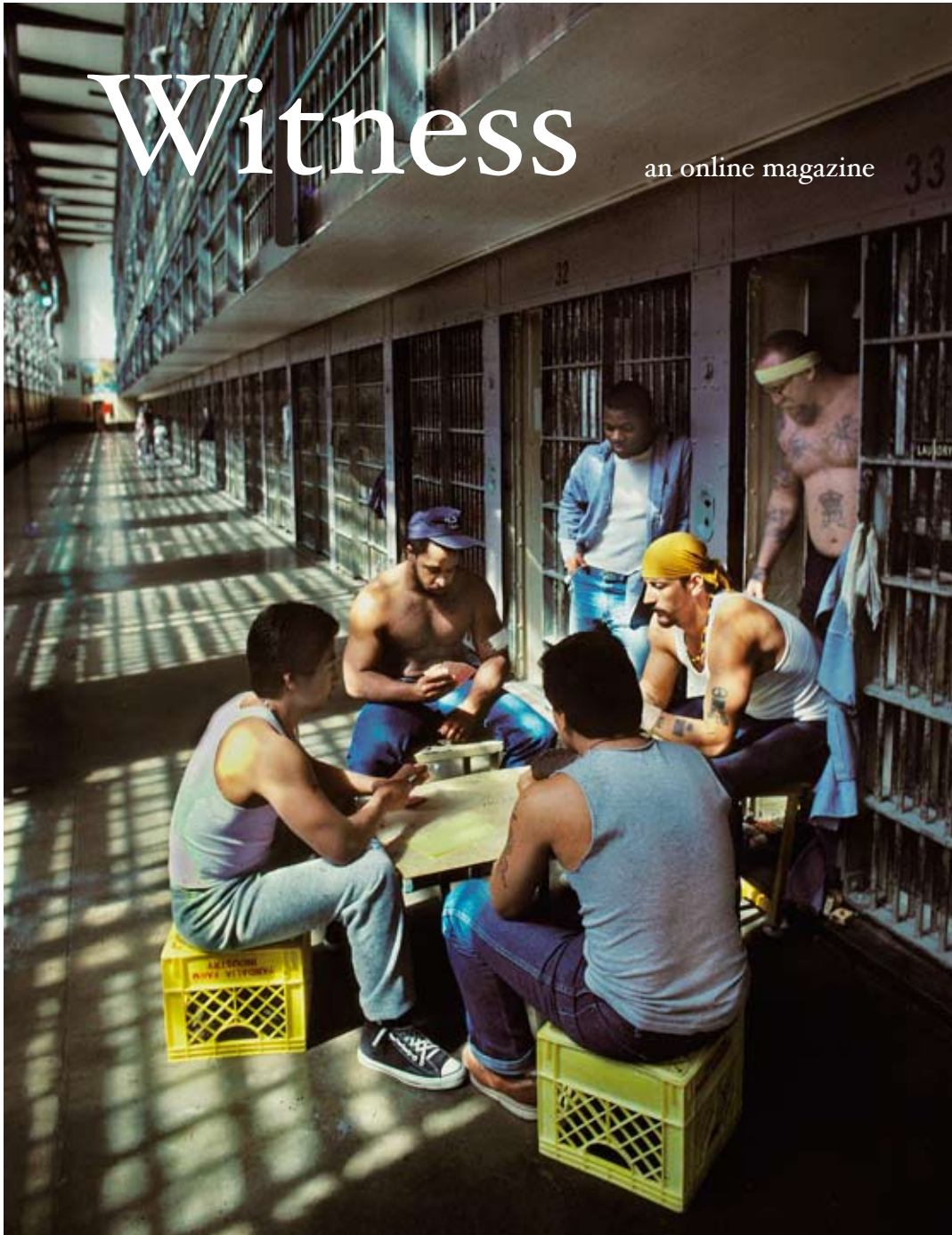


Witness

an online magazine



American Prisons

Photos & Text by Richard Falco

The United States has over two million prisoners locked behind bars on a given day. There are more people incarcerated in the United States than any other country in the world. American prisons hold 25% of the world's prisoners, though the U.S. comprises only 5% of the world's population. According to a report by the Bureau of Justice, the total number of men and women behind bars, on parole and on probation has reached 6.6 million, more than three percent of the U.S. adult population.

There are a number of reasons why there has been such drastic growth. Beginning in the mid 1970's, strict policies of mandatory sentencing were created by many of states throughout the country. Most of these laws were directed at individuals selling and/or possessing illegal drugs. Between 1973 and 1995, the number of people in state and federal prisons increased five fold. Prisons across the country were operating well above capacity. The cost of this incarceration is now \$50 billion annually. Unfortunately, in an attempt to lower expenses, funding for many rehabilitation programs has been decreased or discontinued. This has led to a revolving door crisis wherein the recidivism rates have soared to about 60%. Approximately two-thirds of ex-prisoners will be rearrested within three years.

This policy of widespread incarceration is widely debated. Research by the Department of Justice, the U.S. Sentencing Commission and other agencies has documented that many of these offenders are low-level offenders whose continued incarceration is extremely costly and wasteful prison space. With one out of every four prisoners in jail for nonviolent drug offenses a number of agencies believe that additional spending on drug treatment, job training and education would reduce crime fifteen times. Rehabilitation, however, has become something of a dirty word as America evaluates issues related to crime. A hard truth remains. Each prisoner who emerges unreformed will only start committing crimes again.



Prisons are mean, tough places. Often there is too much time and not enough positive reinforcement.



In many prisons, inmates quickly come to know the term called: rent. Whenever a new inmate enters a cellblock or ward they are immediately confronted by one of the prison warlords or gang leaders. This is done so that there are no illusions as to who holds authority inside. During this confrontation rent will be determined. Rent is the fee an individual must pay in order to stay protected. This can be anything from paying a cigarette a day to the gang leader, making beds, cleaning up, running errands or becoming a homosexual pet to someone or a crew. Usually, at one point or another an inmate will affiliate with one group or another for protection. The alternative is to fight and always having to watch your back.





Overcrowding, combined with fewer and fewer educational or rehabilitation programs, have made prisons tinder boxes that periodically explode. Lock-downs, in which everyone is confined to their cell and counted, are a common occurrences in most prisons.



WOMEN IN PRISON



Though the incarceration rate for men is sixteen times higher than that of women, women's numbers are also rising. Officials are watching with alarm because the female population is actually growing at a faster rate than the male population. In a majority of the situations, there are different factors that contribute to the incarceration of women. Drug and alcohol dependency are still the major culprits which lead both men and women to jail, but there is a twist. A great number of the women in jail today are here because of the relationship they have to the males in their life. Many of the women have been physically or sexually abused. Others are connected to crimes that involve the men they are partnered with. Most of the women suffer from poor education, low self-esteem and no self reliance.



The rehabilitation process is proving to be quite different for women than it is for men. Women appear to adapt better in well-structured environments where discipline is strongly maintained. Programs that incorporate boot camp techniques with education and therapy can create very positive outcomes for women.

These inmates chant as they march down a prison corridor on their way to their classrooms. The program is called: S.T.E.P. (Self Taught Empowerment & Pride).



The vast majority of inmates are high school dropouts. Study upon study has shown that education and job training are the best vehicles for upward mobility. Without them the cycle of poverty is extremely difficult to break. These women are working toward their GEDs.





Prison officials have found that structured environments, coupled with drug and alcohol treatment, education and therapy have drastically lowered the recidivism rates among women. This group session focuses on building self-esteem, confidence, independence and personal responsibility.



A number of institutions around the country are using the STEP concept. Statistical data has shown the program's recidivism rate to be about eight percent. The recidivism rate for the general population of women in prison is sixty-four percent.

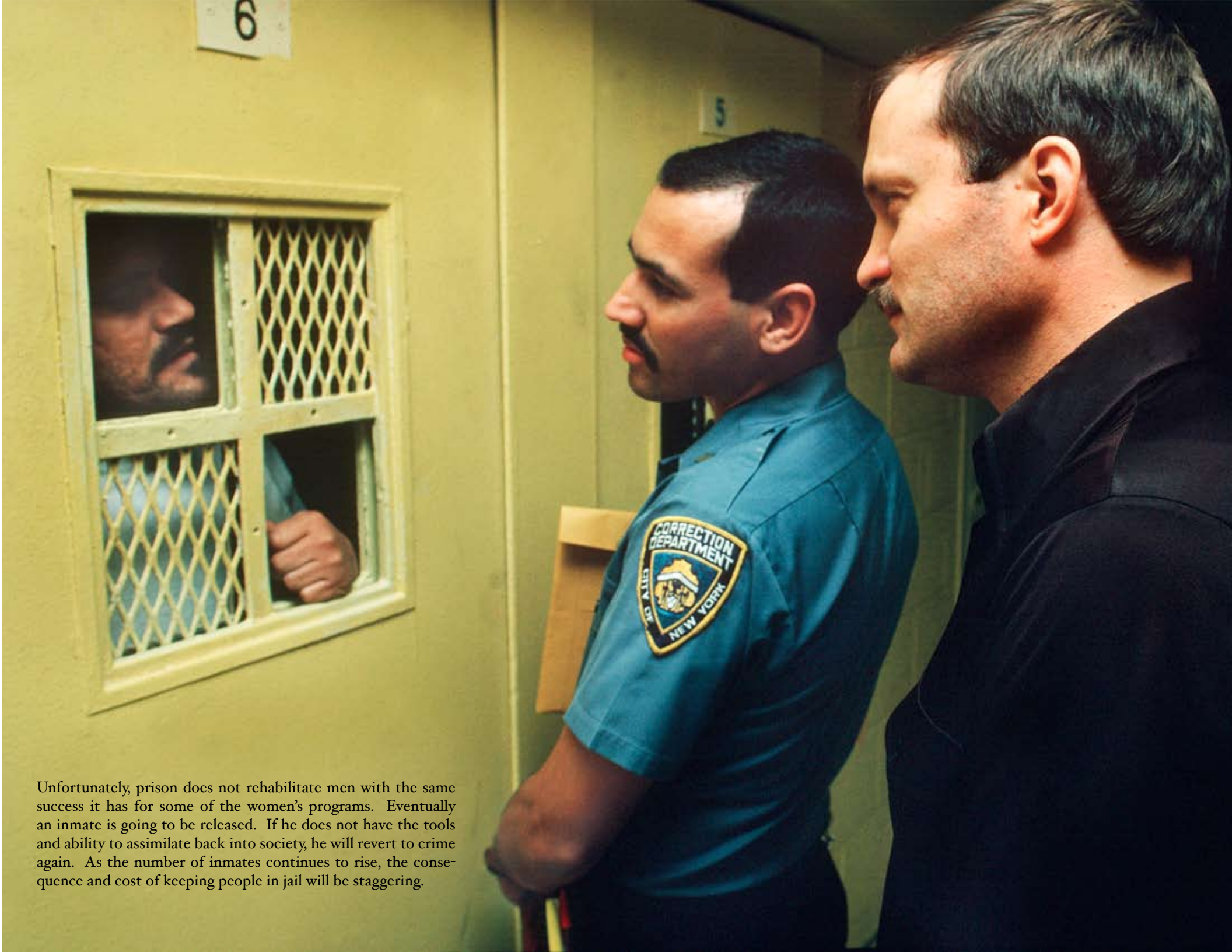


Groomed and gowned, the women of STEP march out of their cellblock chanting. They will march to the graduation ceremony held in the prison's common area.





For some of these women, this is the first time in their lives that they have experienced a sense of accomplishment. The hope is that it will carry over after their release from prison.



Unfortunately, prison does not rehabilitate men with the same success it has for some of the women's programs. Eventually an inmate is going to be released. If he does not have the tools and ability to assimilate back into society, he will revert to crime again. As the number of inmates continues to rise, the consequence and cost of keeping people in jail will be staggering.

Confiscated weapons are displayed for the press. Inmates will make a weapon out of just about anything. Violence, fear and intimidation are part of daily life for an inmate.



A guard watches prisoners from a gun tower. Rehabilitation does not often happen in the men's penal system. The recidivism rates are as high as they have ever been.



An inmate in the solitary confinement is served lunch. Prisoners in solitary stay in their cells twenty-three hours of the day. They are allowed out for a brief walk and a shower.

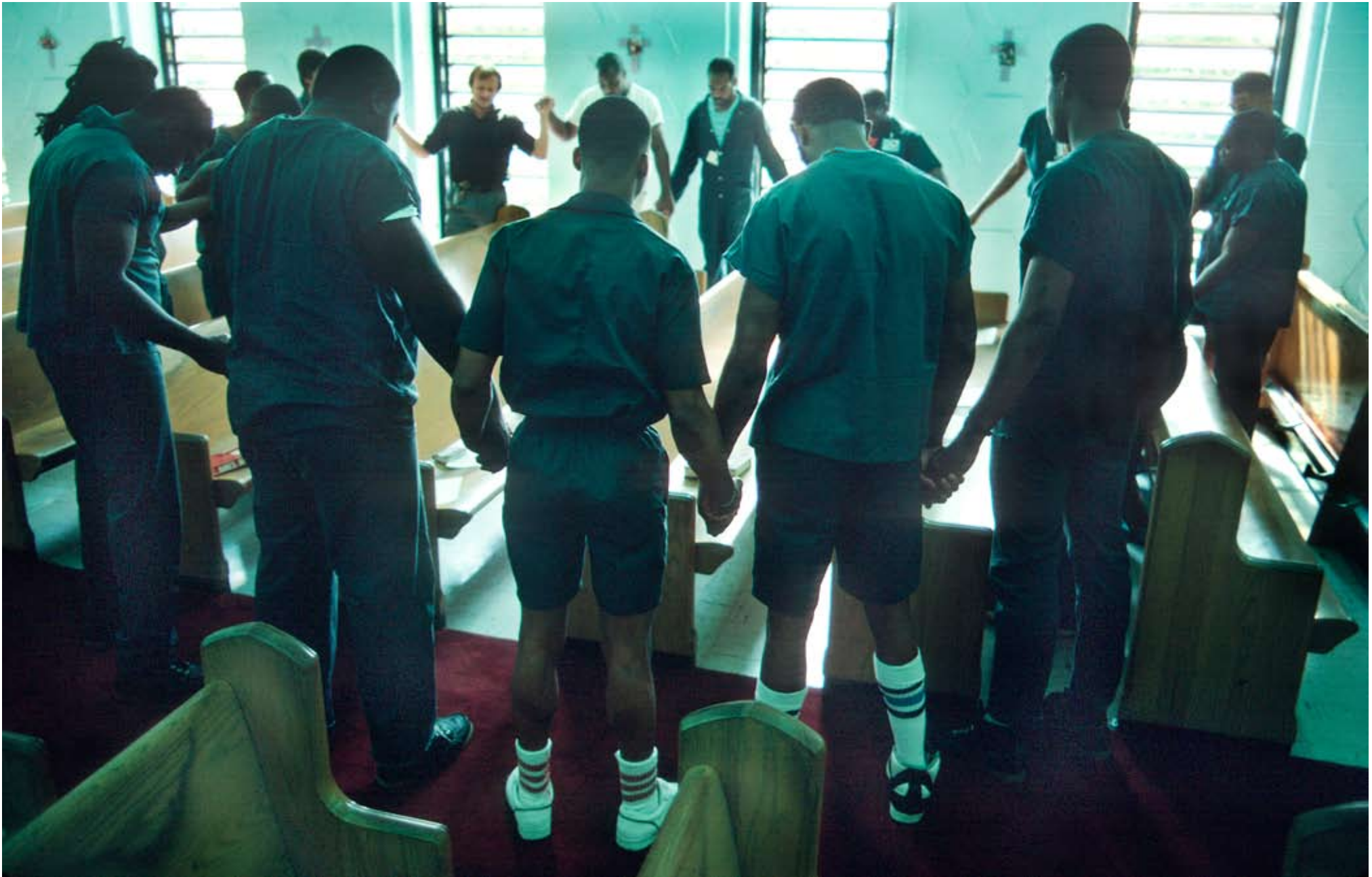


For most inmates the days are long and monotonous. In some facilities, the overcrowding is so bad that there are two to three men in a cell originally made for one.



Inmates workout in the yard, while another has his record reviewed before his parole hearing.





For many inmates, both women and men, religion is a means in which can come to terms with their situation. The two largest groups are Islam and Christianity.



When programs fail or are unavailable, only the efforts of a special individual can change a life. Reverend Dan Shenk is one such individual. Working as a prison chaplain he wears many hats. He believes that in order to change the pathology you must change the man. He is a strong advocate of getting men into drug treatment programs and taking responsibility for their lives. When an inmate shows a desire, he will steer them toward job training. If programs don't exist, he will try to create one. With his mild and quiet manner, he will continually stress the importance of making the right choices and resolving conflict. Officials have often asked him to mediate between revival groups and individuals because he is trusted and respected by all.





The chaplain listens to the complaints of an angry and distraught prisoner held in solitary confinement. Because the inmate has a history of irrational behavior and violence, Reverend Shenk is not allowed inside the cell for his own safety.

This project is a production of

VISION PROJECT Inc.

Vision Project is an organization dedicated to the development of documentary photography and educational programming related to still photography.

The goal of Vision Project is to produce documentary material and educational programs that encourage understanding and awareness about a broad variety of social issues. This information and programming are made available to the general public with a particular focus on members of the younger generation.

Vision Project seeks to reinforce the social, cultural and historical contribution that visual documentary work contributes to society. To reach these goals, we have assembled a group of talented professionals with extensive expertise in photography, web technology, journalism, design, and education.

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One out of every one-hundred Americans is presently in jail.