

Suicide Prevention

Is it working in the Federal Prison System?

Dennis Schimmel, Ph.D.; Jerry Sullivan, Ph.D.; and Dave Mrad, Ph.D.

Introduction

Those of you who worked for the Bureau of Prisons before 1982 may recall that suicide watches were handled very differently. Typically, the potentially suicidal inmate was counseled, put in a single cell in detention with limited property and clothes, and checked every 15 minutes. The Bureau had no formal policy or procedures for the management of suicidal inmates; institutions may have varied considerably in their treatment of inmates in crises and the training provided to staff.

In mid- 1982, the Bureau of Prisons issued a new policy in the form of Program Statement 6341.1, which outlined a comprehensive suicide prevention effort involving increased staff training and attempts to better identify suicidal inmates. It also required continuous observation of suicidal inmates, allowed trained inmate "companions" to assist in suicide watches, and called for a formal review, or "psychological autopsy," of each suicide. There has been only one minor revision to the policy since its inception.

A psychology work group was established last year to review the Bureau's suicide prevention program. The work group reviewed all psychological autopsies from the past 5 years and conducted a phone survey of all Chief Psychologists. This article summarizes the work group's efforts.

Autopsy analysis

Suicide rates

The "bottom line" issue is what happened to the rate of suicides during the first 5 years. The various studies of Bureau suicides use slightly different criteria for

developing the suicide rate; this discussion should be considered suggestive rather than conclusive.

A summary submitted to the Bureau of Prisons' Executive Staff by Gaes, Beck, and Lebowitz (1981), suggested an annual rate of 24 per 100,000 in the 6 years prior to the implementation of the 1982 Program Statement. A study by Anne Schmidt (1978) reported a rate of 28 per 100,000 for sentenced Federal prisoners between 1970 and 1977.

There were 43 suicides in the Bureau during 1983-1987, which translates into an annual rate of about 24 per 100,000.

This is not very encouraging at first glance, but some significant factors need to be considered. First, Gaes used a different formula in computing his rate. In our review, we looked at the number of suicides relative to the average daily count.

Gaes added an additional 40 percent to the average daily count to account for every person in the system during a given year. If he had not added this 40 percent, the annual rate of suicide from 1977 to 1981 would have been 34 per 100,000. Conversely, had we added 40 percent to our average daily count, our rate would have been approximately 17 per 100,000.

Second, Schmidt did not include eight suicides of unsentenced prisoners and a suicide by an inmate on furlough in her analysis. These additional suicides would have elevated the rate to over 35 per 100,000.

Finally, a major influence on our suicide rate since 1983 has been the influx of Cubans. Of the 43 suicides, 10 have been Marie Cubans—8 detainees at Atlanta, and 2 incarcerated at other institutions. Excluding the 8 detainees, the annual suicide rate since 1983 would be 21 per 100,000. The annual rate among Cuban detainees has been approximately 75 per 100,000.

Thus, comparing "apples with apples," there appears to have been a clear decrease in the suicide rate, especially among regular Federal inmates, since the implementation of the suicide prevention program in 1982.

Table 1. Comparative suicide rates

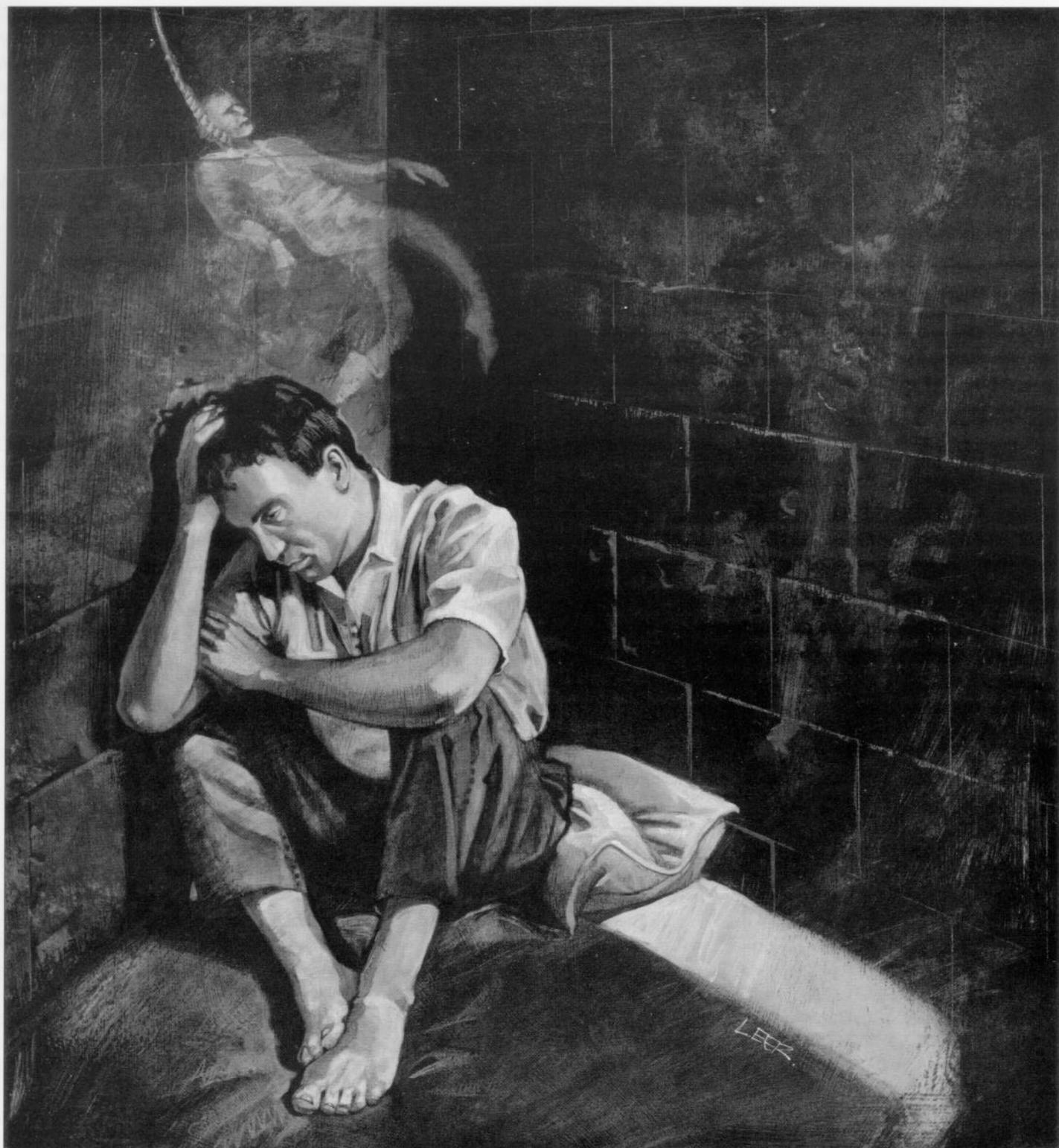
Annual suicide rate	Cited rate	"Apples with apples"
Schmidt, 1970-77	28/1,000,000	35/1,000,000
Gaes, 1977-81	24/1,000,000	34/1,000,000
Current Study, 1983-87	24/1,000,000	24/1,000,000"

*Without 8 Atlanta detainee suicides—21/100,000

Gender

All 43 suicides involved males. The suicide rate for male inmates was about 26 per 100,000. The annual suicide rate for males in the community, often considered an underestimate, is about 18 per 100,000.

There have apparently been only a few female suicides in the Bureau's history, and none that were recorded since the mid-1970's. The estimated rate for females in the community is about 7 per 100,000, though their rate of attempts or suicidal gestures is actually higher than that of males.



Illustrations by Rebecca Leer

Method

The most frequent method of suicide was hanging. Thirty-four of the 43 suicides (79 percent) have been by hanging, including all 8 Atlanta detainees. Five (12 percent) have been by self-inflicted cuts. Two have involved an overdose of medication, one individual jumped from a second-floor tier, and one shot himself while on an unescorted furlough.

Place

The most common setting for suicide continues to be a segregation or seclusion cell. Twenty-four suicides occurred in segregation (56 percent). Another three (7 percent) occurred in a mental health seclusion unit. Only 29 percent of the suicides occurred in regular housing. One suicide occurred on a medical unit, one in an admissions and orientation unit, and one while on a furlough. It should be noted that no suicides occurred while an individual was on an actual suicide watch.

Time of day

Twenty-one of 43 suicides (48 percent) occurred during a 5-hour period between midnight and 5 a.m. The other suicides were evenly distributed throughout the day, with one exception—a cluster of five suicides that occurred shortly after 4 p.m. It has been hypothesized that these suicides may have been manipulative, in that there was a higher possibility of discovery by staff at that time. In any case, the greater risk occurs in the early morning hours and shortly after the 4 p.m. count.

Psychiatric/suicidal history

In 13 (30 percent) of the 43 cases, a primary previous diagnosis of schizophrenia was mentioned. There was one case of bipolar disorder (commonly known as “manic-depressive illness”). In

two additional cases, there were prominent diagnoses of both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Thus, in 16 of the 43 cases (36 percent), there was a history of a psychotic condition. In an additional four cases (9 percent) there was a history of treatment for nonpsychotic depression. The rate of mental health problems is clearly disproportionately high among those who actually do commit suicide.

In 19 of 43 suicides there was a history of at least one previous attempt. In an additional two cases, the individual had been previously placed on a suicide watch but had no history of actual attempts. These 21 cases account for approximately 49 percent of the individuals who actually commit suicide.

Time of year

Thirty-three percent of suicides occurred in May or June (eight in May and six in June). The suicides were evenly distributed across the other months, with the exception of a slight increase in January and February (four suicides in January and five in February).

Race/ethnicity

Sixteen of the suicides were by whites, 15 by Hispanics, and 12 by blacks. The Hispanics accounted for 35 percent of the suicides, while their approximate average in our population over the past 5 years has been about 24 percent. Of course, the percentage of Hispanics in our population has grown steadily.

Sentence length

A review of the length of sentence of the suicidal inmates appears to reveal three high-risk groups. First, 8 of the 43 suicides (19 percent) occurred in the presentence population, though they represented only about 8 percent of the total population. Twelve (28 percent)

Table 2. Sentence length/status (in %)

	Length in years							CU
	PT	0-2	2-5	5-10	10-15	15-20	20	
Total BOP	8	8	22	24	12	7	13	6
Suicides	19	5	16	7	2	5	28	19

(PT=Pretrial; CU=Cuban)

were in cases involving a greater than 20-year sentence, though they represent 13 percent of the population. Although the Cuban detainees represented only 6 percent of our population, they accounted for 8 suicides (19 percent). In none of the other sentence length categories did the rate appear to be disproportionately high.

It was interesting to review the factors listed as precipitating suicide in each of the cluster groups. In the presentence cluster, legal and family problems appeared preeminent. In the 20-to-Life cluster, the inmates usually were having problems within the institution. They had often been perceived to be “snitches” or in need of protection. In some cases, they appeared quite threatened, and may even have begun to develop paranoid tendencies toward the other inmates. These individuals would typically not commit suicide shortly after sentencing, but rather after 4 to 5 years of incarceration. An outside crisis (e.g., a death of a close family member) might also trigger

the suicide. In the detainee group, there was very seldom any evident precipitant. Most of the autopsies simply address the individual's history of impulsiveness and, in many cases, psychiatric disturbance.

Age

While most of the factors listed above confirm previous thinking relative to suicide risk, the age factor was surprising. In the current program statement, the 19- to 24-year-old inmate is cited to be at significant risk. However, the data from the last 5 years reveal only five suicides in this age group (12 percent of all suicides), which is consistent with their 11-percent representation in our population. The highest number of suicides (39 percent) occurred in the 30- to 39-year-old group, which represents 40 percent of our population. Overall, the distribution of suicides by age did not suggest that one group was at significantly higher risk than another.

Table 3. Age groups (in %)

	Age					
	<26	26-29	30-39	40-50	50-59	60+
Total BOP	11	14	40	22	9	3
Suicides	12	19	39	21	9	0

The data on age, in relation to the other variables already mentioned, were discussed at some length by the work group. One hypothesis for the lower than expected rate of suicides in our younger group was that the current program may have a differential effect. Perhaps our

efforts better identify and intervene with the younger, immature inmate.

Survey of chief psychologists—Overview

The work group sent a questionnaire to all chief psychologists and followed it with a direct phone contact. It should be emphasized that, in general, the survey revealed a very high degree of satisfaction with the current suicide prevention program. The consensus was that, while the program needs some "fine tuning," we should not significantly modify it. Among the survey's findings:

Program Coordinator

In all but eight institutions, the designated Suicide Prevention Program Coordinator is the chief psychologist. In five of those institutions, a psychiatrist is designated as coordinator. In the three remaining institutions there is currently no psychology staff; the Health Systems Administrator is the designated coordinator. In all settings, except where there is no psychology staff, Psychology Services does almost all (if not all) of the staff and inmate companion training.

Training

All institutions contacted reported that suicide prevention training was conducted during both institution familiarization and annual training. The universal recognition of the importance of this training was clear. In a number of institutions, additional training was provided during the year either to correctional counselors, physician's assistants, or selected custodial staff (e.g., detention officers).

Inmate companions

Probably the single most interesting survey response involved the use of inmate companions, in 32 of the 46 institutions surveyed. Inmate companions were hailed by most people who use them as providing a valuable service. The chief psychologist often commented on the quality of the job they did and often suggested that the rewards for the companions should somehow be increased. A few chiefs cited a number of advantages in the use of companions, but still discussed liability and ethical issues that raised doubts in their minds. Most people who use companions wanted to see this program component retained.

Those who did not use companions often cited philosophical or ethical problems with the program, liability concerns, or security and logistical problems at their particular institution. It was clear that there were strong opinions on both sides; no other issue so clearly appears to generate a strong opinion one way or the other.

Other survey issues

The survey suggests that the vast majority of suicide watches are done in the institution hospital. In only a few institutions did logistical problems prevent a hospital watch.

Most watches do not lead to psychiatric transfer. A majority of watches are short-term and handled in-house. When a psychiatric transfer was required, none of the chief psychologists reported significant difficulties in getting an inmate transferred to a medical facility.

Restraints appear to be used in only a small percentage of Bureau suicide watches. In most institutions, the use of physical restraints while an inmate was on watch was described as "a rare occurrence."

Conclusion

The Bureau's suicide prevention efforts over the past 5 years are widely viewed as successful. While the differing criteria used in studying the suicide rate mean that no cause-and-effect relationship can be shown, the overall rate of suicide appears to have declined, and staff are better trained and more sensitive to issues involved in prevention. The information contained in this article should provide some encouragement that our efforts have been worthwhile. ■

Dr. Dennis Schimmel is Chief Psychologist at the Federal Correctional Institution, Oxford, Wisconsin. Dr. Jerry Sullivan is Chief Psychologist at the Federal Correctional Institution, El Reno, Oklahoma. Dr. Dave Mrad is a staff psychologist at the U.S. Medical Center for Federal Prisoners, Springfield, Missouri.

Inmate companions—Pro and con

The use of inmate companions was one of the more innovative aspects of the 1982 Program Statement on Suicide Prevention. Though the concept was not initially embraced by many institutions and staff, today the majority of institutions have companions and the feedback from Program Coordinators is generally quite positive. Here are a few of the thoughts expressed during the survey of chief psychologists:



Pro

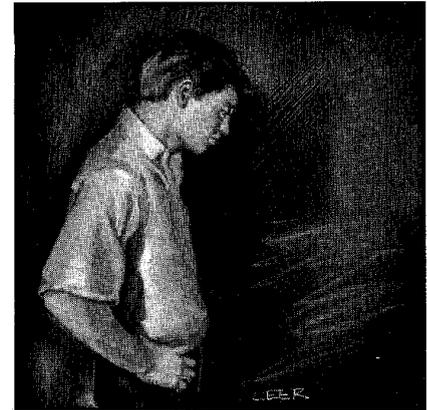
"At first I had a number of reservations about companions, but now I'm sold on them."

"They do a great job. In some ways they are more effective than staff."

"No problem. They are motivated and do a good job."

"One way to improve the suicide prevention program is to give inmate companions more reward and recognition. They deserve it."

"There is now a track record of their success."



Con

"Staff are to provide for the care and custody of inmates."

"There is no way to logistically isolate an inmate and a companion at our institution."

"We have them at our institution, but the liability issue still somewhat bothers me."

"I would not sleep as well at night if we had companions."

"All it will take is one bad incident with a companion."

From "College Town" to "Prison Town"

A wrenching conversion for a small community

Doug Green

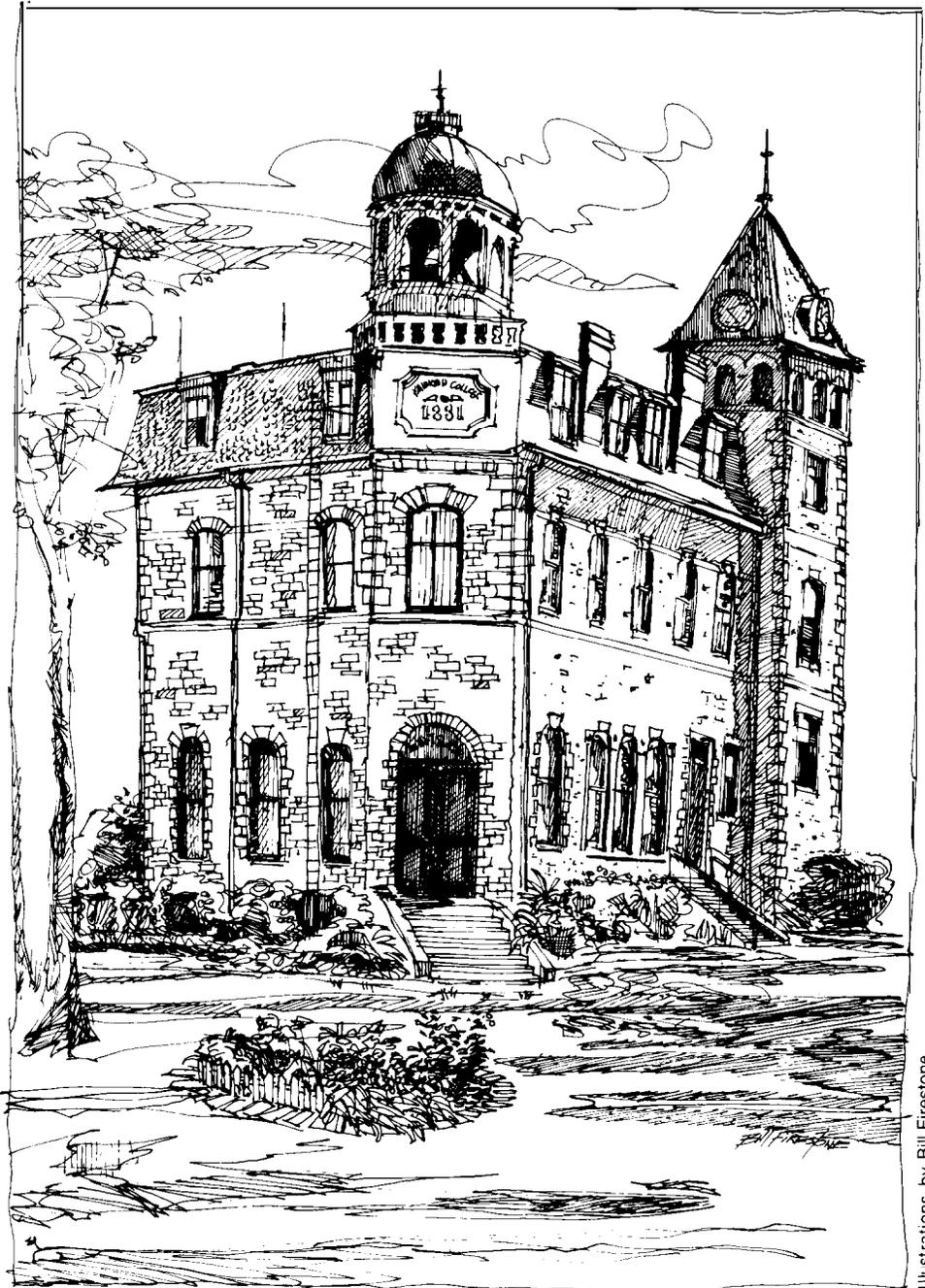
The Federal Prison Camp in Yankton, South Dakota, one of the Bureau of Prisons' newest institutions, is also paradoxically one of the oldest sites. Most Bureau conversions of facilities to prison space have taken place on military bases—Yankton is a former college campus, on a national historic site at that, and is located in the heart of the community, not at its fringe as are most institutions.

This was a unique conversion effort for the Bureau, and a wrenching one for the community. This article chronicles the debate that led to the establishment of FPC Yankton. As more new prisons are built and other facilities are converted this debate will occur again and again, not just in the Bureau of Prisons but in all correctional systems.

The Lewis and Clark Expedition stopped by Yankton (then a Sioux winter campground known as E-hank-to-wan) in 1804, on its way to points further west. The territory was opened for settlement just before the Civil War, and Yankton became capital of the Dakota Territory until 1883.

The first college in the territory, Yankton College, was chartered in 1881, and provided a liberal arts education for thousands of students for slightly more than a century. But in December 1984, long-standing debts and large projected deficits forced the college to close its doors.

The effect on the South Dakota community of about 12,000 was immediate and severe. More than 200 students and 100 faculty and staff would have their educations and their careers disrupted, and the town would lose a \$1.4-million



The "Old Middle" Music Conservatory at Yankton College.

Illustrations by Bill Firestone

annual payroll—a heavy blow to any community of Yankton’s size.

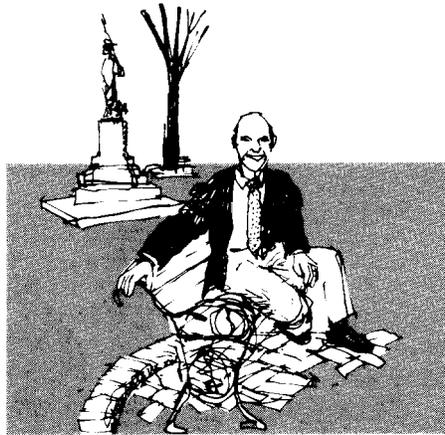
Beyond the economic losses, however, were the intangibles of pride and community image. To many citizens (and alumni), reactions “ranged from shock and sadness to bitterness,” according to the *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*. The great-grandson of founder Joseph Ward wrote, “Most of us experienced frustration and even anger at not being able to make one last heroic effort to save our college.”

Efforts were made, however. Two months after the last graduation ceremony in 1985, the college’s Board of Trustees entered into an agreement with a private corporation, Education Systems Development Corp., formed specifically to recapitalize the college. The trustees were optimistic that the college could reopen in 1986, but the hoped-for funds never materialized. The Chamber of Commerce also attempted to interest corporations in using the grounds as a retreat center, with no success.

As the college’s financial condition had deteriorated over the previous 10 years, so had its physical plant (16 buildings on 33 acres). The Conservatory of Music, known as “Old Middle,” built in 1881 and listed as a National Historic Landmark since 1975 (the entire Yankton College Historic District is listed on the National Register of Historic Places), was in serious need of repairs. From one of the town’s greatest assets, the college was turning into a liability.

Enter the Bureau of Prisons

In mid-1987, the office of South Dakota Senator Larry Pressler contacted a number of Federal agencies to see if any



**“Most of us
experienced frustration
and even anger
at not being able to make
one last heroic effort to
save our college.”**

of them had a use for the Yankton College facility. The Bureau of Prisons was immediately interested.

Chief of Facilities Development and Operations Bill Patrick first visited Yankton in September 1987. At a joint meeting of the Yankton County and Yankton City commissions, Patrick noted that a prison camp on the college campus would be classified as a Security Level 1 institution (the lowest of six levels). He suggested that community leaders talk to citizens—especially citizens who lived near the campus—to solicit their reactions about having a prison so close by.

This initial discussion raised several issues that would be hot topics in the following months. Patrick said that the camp would house 300 to 500 male inmates, serving average sentences of 18 months, and typically having committed such crimes as tax evasion, fraud, and money laundering—and drug trafficking

(about 50 percent). The prison workforce, Patrick said, would include 100 to 120 people, with 50 to 60 percent hired locally, and an average salary of \$22,000. The conversion would take 6 to 8 months.

City Commissioner Leon Abler asked how many walkaways could be expected. Patrick replied, “Generally, two to four per year with a facility in this range.” Commissioner Dave O’Brien then asked if the security level could ever be reclassified upward. It would be impossible to do that in Yankton, according to Patrick, because of the unique nature of the campus. Acting YC President Don Peterson added that he would only allow a Level 1 facility on the campus.

“As long as I’m acting president up there, that would be part of the contract,” he said. “It would not go to Level 2 as long as I’m alive.” Patrick said that the Bureau of Prisons could probably promise that the security level would not change.

Peterson noted that while at first he wasn’t interested in having a prison camp in Yankton, “I personally have changed my mind and have no fear of what Bill Patrick is optioning to us.” The prison would probably be the best chance of repaying the college’s debtors “100 cents on the dollar.”

The *Daily Press and Dakotan* wrote, “The news that the federal government is looking at the Yankton College campus as a possible location for a minimum security prison may leave some residents with a feeling of discomfort, perhaps even disbelief.” The citizens of Yankton would soon find themselves debating some highly technical aspects of corrections.

The debate begins

A hundred and fifty residents who lived near the college attended a town meeting shortly after the Commission meeting. They were shown a film on the Federal Prison Camp, Big Spring, Texas, that depicted the positive effects of that institution on the community. But, as some immediately noted, the camp is located on an abandoned air base, nowhere near the middle of a residential area.

Some of the residents' concerns expressed at this meeting would structure the debate in the coming weeks:

- What type of crimes were the inmates likely to have committed?
- Was there any danger from walk-aways?
- Would the college need to be fenced?
- Could the Government decide to upgrade to a Level 2 facility or higher?
- Would the value of their homes decrease with a prison so close?

The community would not have the chance to vote on the issue, which displeased many. The City and County Commissions would decide, once the Bureau presented a formal plan. One attendee said, "I think we're going to get something rammed down our throats that we probably don't like."

A newspaper poll a week after Bill Patrick's presentation found that, of 25 area residents polled, 9 were in favor, 9 against, and 7 undecided. Resident Jim Abbott said, "I view it as a choice between something and nothing. My first choice would be a college. That is unobtainable. My second choice is any



**"I guess
I have a little bit of concern.
But I also think
property values won't be
too super if there is nothing
over there."**

kind of possible solution that avoids ruin and decay of the property." Another neighbor noted that in recent months the empty campus had been plagued by vandalism.

One of the "undecideds," John Willcockson, when asked if he was concerned about his property values, replied, "I guess I have a little bit of concern. But I also think property values won't be too super if there is nothing over there."

The proposed conversion picked up an early booster in the *Yankton Daily Press and Dakotan*. The newspaper, soon after the debate began, ran a number of editorials in support of "an option that has more benefits than drawbacks." The paper noted, for instance, that "though some of the inmates would be serving time for drug abuse, the strict testing system used at level 1 facilities virtually eliminates any use at these sites. If evidence shows up in regular urine tests, the inmate is automatically and quickly

transferred to another facility. But these incidents are rare because the inmates are short termers who don't wish to extend their prison time."

Over the next weeks, opponents of the prison organized into a group led by two former Yankton College faculty members, Pete DeFavero and John Notheis. The group felt local media had been biased in favor of the prison and began to fill the newspaper's letters columns.

One opponent wrote, "I know we have the Human Services Center [which housed some State prisoners as trustees] and halfway houses in Yankton and that doesn't bother me. I visit the HSC five days a week in the trusty unit. I was a probation officer for four years. I have worked with and been around people in trouble with the law in one way or another. They need help. Yankton has been helping them in many ways. But where does it stop?"

Debra Jorgensen, who lived 50 feet from the campus, wrote, "No child should have to be afraid of their own neighborhood...When we were buying [a house], I looked for a nice house, nice neighborhood, and a school nearby. If I were now looking to buy a house, a prison across the street would not be one of my priorities."

Another letter-writer suggested, "Do you really want Yankton's promotional literature to read, 'Yankton, a place to grow. Even if you mess up, you won't have to leave.'?"

While many citizens were nostalgic about the loss of the college, a local attorney wrote, "I have been directly involved in law enforcement in Yankton

almost continually since 1969 and during that period I have seen Yankton College students prosecuted for everything from shoplifting to drugs, sex offenses, burglaries, and robberies.”

Visits to Level 1 facilities

A number of Yankton residents, including some opposed to the conversion, visited FPC Big Spring at the end of September in the company of some Bureau officials. Those already in favor came away more strongly in favor (a county commissioner noted, “...you drive by and it looks just like a college campus”), while those opposed seemed only marginally less so.

While Big Spring residents generally seemed supportive of the prison camp, they were less enthusiastic when asked how they would feel about a prison in their own college. “It would be too close to residential sections,” one said, while a Big Spring homemaker, asked why the camp was “better” located on the outskirts of town, replied, “Sometimes they leave out there.” Big Spring averaged 20 walkaways or escapes per year in 1985 and 1986, from a population of more than 700.

The Federal Prison Camp at Duluth, Minnesota, the closest such facility to Yankton, also became an issue. The opponents’ group thought that the inmates’ profile—more than half served time for violating drug laws, and others for robbery and firearms offenses—didn’t match the Bureau’s promises for Yankton.

Four Yankton residents, including landowners directly adjacent to the college and a county commissioner, visited Duluth on September 24. Richard Wright, one of the immediate neighbors,



**“If I
were now looking
to buy a house,
a prison across the street
would not be
one of my priorities.”**

wrote, “One of the major concerns, other than safety, has been the fear of a decrease in Yankton’s adjacent property values. I wish I had an answer. I do not. I do feel, after seeing the Duluth facility, and understanding a Level 1 institution better, that I would have no fear in living in or buying a home next to a Level 1 facility. I do feel the facility would probably create doubts and fears with new people coming into a community....”

One of the most unusual communications came from an inmate at Duluth—a former Yankton resident serving time for embezzlement. Ronald Wright wrote, “I was sentenced on March 10, 1987, and ordered to report [to Duluth] on April 14, 1987. During the month-long waiting period, I conjured up many ideas in my mind as to what would happen to me in prison. These include homosexual acts, beatings by other inmates, getting AIDS, and all sorts of bad things....but as I soon came to find, all my fears were unfounded and a figment of my imagination.

“I believe I know what the fears of the area residents are. I would have more concern with inmates from the mental institution than I would from a level 1 camp facility. The inmates are not violent and are not interested in getting into trouble which will only cause them to receive a longer sentence or be transferred to a higher security prison. The inmates at a camp want to get their time served and return to their families and jobs as soon as possible. Most of the inmates at this level of camp are or were married and have families on the outside to return to.

“As I recall, the residents in the area of Yankton College complained about the ‘rowdiness’ of the college students periodically. The students were very inconsiderate of people’s property at times. It was usually a very small percentage of the students that caused the problem. The area residents will have no problems with ‘rowdiness’ from a camp facility.”

The decision is made— and criticized

A public meeting was held on October 6 at the college’s Nash Gymnasium. More than 400 attended—a huge number in a city of 12,000—for 3 hours. Bill Patrick represented the Bureau and presided over the hearing.

On the following Monday, the City Commission would vote on whether to recommend to the college’s trustees to sell the campus to the Federal Government. Patrick said that the Bureau could not look to a popular vote as a measure of community support, but relies on elected officials instead. The Bureau, however, would not proceed with the

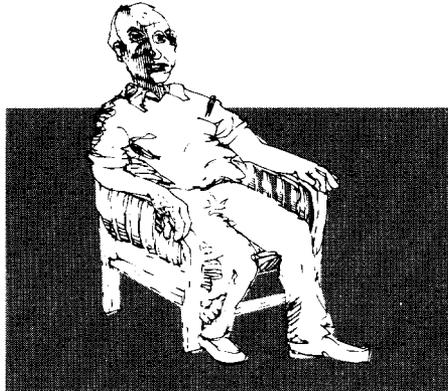
project if the college trustees approved the sale but the city and county commissions did not. Patrick also addressed one of the residents' major concerns by guaranteeing that the facility's environmental impact statement would include conditions making future upgrading of the facility effectively impossible.

Safety remained uppermost in people's minds. One resident who lived a block from the college said, "Why should my children have to walk out of the way close to a prison with guards without guns? I'd prefer they were carried."

Patrick could not guarantee that children wouldn't be negatively affected by the prison. Opponent John Notheis noted that the Government could not buy neighboring homes or pay for upgraded security, but "all of the major issues I can think of did come up, and I think Bill Patrick did an excellent job of answering the questions."

At the City Commission meeting on Monday, the head of the board of selectmen from Putney, Vermont, Peter Shumlin, was brought in by the opponents' group. Shumlin told the hearing that Putney, a small town of 1,400, faced a situation similar to Yankton's when its college closed. The Bureau of Prisons had attempted to acquire the campus, but when put to a public vote, 80 percent of the residents rejected it. After an auction, the town was able to recruit a new 2-year college for dyslexic students.

Nevertheless, the City Commission voted unanimously to recommend that the Federal Government continue negotiations to purchase the campus. (The County Commission also voted unanimously in favor the next day.) After the



**"I'm
very disappointed
to see...we can't
even allow 30 days
to evaluate putting a prison
in town."**

vote, one opponent said, "I'm very disappointed to see...we can't even allow 30 days to evaluate putting a prison in town."

The *Daily Press and Dakotan* wrote, "Some of the arguments that continue to be raised will never be answered or addressed to everyone's satisfaction. Many are hypothetical scenarios, the kind of 'what if' situations that are fair questions but which ultimately cannot be answered with certainty. But the best judgment is one based on what other communities have experienced, and these reports confirm that a level 1 facility would be a plus for this community."

Taking it to a vote

The next strategy on the part of the opponents (now organized as Citizens for a Better Alternative) was to gather the several hundred signatures needed to put an initiative measure on the ballot requiring the city to buy the college, as well as focus on alternative solutions, such as a civic center/cultural complex,

post office, or selling buildings to individual buyers.

Although the petition drive succeeded (about 1,100 citizens signed), and the City Commission set the election date for December 15, it was not clear that the results would have any validity. Yankton College's acting president, Don Peterson, said, "I think the ordinance is meaningless. It will not change my thinking or my negotiations with the Federal Bureau of Prisons."

In addition, any alternative solution seemed certain to require a tax increase. The City Manager projected a property tax levy of between 30 and 39 percent to finance the city's purchase of the college and maintain it while another buyer was sought.

Both sides spent the month before the vote in intensive lobbying. An Associated Press story in early November was headed "Prison has Yankton in 'civil war'," and related the "believe it or not" story of Bill and Shirley Jennewein. The Jenneweins had both been instructors at the University of South Dakota in Springfield, which closed in 1984 when the State legislature voted to convert it to a State prison. They both found jobs in Yankton, three blocks from the college. Their 8-year-old son was quoted, "Where can we go where they won't try to make it a prison?" NBC News (whose anchor Tom Brokaw came from Yankton) also found the story of interest—"...a small town right in the middle of the country actually wanting a prison right in the middle of the town."

As it turned out, the residents did want the prison. Election day, December 15, saw the vote go decisively against asking the city to purchase the college (and thus

in favor of the Government purchasing it)—3,025 against to 986 for.

Preparing to open

The following January, the Bureau made its formal offer to the college's trustees. All creditors would be fully paid off, the campus would be restored and maintained, and the city could look forward to about 100 stable new jobs.

The prison's new management team both came from FCI Phoenix. Stephen Pontesso was Associate Warden (Industries and Education) and Rick Stiff was Executive Assistant at Phoenix. They first visited Yankton in February, about the time the buyout plan was submitted to U.S. Bankruptcy Court for approval.

On April 21, the court approved the bankruptcy. The Bureau paid \$3.1 million for the college; after all debts and closing costs were paid, about \$1 million would be left to ensure the continuity of the Yankton College corporation. The sale closed on May 5—ironically, the birthday of Joseph Ward, the college's founder.

Throughout the spring and summer, work proceeded on facility conversion. Almost 1,000 people attended job seminars in March, showing a great deal of interest in the 50-90 positions expected to be filled locally. The first Yankton-area employees were on the payroll by June.

Over the summer, the Bureau began some facilities work that was not strictly in preparation for the camp's opening. A Minnesota firm came to the Old Middle conservatory to remove and restore the 104-year-old clock in time for the camp's dedication in September.



**“The day
brought some sadness that
the campus
really will be a prison
but happiness
that it will be so well taken
care of.”**

By August, the Sioux Falls paper could headline a story, “Prison boosts Yankton's economy,” noting that “real estate agents are selling houses that have been on the market as long as 4 years.”

The transition was not totally without friction. The prison asked the city to close part of a street that ran through Federal property because inmates would cross it regularly to go from their quarters to work and school. The city planning commission denied the petition request and Pontesso withdrew it. In addition, some areas previously used for parking by local sports fans were marked off limits.

The first six inmates arrived from FPC Duluth in late August to help with the renovation, and on September 6, the facility was dedicated. Director Quinlan and Senator Pressler were joined by Mayor Ron Tappe, Donald J. Porter, Chief Judge of the U.S. District Court in Pierre, and about 300 citizens. Local

columnist Wheeler Bowen wrote, “...for [Donald] Peterson and other Yankton College supporters who spent 3 years trying to find a use for the bankrupt college, the day brought some sadness that the campus really will be a prison but happiness that it will be so well taken care of.” As promised, the clock was back and working well for the first time in years.

A year later

Yankton College still exists. Early in 1989, its officers decided to place half the money left over from the sale in investments to perpetuate the college, with the other half going to an alumni office and a variety of scholarships. Its offices are still on campus. Renovation work continues on various campus buildings, and the facility, still under the leadership of Stephen Pontesso, is expected to reach its full complement of 500 inmates by 1990.

Overall, the citizens of Yankton seem pleased with their choice in favor of the prison camp. Still, there are some mixed feelings. Last fall, the Bureau of Prisons began erecting a 4-foot fence around the perimeter of the institution. It is designed for decorative purposes, not for security; it provides a barrier for children and pedestrians. Nevertheless, the fence is a daily reminder for Yanktonians that, while the economic benefits promised by the camp are real, some things about their town will never be the same. ■

Doug Green is editor of the Federal Prisons Journal. Douglas P. Sall, Supervisor of Education at the Federal Prison Camp, Yankton, South Dakota, provided substantial assistance in the preparation of this article.