

Crowley prison riot: New details of unheeded warnings emerge in epic lawsuit

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published: Wed., Dec. 21 2011

Seven years ago inmates at a private prison in southeastern Colorado went on an all-night rampage, chasing the shorthanded staff from the premises, attacking suspected snitches, setting fires and causing millions of dollars in damages. Now documents filed in a long-running legal battle confirm what many prisoners have been saying all along -- that prison officials received ample warning of impending trouble but failed to take action in time.

The 2004 riot at the Crowley County Correctional Facility, operated by the Corrections Corporation of America, has emerged as a kind of case study in the multiple ways things can go wrong in a for-profit prison. The night of the incident, the prison had only 47 employees on duty, including eight trainees, to supervise 1,122 inmates. There had been [growing tension at the facility for weeks](#) over issues ranging from food and rec privileges to the presence of numerous disgruntled inmates recently shipped in from Washington and Wyoming to fill beds.

The Colorado Department of Corrections' after-action report would later blast CCA officials for inadequate training and emergency response procedures -- but the DOC's own monitoring of the prison up to the night of the riot had been cursory at best, marked by a distinct failure to follow up on report after report of inmate complaints and indications that the place could "go off" soon.

Yet some of the most telling details about the riot and its aftermath have emerged slowly, over the course of an epic lawsuit filed against CCA on behalf of close to 200 Crowley prisoners. The plaintiffs, who claim to be among the majority of prisoners who "sat out" the riot by quietly lying down in the yard or in their units, contend that CCA could have prevented the riot by responding promptly to trouble signs -- and that they were abused and injured by corrections officers in the aftermath of the incident.

A recently filed court document includes excerpts of depositions by several current and former Crowley officers, who acknowledge having numerous discussions with inmates and among themselves about brewing trouble in the days and hours leading up to the riot on July 20, 2004. A body-slammng use of force on a Washington inmate earlier that day prompted several inmates to inform guards that the Washington group was going to seek payback that night. One told staffer Wanona Wyker that "he had been trying to tell staff that there was going to be a riot...that someone needed to listen, that Washington inmates were saying they were going to tear the place up."

Despite numerous warnings, Crowley's commanders failed to lock down the facility or stagger the recreational time. Instead, the warden left at five, and a skeleton crew remained when all 1100 inmates were released for recreation. A confrontation between a group of officers and Washington inmates quickly led to a staff evacuation; emboldened inmates poured into the housing units and began to help themselves to free weights. Once they realized no one was going to stop them, they started breaking windows and doors, smashing electronic control centers, busting fixtures and flooding tiers, setting fires and rifling case managers' records.

Many inmates say they attempted to wait out the rampage in their cells but were driven out by smoke -- or, after the SORT teams arrived hours later, tear gas. In many cases, prisoners say they were [treated more harshly by staff in the aftermath of the riot](#) than anything they endured during the disturbance. An account filed by inmate Justin Dougherty is typical of the plaintiffs' claims of injury and abuse:



He was on his way to the weight room when the riot started on the west side [and] he heard the announcement to lock down. He tried to cross to the other side of the yard, but was unable to return to his unit on the east side. Guards shot at him as he tried to get to the east yard, a Molotov cocktail exploded near his feet, and inmates assaulted him...Shot 3-4 times with rubber bullets and bird shot...BBs were embedded in back, face, and lips. Assaulted by other inmates: hit with piece of debris in the back, punched on side of head, chased by 5-6 inmates with weapons after escaping the chaos in the yard. Bruises on neck, back, forearms.

"Smoke and gas inhalation in Unit 1-a for approximately 2 hrs. Coughing, skin and eyes burning. Saw inmates looking through files for reasons to physically assault other inmates. Saw inmates being chased, stabbed, and one thrown off the tier. Hid in a cell, under a bunk, until water filled with feces began flooding the cell. When SORT arrived, they made him lie face down in the fetid water to be pulled from cell and cuffed.

"Air full of gas. Hands purple and swollen with no feeling, wrists cut and bleeding from being cuffed in back for 8 hrs. Still has scars...Denied water in yard even though eyes burning from gas and smoke. Denied medical treatment. Denied water for nearly 24 hours. No food for 20-24 hours. Forced to wear soiled clothing for 3 days. Dehumanized and humiliated. Has lung problems caused by the smoke inhalation and tear gas during the riot."

The lawsuit, brought by Boulder attorney Bill Trine and [Washington-based Public Justice](#), has involved taking statements from dozens of CCA employees as well as hundreds of former Crowley inmates. After more than six years of litigation, no trial date has yet been set, but a status conference in the case is scheduled for later this week.