

**TENNIS RACQUETS, TORTURE  
AND THE NEW MEXICO STATE PRISON RIOT OF 1980:  
A DISCUSSION FOR GRIEVANCE SYSTEMS**

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The New Mexico State Prison-Santa Fe in 1980 was plagued with overcrowding, limited programming, and insufficiently trained guards. It came to a boiling point one day as a group of inmates got drunk from homemade hooch and began one of the most deadly and violent prison riots in U.S. history. Guards were beaten and raped with their own night sticks. Over 30 inmates died in the carnage. Inmates were tortured every way imaginable. One inmate had his flesh melted away with a welding torch.

**WHAT WAS LEARNED**

The public scoffs at tennis courts at tax payers expense within prison walls. But what prison systems across the country have learned from this incident is that decent food, recreational, spiritual, and educational programming are far less costly than the medical costs of repairing the bodies of staff and inmates and the astounding costs of the law suits that resulted from the riot. (The State of New Mexico is still to this day recovering from this financial burden.)

**THE OVERWHELMING COMPLAINT HOWEVER...**

After all of the blood and body parts were mopped up. After the inmates were interviewed and they complained about the food and lack of programs, the overwhelming complaint was WE ARE NOT HEARD. After this riot, grievance systems and policies became implemented in prisons throughout the country. Many prisons, juvenile and adult employ a full time grievance coordinator. They found that the better the grievance system is implemented the VIOLENT BEHAVIOR DECREASED.

Psychiatric and residential child-care facilities have also found the value of grievance systems. We have learned that GRIEVANCE SYSTEMS ARE A BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT TOOL. If they are writing about their anger and frustration, they are less likely to be acting out their anger and frustration.

When a client threatens to write a grievance on you, encourage him/her with a supportive attitude. If you say with a angry voice "FINE, BE SURE TO SPELL MY NAME RIGHT H-O-R- T -O-N!!" He's got you hooked. Support the client in writing a grievance as an acceptable, positive behavior choice.

**DON'T EXPECT A THANK YOU**

Be prepared for the clients to complain about the grievance system. They are not going to say "I appreciate you doing this for us." They will say "why should I write it, it never does any good any way." But they will say this as they are walking off with a pencil and paper in their hand.

If a grievance system can work in maximum security prisons, it can work in your Unit or group Home.