

## **Prison employees' arrests detailed**

**From hot checks to murders, prison workers frequently charged**

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**They're accused of fighting with their families, getting drunk in public, writing hot checks, driving drunk and getting caught with illegal drugs.**

**Occasionally, they're arrested on accusations of murdering, setting fire, stealing, laundering money, smuggling illegal immigrants, even robbing a bank or impersonating a police officer.**

**That was the snapshot that emerged Thursday as state prison officials made public a list of Texas corrections employees who have been arrested during the past three years. The list of charges is a cross-section of the criminal code.**

**The data were released under the Texas Public Information Act four days after the Austin American-Statesman disclosed that at least 761 employees of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice were listed by the agency as having been arrested during 2005. The details released Thursday showed 767. Another 148 arrests were logged during the first two months of this year. If the arrests continue at their current pace, they would set an annual record.**

**Most of the arrested employees were correctional officers. Although many of the charges were misdemeanors, many others were felonies — including domestic violence charges that are supposed to prevent correctional officers from carrying a weapon, if they are convicted.**

**Many of the employees were wanted on arrest warrants. Four correctional officers in two years were arrested for violating probation on prior convictions, even though agency rules prohibit anyone on probation for any crime from being hired as a correctional officer.**

**Prison officials acknowledged Thursday that although potential hires cannot be on probation, employees may serve probation for some minor crimes.**

**"It's clear we need to look into this issue in more detail," said state Rep. Jerry Madden, R-Richardson, chairman of the House Corrections Committee, which oversees the prisons agency, after being briefed on the figures.**

**In making public the first detailed listing of criminal charges against employees, prison officials included only the incident date, the employees' names, their jobs and the offenses with which they were charged. They did not disclose whether the employees were convicted or whether they were fired.**

**Officials said that information is still being compiled.**

**The number of employee arrests has steadily climbed during the past decade to a record 781 in 2003, the agency's internal statistics show, although officials say the number of workers has remained about the same in recent years.**

**Thursday's report listed 716 arrests in 2004, instead of the 704 reported earlier. In 2003, the new list showed 783 arrests instead of 781.**

**The agency has about 38,600 employees; 23,700 of them are correctional officers. Prison officials attributed the discrepancies to cases where a warden or supervisor initially logged the arrest as one case, though several employees were involved. The offenses listed in the new**

**information were provided by employees and were not confirmed from official records, they said.**

**Notable among those arrests not included in the agency's list was that of Salvador "Sammy" Buentello, the prison system's former head of anti-gang enforcement, who was arrested and indicted in 2004 on felony sexual assault charges. He recently pleaded guilty to unlawful restraint and five counts of official oppression, all misdemeanors, in exchange for probation and fines.**

**In recent days, officials and correctional staff have suggested that the growing arrest rates highlight a need to increase the pay scale for correctional officers. Texas ranks 47th in the nation, starting trainees at about \$22,000 a year.**

**Kathy Walt, press secretary to Gov. Rick Perry, would not comment on the new arrest details, saying she had not reviewed the data. But she disagreed that pay is necessarily a key factor.**

**"By that argument, there'd be a lot of reporters with arrest records . . ." she said, insisting that the arrest data should be closely reviewed. "Certainly, though, you would expect those who are guarding not to be on probation or charged with the same crimes as the inmates."**

**According to the agency's newly released data, the serious felony charges in which employees have been arrested ranged from capital murder of a child, murder, negligent homicide to bigamy, indecent exposure and child pornography.**

**One officer was arrested on charges of passing a fake \$20 bill. Others were arrested on charges of interfering with a 9-1-1 call. Another, on charges of the promotion of child pornography.**

**On one of the murder charges, the Houston Chronicle reported in September 2004, a woman and her husband, who is a correctional officer, were arrested in the death of her baby in 2003.**

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