

This is Jail

Nothing can prepare you for life behind bars

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Last spring, I became a prisoner in a rural California county jail for 90 days having been sentenced for a non-political offense.

I did some research before surrendering to the authorities, so in many ways I knew what to expect when I arrived. Nothing, however, can really prepare you for the full range of indignity and repression you experience.

For a person committed to some measure of self-reliance and a strategy of carving out as much autonomy as possible within a society created to maintain hierarchical relations, the removal of that autonomy is hard to accommodate.

Compared to most state and federal prisons, county jails are considered less harsh and less dangerous. Some prisoners are on their way to trial. Some, having been sentenced, are awaiting transfer to a state or federal prison. Others are serving short (less than a year) sentences.

So, the level of generalized violence is lower (I only saw one almost-fight during my time there), for the most part racial segregation is relegated to sleeping and eating space, and the guards are sheriff's deputies, which gives them some skill in dealing with people. However, this particular county jail has a rather unpleasant reputation. Many of my fellow prisoners actually thought that a medium/maximum security prison with armed guards was a better place to serve any amount of time. All of them agreed that this county jail was the worst place they'd ever been.

I surrender to the court at 9am. I am chained to three other guys. In the Receiving area we get our jail ID photos taken, a copy of which is entered into the sheriff's department database, while the other is imposed on a plastic wristband that we have to wear at all times.

Of course, there is a barcode, or actually two barcodes. One is our Personal File Number (PFN), which follows us for the entire time we're under supervision (arrest through the end of probation), and the other is the jail's number. I never saw anyone's wristband get scanned. Thirteen hours later, I have a bunk.

One of the first things I notice is the cold. Aside from the relentless and unpredictable noises, recycled air is a mundane characteristic of incarceration. I eventually get used to the regulated temperature.

I initially wondered about the sodden toilet paper covering almost every vent, but after the first day, I am thankful for all the collective efforts of the hundreds (really more like thousands) of men and boys who've taken the time to create at least a partial barrier to the air conditioning system.

I begin my sentence in the middle of April.

The air is becoming warmer. But inside jail, I am always cold. Part of my first commissary purchase is thermal underwear, which everyone wears. Some guys wear their two allotted t-shirts at the same time. The blankets, even when they were new (how many years ago was that?), are thin and more decorative than functional.

Fresh air is only experienced in two 15 minute intervals, when we are on the way to so-called work, the education wing or visitation. Other than that, in the time I was a guest of the county, the guys in my housing unit were twice outside on the "big yard," an open courtyard with grass; the "little yards" are fully enclosed hexagonal spaces about

18 square feet, with a single basketball hoop. Two times, for about 90 minutes each time, at the discretion of a deputy.

The near total lack of choice and freedom is the most mundane observation of being confined. We do not choose what we wear. Because bunks are segregated by race, we do not choose where we sleep.

Or, when we get to leave our dorm. Or, even whether the TVs are on.

While in the minimum security wing, we have unlimited access to the toilets and showers, but we cannot choose the water temperature. We do not choose whether or not to go to work. Because it is compulsory and unpaid, it is actual slavery. If prisoners are indigent, we have no choice about what we eat. The list goes on. Along with the uniforms (a ridiculous combination of medical scrubs and pajamas), the routine is designed to infantilize and humiliate.

The deputies call us by our names, but when we respond to them, we are required to recite our PFN to confirm our identities. After every work shift or any unit-wide infraction, we are strip-searched.

The housing unit I am in is assigned to the kitchen. Most of us scoop frozen or heated globs of food onto trays that are shrink-wrapped at the end of the assembly line. Four hours of standing in one place doing the same motion until the break; then four more hours.

The food preparation facility is a low warehouse with large doors leading directly to the loading dock, which allows swallows nearly unlimited access to the workspace. Mice are also permanent residents.

When we get colds or the flu, which is all the time, we still have to work. It's amazing that more prisoners all over the state (this kitchen supplies trays for almost every county jail and state prison) don't pick up various illnesses from the food, but by the time the tray reaches a prisoner, the items have been cooked at least three times and frozen twice. Nutrition is almost non-existent, but calories from carbohydrates remain.

The food trays are referred to as "two scoops of disrespect." That's also the term for the strip-searches.

Somewhat oddly, then, is the way prisoners respond when one of us notices an indignity originating among prisoners. If anyone complains that the line to the shower or telephone or chow is cut into by someone with an oversized reputation, or if someone asks the guys who are in the middle of a heated conversation at 2am to keep the noise down, they are quickly and inevitably reminded, "This is jail."

This statement is supposed to trump any possible complaint about marginally anti-social behavior. It was surprising because when prisoners are on the receiving end of similar shit from the deputies, it's called disrespect; but when something unpleasant is done by prisoners to each other, it's okay—because we're in jail. It's like saying, "Boys will be boys;" it explains nothing, but is supposed to excuse everything.

Since I'm used to interacting with people with as few authoritarian mechanisms and signals as possible, it was difficult for me not to mention when my needs and desires were not being taken into consideration by other prisoners. The tacit acceptance of interpersonal aggression, as long as it comes from other prisoners, is one of the lingering negative observations and experiences of my time in jail.

It's no wonder that historically, the prisoners who are targeted by the guards for the severest retribution are the ones who are able to transcend petty interpersonal and interracial rivalries and aggressions that usually keep prisoners divided. For such exemplary individuals, "This is jail," is only the beginning of a strategy of principled resistance.

I didn't meet anyone like that while doing my time.

When not incarcerated, AKD868 spends his free time appreciating the outdoors.

Resources for Prisoners & Supporters

Prison Legal News, a publication that can put prisoners in touch with news and resources. P.O. Box 1151, 1013 Lucerne Ave., Lake Worth FL 33460.

StopPrisonProfiteers.Org Challenges companies that rip-off prisoners and their families on basic services.

Books Through Bars distributes free books and educational materials to incarcerated people in PA, NJ, NY, MD, DE, VA and WV. Each year they send over 8,000 book packages. BooksThroughBars.org 4722 Baltimore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19143

The Campaign to Fight Toxic Prisons (FTP) conducts grassroots organizing, advocacy and direct action to challenge the prison system puts prisoners at risk of dangerous environmental conditions, and impacts surrounding communities and ecosystems by their construction and operation.

PrisonEcology.org Exposes environmental violations in prisons.

HumanRightsDefenseCenter.org Coordinates many of the sites above.

Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC) Industrial Workers of the World IWW.org. IWOC was one of the forces behind the September 9, 2017, nationwide prison work strike.

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