

SNITCHES AND B*TCHES

by
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In California since the early 2000's, The California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) has had Special Needs Yards, SNYs, for inmates for a number of reasons would not be able to live safely on a regular mainline yard. SNY inmates are referred to as 'snitches and b*tches' by the mainline inmates, most of whom are active gang members. We SNY inmates are mostly gang drop-outs or presurgical transgender women, homosexual men, or are simply not members of the gang lifestyle and would be unwilling to live that life.

I have been SNY since I arrived in the CDCR in 2007, after several years of fighting my charges in county jail, unsuccessfully. I was originally a level 4 inmate, highest custody level because of the violent nature of my crime and the very large sentence I was given. By following the rules, I have worked my way down to level 2, medium custody, and am currently in a dormatory-style living facility. Very few people go home from higher levels of custody, and the majority of treatment and self-help programs are only available at medium security facilities, especially at transition hubs like the facility I am at now.

SNY began because gang members had no reason, no motive to leave the gang life. If they did, or even explore the possibility of doing so, they would most likely be murdered. SNY gave them a place to go that was safe, and that they could work their way down to lower levels, as I have done. The demands of being a gang member would have prevented this for most of the active inmates.

Since it was a safer place to be, the CDCR began to move others to SNY yards. This created a place for transgender women to go where they could have access to work, programs, treatment and self-help groups. The same was done by others, as well, who needed a safer yard than mainline. This includes sex offenders, white-collar criminals, and other, non-gang related inmates. Soon, the numbers of SNY inmates swelled, to where we were as numerous if not more so than the mainline active population.

Beginning in 2018, the CDCR decided to eliminate the SNY facility yards at the lower custody levels of 1 and 2, and 'blending', their words, the active gang members with the drop-out ex-gang members still in prison. This was done, as we were told by the officers, because the SNY population was larger than the active mainline inmate population and, since SNY had their own gangs now, it was no longer necessary to separate them from the active inmates. Part of the reasoning was that, since the lower-level gang-active inmates were behaving themselves and planning to go home, they wouldn't attack the drop-out inmates.

I don't think this was a totally bad idea, actually. Previously, to become an SNY inmate, an active gang member would have to openly drop-out, and inform the police about some criminal activity, who had the drugs or cell phones, or simply identify other gang members so the police could target them. This, as I think most people would realize, was a dangerous thing to do. Drop-outs are the lowest of the low in the active gang members' eyes, and would be the first to kill or at least assault. Family members would be targetted for a beating or killing, so few if any gang inmates would drop-out prior to SNY.

Under the new rules, creating Non-Designated Programming Facilities, NDPF, yards, all a gang member would have to do was not get a disciplinary report, a write-up, and their points would drop to the point they could transfer to an NDPF yard, take classes and go home sober and prepared for a job. Active inmates didn't have to 'snitch' on the gang activities, and could maintain their active gang contacts, including often times, family members and parents of their children.

I am all for giving people, no matter who they are or what they have done, a second chance (or third, fourth, etc.) and the cognitive and affective tools they need to lead clean, sober, and productive lives. However, I anticipated problems.

The first few yards that flipped over to NDPF, like Donavon State Prison, were bloodbaths. Gang members were not asked if they wanted to come to an NDPF yard, and SNY inmates were told that they were simply no longer SNY. The 'blending' was done without consent, without even agreement, of the inmates involved. That lack of screening of inmates was, I believe, the downfall of the program.

Active inmates were told that if they didn't come back to a mainline yard in 72 hours with an assault charge, they would be next. Some gang leaders, shot-callers, ordered other inmates to come to an NDPF yard and 'take out' a particular inmate who had provided information about that gang leader. It got so bad that the CDCR stopped the program twice, that I know of, and finally Governor Gavin Newsom stepped in and ordered a stop to creating new NDPF yards. This left the CDCR with level 1 and 2 NDPF and SNY yards. Unfortunately, the yard I was on, and am on, has already flipped to NDPF.

On this yard, the first influx of active gang inmates came, took a quick look at all the transgender women, and decided to leave of their own accord. The few who remained found girlfriends and have been no trouble. The second wave proved more problematic and brought some violence with them, but nothing like what was reported on the news out of Donavon. Several group attacks on individuals, but no weapons used, no one killed or severely injured. While I have seen many fights in prison, including on this yard, until we were NDPF and no longer SNY did I see a group attack on one inmate. Active gangs brought that, not SNY gangs either.

The other change I've seen is that drug use is now overt and obvious. When we were SNY, the few who were still chemically dependant did their drug habit in private, not out in the open. Now drugs seems whenever there are two or more people. Drug use on theyard wasn't associated with violence before. As long as the drugs flow and the money shows up, they were happy. Now, the mainline gangs want control, to dominate the business, and that is done with fear, terror, and retribution.

For inmates in recovery, this is a huge problem. Few here are far along in their recovery and are still prone to relapse. I have seen several good friends stumble in their walk to be clean since the NDPF change has come. Drug so obvious conotes a lack of concern about the consequences of being caught. Really, there aren't any if you have no desire to go home. If caught, the officers move you to a higher level facility, where your homies have plenty of drugs for you. What's the problem?

Now that I'm NDPF and not SNY anymore, I have no options left to my choice. I refused to sign off my SNY status so the CDCR did it for me. As it has been explained to me, if I move to another vard, I will have to go to an NDPF yard,

and I am not allowed to go to an SNY yard. So, if I am good and follow the rules and take the classes and self-help groups assigned to me, I'll eventually be moved to another NDPF yard where my life and safety will be in danger. If I have problems, get beat up and victimized, or better yet stabbed with a shank, I'll be **moved** to an SNY yard where I'll be safe again. That's not the choices I was looking for in life, to be honest with you.

There have been good results from this, however. I've met three people who were veteran gang members, now decades older, and looking to drop-out but they **have** all their friends and family in the gang lifestyle. For these three people, this change was a Godsend. They will get to go home someday, sober, and meet up with their remaining families and live a good, productive life in their remaining years.

I saw my counselor a few weeks ago. I asked her what was new with the NDPF and SNY changes. She said, "you know as much as I do." I believe her. I really doubt thatx anyone in the CDCR administration has any real thoughts about what to do, or even really cares now that the prison riots they started have subsided. If bureaucracy was a cancer, then the CDCR is stage 4 and ready for a hospice program. It's now June 2020, and I see no end on the horizon.