

Surviving in the Hood

Not picking up the signs can spell disaster

We read a lot about street survival techniques and training, and about the importance of knowing basic things such as interpreting body language. We recognize that these things have a huge impact on a cop's safety. The fact is that having "street sense," that kind of sixth sense that allows a person to intuitively know what to expect, is something that is innate. Most cops have it, that's why they gravitate toward law enforcement. Some have it as a result of immersion, they've grown up in an environment that forced them to develop this survival tool, and others have it after gradually becoming exposed to the street through other avenues. No matter how or where you acquired your instincts, it's something that every cop needs in order to survive.

If you doubt that street smarts aren't important to every cop's well-being, consider it from the perspective of a correctional officer—that's right, *Correctional Officer (CO)*. We all know the other words used to describe them: guard, detention officers, screw and some others that aren't fit to print. But when you think about whose life is more at risk every moment of their shift, hands down it's got to be the CO.

Those of us outside the walls have a distinct advantage over our brothers inside. We carry guns, OC, batons and Tasers. We have the ability to get into our vehicles and remove ourselves from dangerous situations, if that's an option that we choose. We can use our radios to call in reinforcements when we are outnumbered. In short we have some relief should we need it.

Now consider the COs. Once they step inside the walls that gate clangs shut behind them, a tangible sign that there's no escape. They are not only expected to maintain order, but they are expected to do so without any weapons. All that they have to survive is their training and instincts. Granted, there are some officers that are armed, but they are in towers in the yard, or on special response units summoned as a last resort. Except for those instances, it's each officer's ability to read the inmates in his charge that determines his survivability.

Picture your beat. You know the hot spots, where to expect trouble. You also know where the areas are that allow you to relax, maybe grab a cup of coffee. Inside the walls, each cell block is "the hood." There are no areas that aren't trouble spots. The COs must watch their backs 24/7. Every neighborhood inside is a bad neighborhood; every beat is dangerous.

I've had the opportunity to be inside several facilities, to include the Rhode Island (RI) State Prison. I've worked with the training staff and I've discussed officer survival with one of the Instructors, Officer John Bray. In addition to being involved with in-service training and recruits, he regularly pulls shifts in the cell blocks. John is also Commander of an Honor Guard that travels around the country, attending the funerals of COs that have been killed in the line of duty.

John is keenly aware of the importance of officer survival. He feels that one of the main reasons that COs are killed is due to apathy. They become too familiar with the inmates, grant them favors, i.e., give them cigarettes, gum, etc., and then pretty soon one day it turns into a cuff key. He tries to instill in the new recruits the importance of being firm and not showing favoritism toward anyone. The prisoners are no different than our bad guys on the street, they're looking for an opening; they're looking for the weak link.

So things that we use on the street—eye contact, a firm voice and a firm grip whenever we go hands on, these are all critical inside the walls. Routine events like escorts, pat downs and strip searches, need to be done authoritatively without the least bit of hesitation. Any reticence on the part of the officer to perform these tasks is interpreted as a sign of weakness. When that happens, John advises that a mental or physical challenge is sure to follow. That can be a problem when all the officer has with him is a radio that may or may not work. And since there are many blind spots inside, not to mention that not all areas have camera surveillance, an officer does not want a physical challenge any time soon.

Twelve years or so ago, basic self-defense was taught to the COs. Thankfully the correctional system has advanced beyond that point; they now teach communication skills that help prevent and defuse potential problems. They have also incorporated more pragmatic physical skills such as ground fighting, jiu jitsu and kick boxing. Traditionally, COs have been on the short end when it came to money for training and equipment. That trend is beginning to change. RI Corrections now has a Judgmental Training Simulator to augment their firearms and less lethal capability.

But as is the case on the outside, it all comes down to the individual officer. John cautions his newbies to always know their surroundings and to keep their backs covered. He recognizes that being a CO is a vocation—it's a calling. Not everyone is cut out for the job, especially when you consider that you are always outnumbered. In the case of John's facility it's 135 to 1, bad odds in anyone's book. Their motto is, "We work the toughest beat in the state." I certainly wouldn't dispute that notion at all. These guys and gals are warriors extraordinaire. They regularly do the job that many of us would never consider doing. Officer survival—it's a matter of life and death, especially inside the walls.

Stay safe brothers and sisters!