

Holidays Are Dangerous Times Within Correctional Facilities

By William Sturgeon

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The following is an updated version of the article "Holidays Are Dangerous Times Within Correctional Facilities" first published on Corrections in December 2011.

The world has changed drastically since I first wrote this article about the dangers associated with the “Holidays”. During my many years working in the criminal justice system, in both law enforcement and corrections, I have experienced first hand the additional “dangers and challenges” that arrive with the “Holidays”.

In today’s world, criminal justice personnel not only have the “Dangers and Challenges” that are normally associated with the “Holidays”, they now have to factor in the possibility of terrorist activities directed at them

and their facilities.

It is my belief that criminal justice personnel should be prepared for the following:

Correctional Law Enforcement and Court facilities should be extra vigilant at the perimeters of their facilities.

- Suspicious vehicles
- Suspicious persons or groups of people
- Anyone taking photographs of the perimeters
- Any packages left near “official” vehicles, staff parking, perimeter walls, fences, and sally-ports should be treated with extreme caution
- Video of the perimeter should be reviewed at least daily, with special attention to all of the above

Correctional facilities need to be extra cautious during visiting hours throughout the “Holiday Season”.

- Packages left in visitors’ lockers
- Close surveillance of visitors
- Special attention to visitor vehicles
- Special attention to visitor clothing (While bulky clothing will be the norm in some parts of the country/world during the winter months, special procedures should be put in place that will permit correctional personnel to check for weapons, explosives and/or other contraband.)
- Visitors should be under constant surveillance and their demeanor should be assessed for the following:
 1. Are they overly nervous, sweating, tapping their feet, etc. (Outward physical signs of distress.)?
 2. Are they aggressive toward staff?
 3. Have they left anything behind?
- Increase the random shake-downs
- Insure that each shift is fully staffed
- Be prepared for incidents, both inside and on the perimeter of the facilities
- Conduct a comprehensive review of all Emergency/Contingency Plans
- “BE PREPARED FOR THE UNEXPECTED”

Law Enforcement and Sheriff’s Patrol Units need to be extremely attentive to their surroundings by increasing their own “Situational Awareness”.

- Be aware of where you are
- Be aware of where your vehicle is
- Be aware of your surroundings (indoor or outdoor) 360 degrees Up and Down
- Be aware of where the civilians in the area are located
- Be aware of where suspects are located and their stance(s)
- Be aware of where the suspects' hands are
- Be prepared to react to the unexpected (Physical attack with non-traditional weapons such as hatchets, butcher knives, axes, explosions, sniper fire, etc.)
- Be prepared to survive an ambush – Remember “YOU MUST GET OUT OF THE KILL ZONE”!!! CJ personnel can be ambushed either in their vehicles or outside of their vehicles.

During the holiday season the offender population becomes antsy, angry, sad, and remorseful along with every other emotion one can think of... even though correctional facilities and staff go above and beyond to make the holiday season as pleasant as possible for the offenders. Life is much different today than in the old days, when at Christmas the doors of the correctional facilities were ‘opened’ and some offenders were paroled.

Being incarcerated during the holiday season is difficult for everyone:

- The Staff
- The Offenders (Most especially first timers)
- The Offenders' Immediate and Extended Families

While the holidays are supposed to be a joyous time as they are portrayed in movies and on television, the reality does not always mirror the fantasy. For some people, the holiday season is very difficult emotionally. This emotional turbulence affects not only offenders, but staff also. Too often we forget that staff are as vulnerable as offenders to the trials and tribulations of life.

Suggestions for staff members to help them get through the holidays:

- Take control of situations – Don't let situations take control of you.
- Prioritize your life. What do you “HAVE” to do? Remember, work should take a high priority. If you go to work tired, with a hangover, or with non-work related things on your mind, you are risking your own well-being and that of your fellow employees and offenders.
- **NEVER GO TO WORK IF YOU HAVE BEEN DRINKING ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES! (NOT EVEN ONE)**
- Let your family and friends know your work schedule and other time commitments, so that they will not pressure you into over-committing yourself.
- TGet your rest!

Offender Issues

If you have worked corrections for any length of time, you know that the holiday season can be difficult. Offenders, who are normally compliant, become testy or even violent.

During the holiday season, security concerns become magnified because of the emotional behaviors of the offenders.

Security issues to be concerned about:

- Be on the lookout for suicide. Review the signs and symptoms of suicide. Talk to the offenders under your supervision. If you suspect that an offender “MAY” be suicidal, immediately get some help. It is better to be cautious than have a suicide on your watch.
- Be on the lookout for escape attempts. The holiday season triggers offenders to do senseless things, like trying to escape. “If I could have just spent Christmas Dinner with my kids.” (Offender caught during a Christmas morning escape attempt.)
- Insure that you are not complacent. Fighting complacency during the holiday season is a constant issue. Everyone (Staff) is busy with their own lives and the holiday season for civilians is usually a pleasant time. It is easy for staff to be complacent and let security procedures slide.
- Homemade Booze, Hooch, Pruno, etc., is always a problem in correctional facilities during the holiday season. Unfortunately, when Hooch is added to a correctional environment, normally docile offenders can become

combative and/or suicidal. Administrators, Line Supervisors, and Staff should be conducting shake-downs in an effort to find the Hooch before it is consumed by the offenders.

- Be alert during and after visitation periods. Insure that the officers who are supervising the visiting area report any/all of the following incidents to the living area officer:
 1. Suspicious activity
 2. Strange behavior demonstrated by visitors or offenders
 3. Any emotional outburst by either visitors or offenders (Crying, arguing, threatening behavior, etc.)

Summary

The "Holiday Season" presents some intensified security concerns in correctional facilities. I have tried to outline the issues that I have encountered during my years in the field.

I want to emphasize the point that you need to get sufficient rest during the holiday period. You should not go into work tired. Balancing life is especially difficult during the holiday season, but it is crucial that you try.

My experiences with security issues that have arisen during the holiday season have one thing in common – They were spontaneous. The 101st Airborne Division has the saying "Stay Alert – Stay Alive"! Happy Holidays!

Mt. Sturgeon is a decorated Vietnam veteran who served with the 101st Airborne Division.

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