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Hazelton inmates were known to use locks as weapons. Some wanted them banned



KRISTIAN THACKER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The entrance to the prison complex.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) and [John R. Ellement](#)

GLOBE STAFF NOVEMBER 02, 2018

The Federal Bureau of Prisons was urged last month to remove combination locks from all cells at USP Hazelton, the prison in West Virginia where notorious Boston gangster James “Whitey” Bulger [was killed](#), allegedly by [two fellow inmates](#) wielding a padlock stuffed into a sock.

The DC Corrections Information Council, an independent agency in the Washington, D.C., city

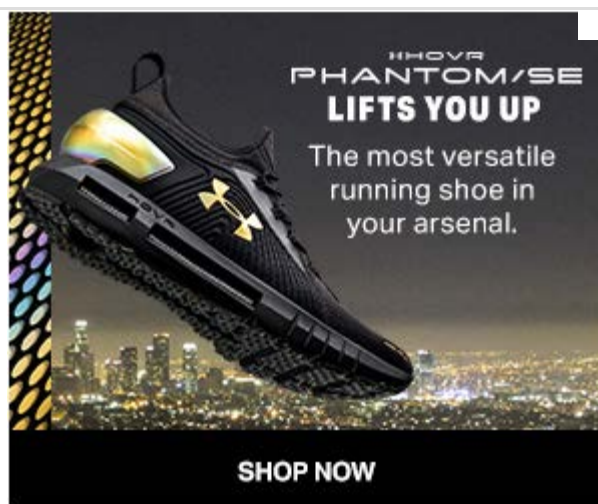
government, visited USP Hazelton in October after a Washington resident was stabbed to death in the prison on Sept. 17. Five months earlier, another man from Washington had also been killed in the same prison.

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Washington has no prisons and sends sentenced inmates to Hazelton and other federal facilities.

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In a letter to the acting head of the Bureau of Prisons dated Oct. 22, the panel reported that Washington inmates had told them that prison administrators should remove combination locks from the entire facility to make the environment safer.

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“Several inmates also mentioned that detached padlocks used to secure foot lockers in cells are commonly used as weapons, often placed in a sock and swung at the head or body of another individual,” the commission wrote.

According to postings on the USP Hazelton website, combination locks are considered a “controlled item” and can be purchased from the prison commissary for \$6.50. The council called on the Bureau of Prisons to install footlockers with embedded locks.

“The use of detached padlocks as weapons on the units is a clear security issue, and one that could be remedied by providing foot lockers with embedded locks,” the council found. “This is but one

corrective action/improvement that the CIC recommends for increased safety while keeping security of individuals’ belongings.”

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Bulger, an infamous South Boston criminal and an FBI informant serving a life sentence for 11 murders, was beaten to death inside his prison cell Tuesday allegedly by two men from Massachusetts with ties to organized crime in the state, the Globe has reported.

[Paul J. DeCologero](#), a member of a notorious North Shore organized crime group whose members

robbed rival drug dealers and dismembered a teenage girl they feared might implicate them, and Fotios “Freddy” Geas, a Mafia hit man from West Springfield, allegedly [beat Bulger](#) with a padlock stuffed into a sock, the Globe has reported.

No charges have been filed against anyone in connection with the death of the 89-year-old Bulger. An investigation by the US attorney for Northern West Virginia, William J. Powell, and the FBI is ongoing. It was not clear whether Bureau of Prisons leadership had responded to the Washington commission’s request.

Bureau of Prisons officials declined to comment Friday, citing pending investigations into Bulger’s death.

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Separately, managers at USP Hazelton acknowledged they have 36 correctional officer vacancies at the facility, where the union says staffing is dangerously low.

In an e-mail, the Bureau of Prisons also acknowledged that noncorrectional officers at USP Hazelton — and its facilities nationwide — often are tapped to set aside their usual work duties and handle correctional officer assignments. Civilian staffers at all Bureau of Prisons facilities are trained to step in when needed, the bureau said.

In the wake of Bulger’s murder, the Bureau of Prisons said in a statement that it was conducting its own inquiry. It did not specify, however, whether it was going to explore why Bulger ended up in general population 11 hours after he arrived at the prison, or whether it was going to look into why Bulger ended up in the same unit as two organized crime figures probably familiar with his career.

The bureau “has sent a team of subject-matter experts to the complex to assess operational activities and correctional security practices and measures to determine any relevant facts that may have contributed to the incident,” the statement said. “The team will make recommendations to the BOP’s senior leadership to assist in mitigating any identified risks.”

Leaders of the union that represents prison workers, along with federal lawmakers and an independent oversight agency, have criticized the prison for its use of noncorrectional officers to fill in.

The agency said it had worked to enhance recruitment efforts at its prison, even as it cuts costs, and

expects to fill 21 of the 36 officer vacancies at the West Virginia prison as soon as possible. It did not say when that would happen.

The agency said staffing levels at the West Virginia complex are consistent with staffing at its prisons nationwide.

It said that nationally, the rate of serious inmate-on-inmate assaults has declined. Bulger's death marked the third killing at USP Hazelton this year.

On the website for USP Hazelton, the Bureau of Prisons said visitation has been halted.

"All visiting at this facility has been suspended until further notice," the statement reads. No reason was given.

Visiting is also suspended at the adjacent 2,000-inmate medium-security FCI Hazelton, which includes a secure women-only prison.

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