PRISON GUARDS

PATROLLING CANADA’S MOST DANGEROUS STREETS

David Silverberg
When Kevin Grabowsky tells me about his most violent encounter in prison, I think, “Wow, this is real-life Oz.” Of course, reality is freakier than some HBO prison drama show, but rarely does the public hear stories from correctional officers (COs)—especially ones that explain, in gory detail, how difficult their job can be.

Grabowsky, a 26-year veteran CO at Edmonton Institution, is unafraid to tell me about the afternoon he faced a beating by dozens of inmates. The day began badly, with some inmates brewing five gallons of homemade alcohol and drinking in the recreation yard. Close to 150 inmates began to get violently drunk, and soon acted on impulse. A fight broke out and an inmate was stabbed close to the heart. He crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Grabowsky, unarmed as always, ran into the fray with a stretcher to take the injured inmate to medical assistance. With two other COs, he heaved the injured man on the stretcher and started running the length of the yard, almost the size of a football field. During the sprint, drunk inmates kicked and punched Grabowsky, and cursed, “I’m gonna kill you, you’re next!”

Adrenalin pumping in his veins, Grabowsky had just enough energy to ward off the attacks. Bruised and bleeding, he reached an enclosed area where a nurse performed CPR on the inmate and called an ambulance. He went home to his one-bedroom apartment that night, sat in the dark and drank some whiskey. He thought, “What kind of job is this? I just risked my life to save an inmate, and I could’ve died tonight.”

What may seem like heroism often goes unrecognized. Today’s 6,600 prison guards work in one of the country’s most dangerous jobs, earning an average of $45,000 per year. Many question if the money is worth the sleepless nights. Prison guards in Canada don’t enjoy those luxuries the rest of us often take for granted. In fact, for years they’ve been trudging the trenches of our nation’s most dangerous corridors without whining too loudly about the pains they endure trying to keep inmates out of sight, out of mind. Until now, that is.

Canadian COs say they are tired of being law enforcement’s castaway cousin. Under the six-year-old Union of Canadian Correctional Officers (UCCO), guards are calling for change in a profession so often marginalized. They have set demands for respect, protection and equality. They’re sick of seeing co-workers stabbed 42 times, and sick of worrying about contracting HIV from an inmate attack. And like many everyday workers, they’re sick of management mishandling their positions. As one CO says, “I don’t think the government is helping us. We’re on the defence all the time.”

DANGER AHEAD

“The abuse officers take now, compared to 15 years ago, is phenomenal.” Grabowsky says. Inmates throw urine and feces at COs, knowing the assault will likely earn them little more than a slap on the wrist. Death threats are as common as dice games, and even more serious are weapons like zip guns, made from pipes, rubber bands and .45 bullets. At one prison, an inmate even constructed several bombs from kitchen materials.

Sometimes, it’s the smaller incidents that frustrate COs the most. Recently, Linda Gallimore, a guard at the maximum-security Millhaven Institution in Bath, Ontario, was collecting food trays at the cafeteria when an inmate threw coffee into her face. Luckily, it was lukewarm by then, so she was unharmed. But this attempted assault is difficult to prosecute, since management only considers extreme bodily harm as a worthwhile charge, Gallimore says. “This is a very mentally exhausting job,” Gallimore sighs, in a voice that weighs heavy with fatigue. “I’m constantly trying to think faster and better than an inmate who has 24 hours a day to act in a disruptive manner.”

Catapulting coffee is the least of her worries. Two years ago, an inmate punched Gallimore in the head, and a concussion sent her home for four months. “What elevates the stress we face is the amount of assaults that could be avoided,” she says.

Dealing with violence has made Art Matheson look at the world differently. With 17 years in corrections, Matheson participates on the emergency response team at Atlantic Institution. More than once, he has seen a group of 15 inmates swarm and beat an older inmate who wouldn’t give them tobacco. “When you see so many people that have been slashed-bad slashings and lots of blood… you desensitize yourself. They do it, we deal with it.”

It would only make sense that anyone in a dangerous workplace should receive some kind of protection. But the union only recently won a three-year battle with Correctional Service Canada (CSC) to use handcuffs, and pepper spray is only used in extreme situations. More importantly, the union is in the midst of a four-year-long process to convince the feds to fund stabproof vests—a necessary shield, says Sylvain Martel, national president of UCCO.

When Martel talks about life on the inside, his words sputter in a frenzy of frustrated swearing. It’s as if his anger overflows at any question relating to his daily battle with the government. When I ask him about CSC’s perspective on protection, Martel cries out, “They say safety is paramount but I think it’s a crock of shit. They’ve manipulated the budget so poorly, we’ve become the punching bag for them.”

Martel would prefer CSC’s $1.6 billion budget to focus on extensive training that can better prepare a CO. More gangs are flowing into prisons, so guards should receive gang-related training, Martel says. Officers who work at armed towers are the only ones trained in firearms, but Martel would like to see all COs familiar with guns, in case a riot calls for increased manpower. “Over the last five years, CSC has been selective on who would be trained on weapons, and I think 60 per cent of guards are not trained in that area,” Martel says.

But what truly upsets Martel is how “CSC uses window dressing and lip service” to hide the truth from the public. For instance, if an inmate is found with drugs, the CSC will be hesitant to prosecute the inmate for the offence. Why? Martel says CSC is concerned about its public image, and further associating Canadian prisons with drugs will only mar its PR campaign. “There are two types of justice systems,” Martel says, “one for the regular Joe and one for the incarcerated.”

Proving his point is evidence uncovered by CTV News, including internal documents that show the punishments handed out to inmates: fighting with a fellow inmate earns the offender a $5 fine, and seriously assaulting a prison guard costs inmates $15. Prison guards call this “buying the peace,” so inmates won’t scream “riot” like someone would scream.
“fire” in a theatre. Martel wonders how long the CSC can continue treading this inmate-friendly path.

Sabrina Nelson is a CO at Warkworth Institute in Campbellford, Ontario, and she believes the feds manipulate statistics. “I'm inside, I know what's going on,” she says. The recidivism rate is higher than published, she asserts, because CSC only uses a two-year window after release to record how often ex-inmates return to prison. “But we all know that you can't be charged and convicted in less than two years, so CSC has these rose-coloured glasses on,” Nelson says.

During her first few years on the job, Nelson thought she would be helping the inmates. She soon realized prisons became revolving doors where convicts return to their cells soon after release. “Very few of the inmates want to change.” Nelson says. “In fact, they learn to become better criminals. They learn how to commit crimes in the future, and not get caught.” She has faced her share of harrowing experiences, including a suicide bomber inmate who planted explosives in the institution using matches and electronic parts. A subsequent coroner’s inquiry recommended installing metal detectors, but that has yet to materialize. “When you're treated second rate by your employer, it's tough to trust them,” she says.

Henri Leblanc is another CO who claims the CSC hinders a guard’s job performance. A veteran guard at Saskatchewan Penitentiary, Leblanc says an oath of secrecy dominates CSC. “So many times they have fumbled investigations.” Leblanc says. “They are not willing to admit there are problems with the correctional system in Canada.”

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS

But some Canadians may claim the biggest problem with that area of corrections is guard corruption. The media often depicts sordid affairs in prisons revolving around guards lashing out at inmates, often with fatal consequences. While some bad apples can spoil UCCO’s own PR image, guards claim they are forced to manhandle inmates who misbehave. “I don't enjoy pounding on cons-I don't go out of my way to make their lives difficult,” says Leblanc, “but I like to keep up on how to handle different situations.” Grabowsky puts it another way, in a statement up for
interpretation. “Just like with cops and paramedics, COs get hooked on adrenaline. I know that sounds morbid but it’s something you have or don’t have.”

According to some guards, the media paints a dismal picture of inmate treatment. Martel relates an incident where an inmate was supposedly beaten by guards, “but he was just kicked in the ass because he wouldn’t go back to his cell,” Martel sighs. “Maybe that action wasn’t appropriate, but CSC still didn’t defend our position. Our boss just lets us hang, like they let us hang all the time.”

When I ask CSC’s senior deputy commissioner, Don Head, about the state of Canada’s prisons, he replies, “The overall state is very good... Since the 1970s and 1980s, we have established a relatively stable correctional system.” Regarding the many grievances brought up by the union, Head counters by stating that he welcomes criticism, although with some issues the union “found a different interpretation and in some cases there were misunderstandings.”

One such misunderstanding may be investigative reports into inmate deaths, such as the one surrounding a riot that occurred in 2001 at the maximum-security Kent Institution in B.C. Martel claims that an inmate wrote down how he was going to organize the riot and gave that note to management. No one followed up on the threat, a riot swarmed Kent and an inmate died in the chaos. Martel says the bosses at that institution should be charged with criminal negligence. Head says CSC investigations wait until police reports are conducted. Regarding Kent, Head tells me “to get back to him about that one.”

CONTROL ISSUES
Running a prison is about control. Who has the power: the inmates or the guards? Matheson, of Atlantic Institution, says inmates “do a lot of stuff and there are no repercussions.” At Warkworth, Nelson notices that inmates “are running things their way.”

Under this model, and under any model that pushes employees out of their comfort zone, anxiety overrides other prevailing emotions. Dr. David Kalinich, a professor of criminology at Florida Atlantic University, suggests that COs can turn into ticking time bombs if their stress levels exceed their feelings of satisfaction. “The CO is the cornerstone of the prison, but the whole environment must be run properly for the CO to do his job effectively,” says Dr. Kalinich, author of Surviving in Corrections: Guide for Corrections Professionals. Matheson views it similarly. “By the time a guy gets to us in the maximum-security institutions, the programs haven’t worked. They’re not working,” he says. And their job is crucial to the well-being of the inmates, says Grobowsky. “To these inmates, a CO can be their parent, best friend, nurse, butler or worst enemy.”

While COs are the building blocks of a prison, the responsibility lies heavily on the upper tiers. “Management has to make a commitment to have control over a prison, and they need a budget to make that possible,” Dr. Kalinich says. In some respects, the prison is like any workplace. The boss needs to respect his staff; the staff needs to communicate their problems to the boss. Money keeps all parties happy. But the big difference here is that the staff wants to protect their necks in the face of rising violence, even if it means chomping down on the hand that feeds them.

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PRISON TENSE - GLOSSARY OF CONVICT LINGO

Surviving in prison isn’t any easier for guards. When they patrol the prison alleys, they need to know the lingo in order to understand what the cons are up to. Like any community, prison has its own language. Here’s some jailhouse jargon:

- **Boss, screw, bull** = guard
- **Goof** = insult to another inmate, like calling someone “asshole”
- **Shank, pick** = homemade knife
- **Suitcasing, hooping** = pocketing drugs or weapons anally
- **Rolling** = beating up, attacking
- **Skinners** = sex predators
- **Heavies** = inmates who do muscle work, like beatings
- **Queen** = prison prostitute
- **Gang bangers** = gang members
- **Brew** = homemade alcohol, usually made from potatoes or fruit
- **Canteen** = inmate goods like cigarettes, bales of tobacco or chocolate
- **Plunge** = to stab, usually in the gut
- **PC** = protective custody, usually for convicted rapists
- **GP, or gen pop** = general population, usually for murderers and armed robbers