the private youth prison should have more guards than other maximum-security prisons.

"They're violent, youthful offenders," said Fred Parks, executive director of the Michigan Corrections Organization, which fought against the youth prison. "It's going to take more staff to handle youth that react very quickly."

Taking it out on prisoners

Some guards have taken out their stress on prisoners, other guards have said.

"The stress level was very high," Hogenson said. "You're so tired that you're kind of mentally numb. The inmates knew we were being overworked. They'd say, 'Aren't you tired? You're here all



“There are two things you have to concern yourself with: the safety of their staff and the safety of the prisoners. And until I'm satisfied both those things are in place, (youth prison operators) are not going to get more (prisoners).”

BILL MARTIN
state corrections
director

fill a shift. "She could run out if she wanted to, without her (car) keys," Trippett said. "She felt locked in, I guess."

The prison recently stopped requiring overtime, asking instead for volunteers, guards said. One guard who asked not to be named said she agreed to work two straight 16-hour days in March.

A shortage of guards

Former Lt. Donald Rector, a shift commander at the prison who had worked at prisons in Texas and Arizona, said he regularly had fewer guards than he needed in Baldwin.

On his shifts, he needed at least 21 guards, he said. He often had 18, once as few as 13 or 14, he said. Sometimes, he'd send one guard to watch inmates during yard time, he said.

"I've got 75 convicted felons out here and one officer," he said. "They're out here trying to manage all these kids who are out there trying to show off for each other."

Rector said officers often didn't respond to calls for help from other officers, leaving it up to supervisors like himself.

"I might be the only one to show up — me, the officer and 50 kids because nobody else is available."

Rector, the victim of an assault at the prison, said he was fired in late January after the prison claimed he left work without permission. He said he was given

the time.

"A lot of the staff is stressed to the point where they're confrontational, very aggressive."

Former guard Kristen Stubblefield recalled one guard in particular liked to taunt inmates.

"He would go in and laugh about it with us," she said. "I will get this inmate so riled up that I'll put him in seg (segregation) and make him hit me."

The guard still works there, she said.

Stubblefield said she was fired in November for not showing up to work one day. She claimed she had permission from a supervisor to take the day off.

One guard who asked not to be named said he watched an officer abuse an inmate after taking him into the segregation unit.

"He (the officer) slams him face down on the bunk and begs him to make another move. I told him (the prisoner), 'Just lay there, be quiet, let me take the handcuffs off.'"

He said that guard has since left.

Trippett, the warden, acknowledged that some guards provoke prisoners.

"We do have a couple still here who do a little taunting," he said. "We have to call them in. It's not allowed."

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