Threat-Level Orange [Jumpsuit]: Computer Malfunction Cited as Cause of Cell Door Release in Florida State Prison

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WASHINGTON, DC | Wednesday, September 11, 2013

Summary

A security breach within the maximum security wing of Miami's Guilford Knight Correctional Center, home to nearly 1300 prisoners, may have been due, at least in part, to a malfunctioning albeit newly-installed digital management system, allowing several prisoners to be released and another prisoner to become injured while fleeing an attempted stabbing by rival gang members.

What Happened and Where Did it Happen?

The "all-release" button was enabled at the Guilford Knight Correctional Center in Miami, Florida, releasing several prisoners and could have led to more fatal consequences had three prisoners been successful in their malicious attempts to seize fellow inmate, Kenneth Williams. Williams, 27, was injured when trying to escape the rival gang members who systematically advanced towards his cell after the doors were opened. Williams may have been targeted due to his potential involvement in the attempted homicide of another rival gang member in 2008.

When Did it Happen?

According to an official report, at approximately 7:04pm on June 13, 2013, one of the correctional officers was relieving another officer when the control panel shut down and the cell door locks of the K-81 maximum-security wing were disengaged. The report also states that not all prisoners left their room during the incident, hinting towards the idea that the alleged computer error may have actually been due more to human interference.

How and Why Did it Happen?

As the investigation into the incident continues, there is much speculation as to what really caused the doors to open that night. One theory is that the computer error was actually human error, whether by one of the guards or another inside connection. Other theories follow that the company that installed the $1.4M digital management system upgrade, Black Creek Integrated Systems, failed to install the proper security measures to prevent such an incident from taking place. Vulnerabilities in the computer's architecture and system configuration, especially within the programmable logic controllers (PLCs) used to control several prison functions, were also considered as possible causes.

How Could it Have Been Prevented?

Making the all-release function a "consciously positive action" through the use of an activation key accessible only to senior officers is one way of preventing these types of security breaches, according to John Strauchs, an experienced designer of prison security systems and one of three security researchers who have studied these systems and presented their results at the Defcon hacker conference in 2011.

Sources Cited

Zetter, Kim. "Prison Computer 'Glitch' Blamed for Opening Cell Doors in Maximum-Security Wing." *Wired.com.* Wired Magazine, 16 Aug. 2013. Web. 10 Sept. 2013. < http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2013/08/computer -prison-door-mishap/>