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WEATHER

Clear and turning much colder. Details on Page 7C.

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Jails Crammed, Steaming, Wait

By JIM MERRINER
and JIM GRAY

Sardine-can crowding in metropolitan Atlanta jails has prisoners' tempers hovering just below the flash point, jailers report. Detention officials say they live in fear of sudden and bloody violence.

Police and the courts can't keep up with crime, and the jails can't keep up with the number of criminals. Convicted prisoners for whom there is no room in the state's likewise-crowded prison system are crammed into the jails cheek-by-jowl with prisoners awaiting trial.

Some metro jails are so crowded that at night the prisoners overflow onto mattresses on the floors.

The crush is so serious at at least one jail that prisoners' bonds are being reduced so they can be released to make room for more.

And a new jailkeepers' worry—that some detention officers may be on the wrong side of the bars—recently has entered the public spotlight.

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Prisoners Tense In Their Stench

By GARY HENDRICKS

The stench hits you right off and it never quite leaves your nostrils until you have left the Atlanta City Jail behind a day or two.

It is a bitter-sweet odor, dry and clinging, mixed with the smell of carbon paper, erasers and typewriter ribbons. You can't decide whether it filters down from the cells on the second, third and fourth floors, or is brought in with the arrested street people.

The jail itself is not filthy. Many of the prisoners are, though.

Jailer: "When's the last time you bathed?"

Drunk getting frisked: "Last night."

"Last year," replies the jailer.

Symbolizing cleanliness of the jail are the trusties, prisoners doing time at the Atlanta Bureau of Correctional Services Corrections Center (prison farm), who are constantly sweeping, mopping, cleaning cells and emptying trash cans.

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Jail Officials Fear Violence

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But overcrowding, a problem for which no immediate solution presents itself, remains the jailers' foremost worry.

"We have a lot of violent people come in here," said Atlanta police Capt. M. J. Spears, chief of the City Jail. Although violence "is not an everyday thing," Spears said, "we have a good many (guards) knocked to the floor or cut up or bruised up" by prisoners.

A 44 year-old matron at the jail was treated at Grady Hospital for a beating and choking at the hands of a prisoner several weeks ago. She was saved by other prisoners, who pulled the assailant off of her.

"It's a dangerous situation," said Lt. John Clower of the DeKalb County jail, "and we're damned lucky we haven't had any serious injuries."

The more people you pack into a small area, Clower said, the more vicious they become. Jailers say they are seeing more fights and sexual assaults among inmates and more harassment of guards—even though prisoners are separated according to record and offense.

Outcries from citizens and the judiciary have been frequent in recent months over the severe overcrowding, especially at the Fulton and DeKalb jails.

County jails around the metro area uniformly report crowded conditions. Clower said DeKalb's facility needs at least 10 more deputies to supervise the prisoners properly.

"We haven't had a flare-up. I attribute that to our innovations," said Fulton Sheriff LeRoy Stynchcombe, referring to such amenities as telephone jacks in the cells and television sets in the halls.

The old prisoner practices of igniting toilet paper or sticking braided aluminum foil in light sockets for heating mid-morning coffee have given way to the use of coffee makers in the cells.

A "rolling library" is available to occupy idle minds, and a branch of the Atlanta library system may be established at the jail.

"I guess I attribute the behavior of our prisoners to this getting the steam off with such things," Stynchcombe said, "and somehow I feel they appreciate what we're doing for them."

While the jail's luxuries are rare for Georgia, the Jefferson Street facility remains among the most-overcrowded in the state. At mid-week, there were 916 prisoners behind bars, with 44 forced to sleep on mattresses on the floor.

A survey last fall showed that only 54 per cent of the inmates were awaiting trial while 32 per cent were awaiting transfer to the state prison system or Fulton work camps. The state can't move its prisoners out faster because the 8,000-inmate Georgia system suffers from a 2,000-prisoner bulge.

State law allows prisoners to remain at Fulton until their appeals are exhausted, but a bill to do away with that privilege is before the General Assembly.

Gov. George Busbee has allocated \$4.6 million for prison renovation, but the improvements will make room for only 730 more inmates. Yet 22,500 prisoners spent time at the Fulton jail last year.

In 1974 the average daily population at Fulton was 689, but few days this year have seen the number shrink below 900. Even a \$1 million, 144-inmate wing opened last year has scarcely helped.

Meanwhile, the state pays the county nothing for the daily prisoner costs. City and federal governments pay \$7.50 per prisoner per day.

DeKalb's jail houses about 500 inmates, although the planned maximum capacity was 443.

Noting that most of the inmates are felons, Clower said, "You're talking about a small prison, not a county jail. We're more on the scale of one of the state correctional institutions."

DeKalb is also forced to use the mattress-on-the-floor expedient. The jail was opened just two years ago with only 165 inmates.

Chief Deputy Larry Bradley said the overcrowding problem became severe last fall, blaming it in part on crime generated by the poor economy.

In Clayton County, Sheriff Robert Deyton said conditions have become so crowded that bonds for prisoners are being reduced so they can be released to make room for more. The 15-year-old jail has a capacity of 109 but is also sleeping extra inmates on the floor.

Fayette County's jail, built in 1957, has 28 beds but a population reaching 35 and more.

The story is the same in Cobb County—160 inmates squeezed into a facility planned for 130.

Back in Atlanta, the prisoners number about 350 on weekdays and 450 on weekends, close to the city jail's capacity. The prison farm on Key Road has about 300 persons convicted of drunkenness and other breaches of the public peace in a facility capable of housing 450.

The arrests last week of two Atlanta jailers on charges of robbing a decoy detective posing as a wino in the city jail underlines a worry on the part of detention officials that allegedly corrupt guards increase the already high chances of violence.

One of the arrested guards had a previous arrest and conviction record. The hiring of corrections bureau officers with past criminal records has brought grumbling among public safety officials.

But Atlanta Public Safety Commissioner Reginald Eaves and Davey Gibson, commissioner of community and human development, say you can't rehabilitate a criminal unless you give him a job and a chance to prove himself.

Deputy City Attorney Ferrin Mathews said no law bars the city from hiring ex-convicts.

The controversy began in November when a fireman, Willie Frank Robinson, was automatically fired upon conviction for shoplifting but later was reinstated by the city administration. Meanwhile, three corrections officers with criminal records were hired, according to Corrections Bureau Director J.D. Hudson.