

# Visitors Make Drug Deliveries to Inmates

By Athelia Knight

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Tony's camper reeked with the smoke and aroma of marijuana as it rolled up the hill toward the prison, carrying 25 women on their way to visit the men of Lorton. The trip from *The Avenue* in downtown Washington had taken about a half-hour on this evening of Nov. 22. It was enough time for some of the passengers to smoke a joint or two, and for one rider, who wore her hair in tiny braids held by silver beads, to roll a dozen marijuana cigarettes.

I had watched her during the trip as she wrapped her dope—she called it "diamond"—in

small sheets of paper, licked the ends shut, and placed the cigarettes in her breast pocket.

The first stop was Central, the largest of

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## THE AVENUE TO LORTON

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### PART 2

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Lorton's six facilities, a village of medium-security dormitories that house inmates serving moderate and long sentences. Three passengers

got off, including me and the woman I had been observing. As we approached the front gate we were greeted by a large sign that read: "Attention: Search Yourself Now So You Will Not Carry Contraband Into Visiting Hall." What would the woman do?

She slowed down, unzipped her beige corduroy slacks, rearranged something in the crotch, and proceeded to the tall, wire front gate, which was opened electronically by a watchman in a tower above and to the side of us. We walked along a short sidewalk about 15 feet and entered the checkpoint hall of the prison. It was a

See AVENUE, A8, Col. 1

# Visitors, With Drugs Hidden, Are Searched and Allowed In



**AVENUE, From AI**  
medium-sized, rather nondescript room, not unlike a rural bus station, with a half-dozen or so sofas scattered about, and orange, blue and yellow lockers—where we could store our pocketbooks—lining a side wall. On the other side of the room, behind a desk, sat a female corrections officer, and behind her were two green doors leading to bathrooms for men and women.

By the time we got there, about 15 people were in line waiting to get through a metal detector, past another electronically opened door, into a partially glass-enclosed room where we would all be searched. Before taking a place in line, the woman with the marijuana went into the men's room. When she reappeared a few minutes later, I got in line behind her. She seemed extremely anxious, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, nervously tapping her right foot. When her turn came, she showed the officer an identification card and gave the name and six-digit prison number of the inmate she was there to see. The officer punched the computer to check whether her name was on the visiting list; it was.

The woman then walked around the counter and stuck her right hand through a small window opening. An officer stamped the back of her hand, and told her to go into the next room, where she was searched by a female guard. It was a lightning-quick search; she was cleared for the visit. I had arranged to visit with a prisoner myself, so I went through the same process, following behind the woman.

We walked out a back door and along another sidewalk for about 20 feet, through another tall wire gate, then down the pavement another 50 yards to the visiting hall. It was a large room, the size of a school cafeteria. Two corrections officers sat at a desk near the front of the room. More than 100 visitors and inmates sat in rows of worn cushioned sofas and straight-backed chairs facing one another.

The woman, after handing one of the officers a slip of paper on which her inmate's name had been written, was ushered into an adjacent waiting room containing a few church pews and chairs. Soon a muscular inmate in blue jeans, a V-neck red sweater and brown shoes came to the door and waved for her to come out. They took seats three rows away from the two guards at the desk and about the same distance from a third guard who was leaning against a door that leads to the room where inmates are strip-searched after the visits. She sat in the cushioned seat and he sat in the chair facing her. They talked for more than an hour, rarely touching, and showing little emotion.

Finally she went to a dimly lit bathroom in the corner of the visiting hall. When she returned to her cushioned seat, she was clutching something in her right hand. The two leaned forward in their seats and wrapped their arms around one another's waists. She slowly ran her right hand under the inside of the back of the inmate's sweater and up to the middle of his back. She then took her right hand from beneath the sweater and her hand was empty. The transfer had been made so smoothly that the guards did not notice.

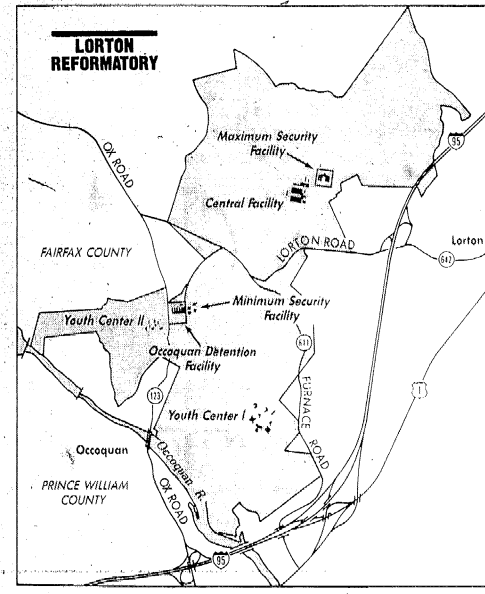
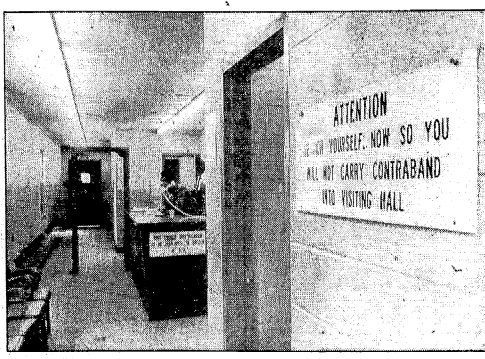
During several visits inside three of Lorton's facilities, I learned the many places where women hide drugs so prison officers cannot find them. The most popular hiding spot was the crotch of the pants. The female guards generally patted the thighs, but no higher. If an officer questioned a bulge there, the standard reply was "It's that time of the month." I never heard a guard challenge that story.

\* One night on my ride from *The Avenue* to the prison, a slender woman, wearing a gray two-piece outfit, taped a cellophane-wrapped white powdered substance that looked like heroin inside the center of her gray wool tam-o-shanter. She then had a tam cover her shoulder-length hair so the packet did not rattle.

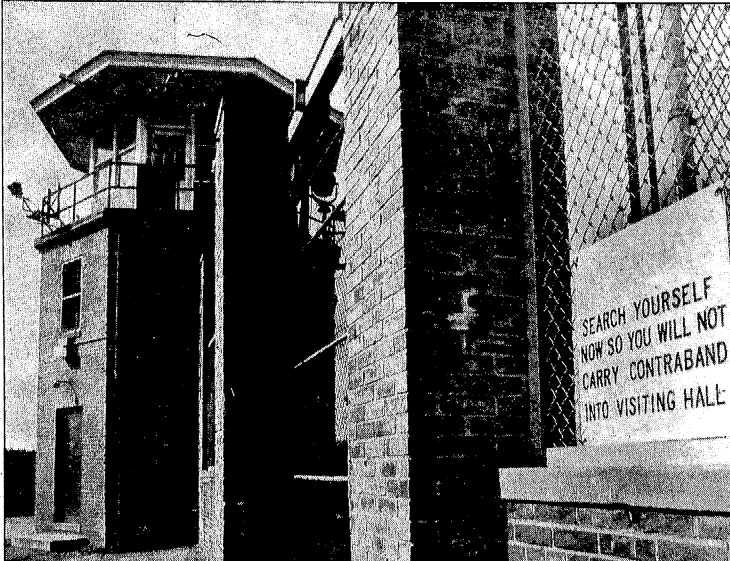


Photos by John McDonnell—The Washington Post

**Top right, checkpoint area for visitors entering the Maximum Security Facility; above, room in which female visitors are searched in Central Facility; right, a map of the Lorton grounds; below, the wall and tower at the Central Facility.**



By Peter Alberg for The Washington Post



The second woman, who was wearing a hat lined with fur, told the woman in the gray outfit that she put her "stuff" around the sides of her hat.

When the two women reached the prison that night, their hats were not examined.

Three weeks later, I wore a hat on visits to three Lorton facilities—Central, Maximum and Youth Center 1. Only once—at the youth center—did an officer ask me to take off my hat so that she could search it.

The manner in which one was dressed seemed to determine the thoroughness of the search. When I wore jeans and a leather jacket, I was patted very closely by a female guard. A few weeks later, I returned

in tweed slacks and a full-length coat; the same guard patted me only slightly.

The visitors often seemed to know which officers at Lorton search them closely and which ones do not.

One night in the parking lot at Central, a young mother carrying a baby talked with a companion about how they hid contraband on an infant when they visited Occoquan, one of Lorton's medium-security facilities.

"Do they check the baby's diaper?" the woman asked.

"No," the mother said. "They just pat around the hat on his head."

"They are sweet over at Occoquan," the woman said with a smile.

In the crowded visiting areas, sometimes as few as two officers watched hundreds of inmates and visitors. Once I saw a fat woman with a short Afro hair style place something in the unzipped fly of an inmate's bib overalls as they hugged. Another time I saw a woman pass something under a table to an inmate. They also transferred drugs in kisses.

The one part of the drug smuggling routine that I could not see firsthand during my trips to Lorton was the final stage: how inmates got the drugs past the officers who strip-search them after most visits. Several prisoners told me they had become masters of the art of partially swallowing a drug, packed balloon so that it lodges in their

throat and can easily be coughed up once they get past the strip-search. They said that if they have difficulty prying the balloon from their throat, they gag themselves with their fingers or by swallowing shampoo. Some inmates said they put a string on the balloon and tie it to a back tooth, then yank it back up later like a fishing line.

The visits also gave me an opportunity to see how these men and their women socialized. Most of the inmates were as well dressed as the women who came to see them—in some cases even better dressed. Some inmates wore designer jeans, sweaters and gold chains, occasionally even a suit. A few had on dark sunglasses. Most of the visitors and inmates are black. They are mothers and sons, wives and husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends, and a few gay men and their lovers.

There are no conjugal visits at Lorton. There also is no privacy in the visiting lounges. At the lounge in Central, also known as *The Hill*, which houses 1,086 inmates, men and women hugged and kissed; some put their hands in each other's genital areas as "smu"; children ran up and down the aisles that separate the rows of seats. Because of the crowds, some inmates there prefer to meet their women in the chapel or the classrooms in the prison school, where visits are not closely watched and those who choose to can sometimes have sex with privacy.

One night I went to the school, which sits on a hill overlooking a running track. Only inmates and visitors involved in Lorton programs can meet in the school, which is about a two-minute ride on a corrections van from the checkpoint, past the dorms where the inmates live.

Some of the men get their women involved in the programs just so they can meet in the school. Two officers are stationed in the entrance hallway, where they check identification passes, but there are no guards in the classrooms. This makes it easier not only to have sex, but also to transfer drugs. After the visiting hours are over, the men escort their women outside to the waiting vans, and then return to their dorms without being strip-searched. At the visiting lounge, by contrast, the inmates are not allowed to go outside with their visitors and they are strip-searched after each visit.

The visiting hall in the maximum security facility, known as *The Hill* because of the classic, towering brick walls that surround it, is set up in similar fashion to the one at Central, though it is much smaller and somewhat shabby. On one of my two visits there, I watched several women in the lounge take their small children outside to the pitch-dark prison yard to relieve themselves; the toilets were broken. One night a bearded man and his pregnant girlfriend spread the woman's coat across their laps and necked on the sofa while two officers, discussed what to do about them. The guards ended up doing nothing.

At Youth Center 1, known as *Baby Lorton*, a sprawling campus of four dormitories for teens aged 17 to 25, visitors and their inmates sit at tables of twos and fours in a large room. A guard stands at a podium in the front of the room and checks the visitors and inmates as they arrive. It was at Youth Center 1 that, two days after last Christmas, 200 inmates went on a night-long burning and window-breaking rampage, sparked by unfounded rumors that a woman visitor had been strip-searched by an officer. Twenty-six inmates were transferred to federal prisons after the riot; 13 guards were injured.

A week after that disturbance, I caught a ride from *The Avenue* to Youth Center 1. I walked into the checkpoint, a small room that had a counter to the left of the door and a large-pane glass window to the right overlooking the parking lot. I took a form from a stack on the counter and completed it, giving my name, address and the name of the inmate I was there to see.

On the other side of the room, a female officer was waiting to search me. After carefully examining my pocketbook, wallet and hat, she asked me to bow my head so that she could run her fingers from the scalp to the ends of my hair, messing it up as she went along. Next I had to take off my leather jacket. I handed it to her and she slowly ran her fingers along the lapel, the edges of the coat, the quilted lining and the pockets. She then told me to extend my arms from my side. She placed her hands on the outside of my ribs and slowly patted down to my waist. She patted in the cleavage and pulled the back of my bra and let it go until it snapped me in the back. She patted down the outside of each leg and then the inside, stomping at the thighs.

It was the most thorough of the searches I had undergone during my visits to Lorton. I felt violated, ashamed and angry, and wondered whether any of the other visitors felt similarly. But it seemed that the regular had become accustomed to any kind of frisking, light or heavy; it was just part of the routine of getting inside.

After the search, I walked with two other women out a side door, past a wire gate that was opened by a tower watchman, and then through yet another gate and down the pavement 100 yards, finally reaching a large visiting room on the second story of a brick building. There, a young woman unzipped the front of her blue jeans, took something out, and passed it under a table to my inmate sitting in a chair beside her.

Next Competition along *The Avenue*