

# The Star-Ledger

**N.J. prison officers know they work a tough job, yet ‘we’re always the bad guys in the public’s view’**

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The liquid hit her straight in the right eye.

On a Monday afternoon in January, after an officer in New Jersey’s only women’s prison searched a cell, a prisoner appeared to use a bottle to squirt something at the officer’s face, according to a new state report.

It might have been milk. It might have been urine and feces. What staff at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility in Hunterdon County knew for sure was these assaults had occurred several times a week — for months.

“However, they are rarely if ever criminally prosecuted,” investigators from the law firm Lowenstein Sandler LLP wrote. “We were told that officers felt that inmates were not being held accountable for their actions and that their supervisors were not protecting them.”

The firm’s 73-page investigation made headlines earlier this month for concluding that women were beaten in retaliation, leading to criminal charges against multiple officers, and for detailing prison officials’ failure to effectively oversee a facility already under federal scrutiny. The head of the entire prison system ultimately resigned and the governor announced plans to close the women’s prison.

But the report also highlighted the dangers officers face daily, sometimes for low pay and without the public recognition their police department counterparts can receive, a perspective bolstered by recent interviews with retired officers and corrections leaders around the country.

“We’re always the bad guys in the public’s view,” said Patricia Caruso, the former head of Michigan’s corrections department. “Everyone knows about police officers, but they still call our corrections officers ‘guards’ a lot of times. It’s very demeaning and degrading.”

New Jersey’s Legislature changed the law in 2018 to identify those who work in prisons as “correctional police officers,” because their powers and responsibilities often mirror those of cops.

Lawmakers and state officials have repeatedly stressed that the vast majority of prison officers do their jobs well, a sentiment echoed by Julie Abbate, who helped launch the federal investigation into New Jersey’s women’s prison when she was with the U.S. Department of Justice.

“In every single jurisdiction there are absolutely far more good staff members than bad,” said Abbate, who has dug into allegations of systemic abuse in multiple facilities and now advocates for safer prisons with the nonprofit Just Detention International. “There’s far more people who want to do the right thing than people who are breaking the rules and committing crimes against women prisoners.”

Even during a recent protest outside the women’s facility, some formerly incarcerated women spoke about officers who’d shown them compassion.

The job can be tough from the get-go.

Recruits fresh out of the academy may only get a two-week orientation before they’re thrown into the busiest shifts, said Luis Soto, a retired major from Northern State Prison who now teaches at Rutgers University.

“You can have up to 80 inmates ... to one officer,” Soto said. “It can be scary at times.”

The job only requires a high school diploma and can include good benefits, but the starting salary is still less than \$44,500 in a state with one of the highest costs of living in the country.

In the last few years, many officers have traded jobs at state prisons for higher paychecks at county jails, Soto said. That once included multiple supervisors who left for Bergen County, where they earned more money despite lower ranks, he said.

Both jobs put you at risk.

“Officers are assaulted, officers are sometimes stabbed, officers get into altercations and they’re out on job injuries for very long periods of time,” said Kimberly Collica-Cox, a criminal justice professor at Pace University.

Two years ago, an officer was slashed across the face at New Jersey State Prison in Trenton, and the state attorney general’s office recently announced charges against nine people who allegedly formed a “hit squad” behind bars to hurt prisoners and staff. Gang members even discussed targeting officers at their homes, prosecutors said.

New Jersey’s largest corrections union, PBA Local 105, has repeatedly said assaults against officers sometimes aren’t taken seriously and that staff feel their discipline options are limited since lawmakers restricted solitary confinement. (That practice can cause serious harm.)

Off-duty officers also take risks.

Faustino Saucedo, who works at the Adult Diagnostic and Treatment Center, restrained a man from jumping off a bridge in March, according to video shot by a passerby. That

same month, Jason Rawa, a 10-year veteran, was injured on an interstate after he stopped to help a driver who'd crashed.

The list of stressors goes on.

There can be tension between staff, and officers have filed lawsuits accusing colleagues of racism and harassment.

Many buildings are aging, and the "disrepair" of the women's prison especially can signal to staff "that because the State does not 'care' enough to fix the facility" it doesn't care about officers' behavior "good or bad," the Lowenstein Sandler report said.

"The buildings were deplorable," said a retired Edna Mahan officer, who was interviewed on condition of anonymity because of the stigma attached to speaking to the press. Two independent contractors who worked at the same prison gave similar impressions.

The strain can add up.

Dozens of prison officers have died by suicide in recent decades, according to union president William Sullivan. Last year was the first without a suicide since 2007, which was likely because of new wellness programs, including a mental health hotline, Sullivan said.

Then there's the pandemic.

Several officers at county and state facilities died with the coronavirus, including Bernard Waddell Sr., Nelson Perdomo and Maria Gibbs. Staff and their families repeatedly told NJ Advance Media they weren't given enough access to tests or protective gear, and their request for hazard pay was denied.

Even as the danger decreased, former Corrections Commissioner Marcus Hicks recently said the department still struggles to recruit new officers and keep the employees they already have.

The newest women's prison report recommended several changes, including paying officers more, installing more cameras and clarifying the rules that guide officer behavior, to lessen the chance that staff violate a policy that's just never been clearly articulated.

Investigators also said prison leaders needed to listen closely to officers.

"Inmates reported that no one is looking out for them and their rights are being abused," the firm wrote. "On the other hand, officers have reported that the inmates are effectively in control of the facility and that inmates do not respect their authority."

That disconnect must be bridged, the report said.