

sexual attacks called assertions of masculinity

by carla engstrom

The guard frisked Michael before they let him come to the booth.

He seemed in good spirits and happy to have company, even if the visit would be only 45 minutes.

The guard led him to the visitor's room which is surrounded by windows. Michael sat down, leaned back in one of the chairs, unzipped his thin jacket, revealing another thin jacket. He said it was cold walking across the yard.

Michael straightened his shoulder length, honey-brown hair, continuously tapped one of his brown, prison-issued shoes and politely waited to introduce himself.

He didn't appear hesitant to speak out.

Younger inmates, 18- to 20-year-olds, who can't protect themselves, are the target for sexual assaults by older inmates, Michael said. Their inexperience makes them fair game for anyone who is serving a long term and who is indifferent to the consequences if caught.

At the Nebraska Penal Correctional Complex, Michael is known by a five-digit number and to protect himself he used an alias while talking about life behind bars.

He speaks from the experience of being in and out of detention centers and prisons since he was 11. He has not completed high school, is serving a 15- to 20-year sentence for armed robbery and will be eligible for parole in 11 years.

Inmates submit to sexual relations out of fear or because they agree to the advantages such a relationship can offer, Michael said.

Older experienced inmates can physically force, sweet talk or threaten younger inmates into submission, he said.

When the 25-year-old inmate entered the prison, he said, a few inmates tried to "run the game" on him, which is prison slang for a confidence (con) game.

A few inmates approached him and tried to frighten him into submission.

"One guy said, 'You're going to be good for somebody ain't ya', and I said, 'good for myself.'"

"Later another inmate came up to me and said, 'You need anything from the store, any candy, cigarettes, drugs? Is anybody messing with you, come to me and I'll take care of it.'"

The inmate, who was trying to sweet talk Michael into a sexual relationship, had first arranged for other inmates to frighten him, so when he approached Michael he would feel he had a friend. The inmate also would be offering protection and contraband or goods in return for sexual favors.

"He takes care of you just like you were his lady," Michael said.

These relationships are commonly referred to as punk relationships. The man dominating is called the daddy and the inmate who submits is called a kid, a punk or a lady. The punk plays the role of a woman to the daddy.

"Punk relationships are a power structure thing," Michael said. "They (daddies) think that violence proves them to be a man. One guy brags that the guards are even scared of him, that he's got several ladies."

"There's always someone trying to make a kid out of somebody. These guys might be gay on the streets, but most of them have got enough time in here that



Photo by Ted Kirk

Three inmates stand at the entrance to the cell blocks of the men's reformatory. Conditions are becoming more crowded because judges are giving more and longer sentences.

they'll never see the streets. So it's the only relationship they'll ever know.

"See, some guys have found a home here. They don't want to go back on the streets. They never had it so good here."

Corrections Director Joseph Vitek said the younger, depressed and inexperienced personality is more susceptible to a rape.

"It is like a female rape in the free world. If a girl lies down in terror and fear and is passive, it doesn't make it any less of a rape, and this is true in prison.

"A man raping a man or younger boy is not primarily satisfying sexual urges, but is degrading the person he is doing it to. It is sexual violence," Vitek said.

Stephen Youngblut, deputy Lancaster county attorney said, the assaults occur in the cells as one or two cellmates attack another.

Assaults can occur in daylight hours, too, he said. "The cell doors open at 7 a.m. and close at 8 p.m. Inmates are able to wander the institution and it's my understanding that they don't have enough guards to keep one inmate under surveillance."

"Not very many guards are around at night, maybe two guards in a cell house. Very often inmates may be afraid to call for help because of the inmate code: you don't snitch on somebody else."

Snitches, rapists and child molesters are on the lowest end of the penitentiary echelon, according to Michael, and they can't live in general population. For safety they must be housed in places like the hospital or solitary confinement.

"Prison is like a big show. Everybody is on stage. Everybody has a role to play, gangsters, drug addicts, snitches."

As for the attack, Youngblut said, "It's a macho type crime. One individual dominates and controls another and I don't think they gain much sexual satisfaction."

Inmates strive to assert their masculinity. They don't have women to tell them how big and strong they are or someone to boost their ego. So they are not able to brag about the women they've slept with, the robberies they just pulled or how they fooled the police. They do not even have a meaningful job to boost their ego."

Inmates' assertion comes out in a negative way, the attorney said. They turn to domination of prisoners.

Michael said he doesn't worry about men dominating him because of his reputation, a hands-off policy. It is obtained a number of ways, by killing, knifing or beating someone.

"I got my reputation by letting others know that if they're going to mess with me, they're going to have to kill me," Michael said.

This is an acceptable solution to the domination problem, according to Doug

Shada, correctional counselor at the reformatory.

"The man has to either pay for protection or let people know if anybody is going to touch him he is going to break his head open," Shada said.

"But if a guy just whispers and just walks away, they're going to follow him like a dog in heat. It's very tough for the weak to survive, unless they have protection."

"Unfortunately the men don't think the administration can protect them," Shada said.

Director of Correctional Services, Joseph Vitek, however, does not agree with Shada's view on how prisoners should handle the domination problem. Vitek said if the aggressor knows another inmate won't stand for the attack and will report it, the inmate is less likely to get attacked.

"I would not advise a young man to fight back or to put himself in such a position, but to report it," the director said.

There has been an increase in homosexual activity because of "the glorification of homosexuals in the news media and the pornographic press" and the prisoners' rights movement which started in the early '70s, Vitek said.

"The way the rape occurs hasn't changed too much over the years, but the frequency is directly proportional to the amount of sexual promiscuity and homosexual activity in the free world," Vitek said.

Rapes are often reported days or months after the fact, he said, and, because of the time gap it's impossible to get a conviction.

The morality of the snitch system has been revamped, Vitek said. In the past it was acceptable to snitch if someone violated a prisoner's rights.

But because of the prisoner's movement, an inmate can testify only if the charges are against the administration, Vitek said.

Another sexual problem behind the walls is comparable to prostitution, Vitek said.

He compared some inmates to "a woman who lets everybody touch her, except this one guy. This guy wants some and takes some. Then she screams rape. In those cases it is damn near impossible to prosecute and strangely those are the ones who scream the loudest."

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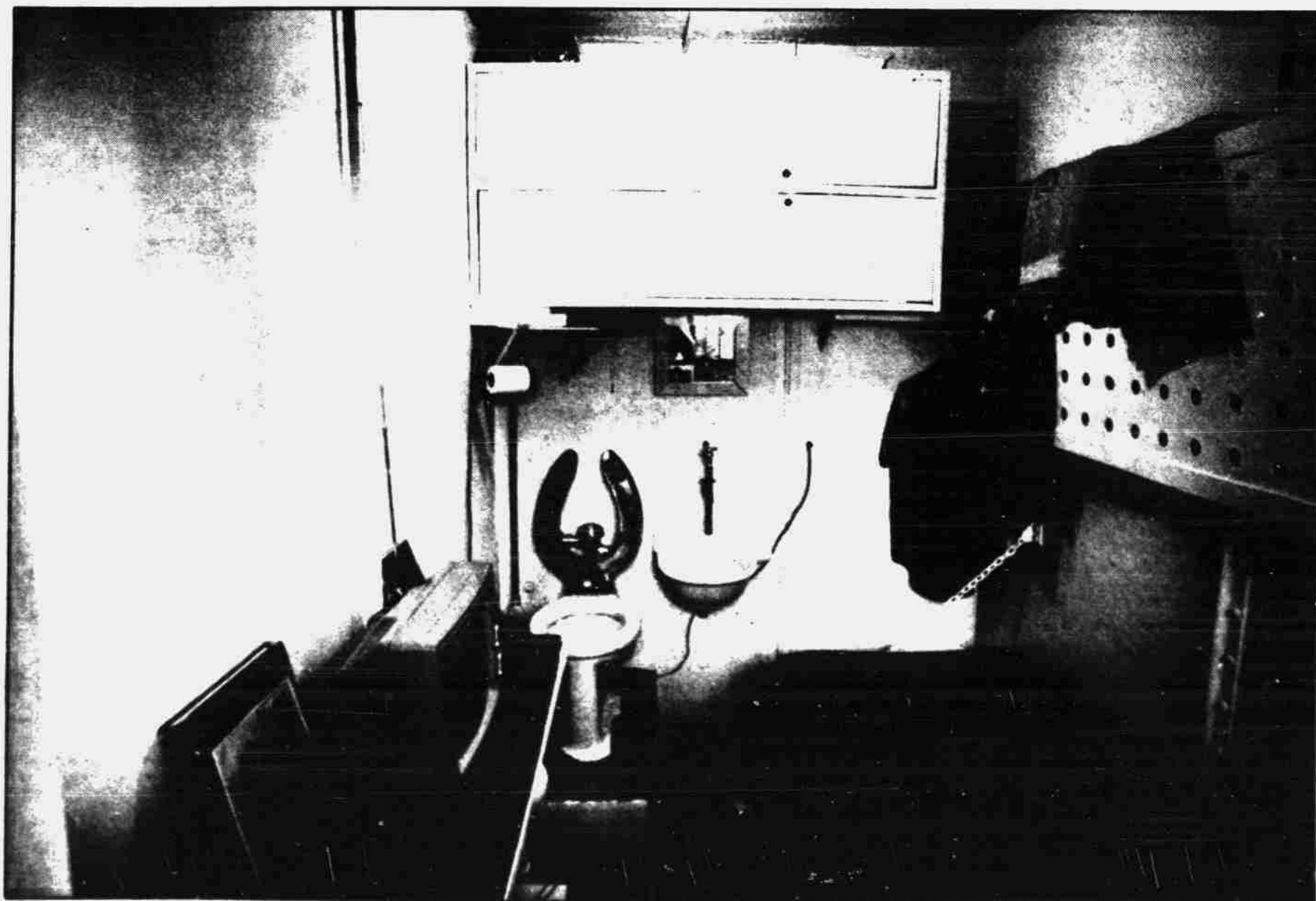


Photo by Ted Kirk

One man lives in this cell at the men's reformatory. The cell has about 50 square feet.