

Designed to Bury You in a Mental Grave  
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Abstract

This contribution is from someone who is, or has recently been, in prison. It offers a unique and private perspective into the experience of imprisonment that is of deep interest to the reader.

I won't get into why I am here or the whole story of "being raised from the streets, running with gangs getting into trouble and sent to prison at an early age (20). But the truth about having a lengthy prison sentence as long as mine is that even with good conduct credits, I won't be eligible for parole until I am in my 50's. Imagine being incarcerated since 2006. I was first jailed at the now-defunct Baltimore City Detention Center. At the age of 22 (2008), I was sentenced to an egregious life plus 55 years and was sent to a high-tech maximum-security prison called North Branch Correctional Institution.

When I first found out that I was being transferred to North Branch, I didn't know what to expect. North Branch is located in Cumberland, Maryland which is roughly a 150 miles away from Baltimore City where me and my family are from. Cumberland, Maryland has always been known for its mountains that sit at top of the Appalachian path that runs from parts of Pennsylvania all the way to Georgia. The bus ride to get to North Branch is just as treacherous. It takes roughly 2 ½ hours to get from Baltimore to Cumberland. That type of distance has diminished relationships and support from friends and family because it's unlikely people would want to travel back and forth just to visit someone inside of a prison. At times I feel as though I have been placed in a storage provided by the state at an undisclosed location to never be heard or seen again. The mountains that surrounds this place actually isolate it, for when it gets dark all you can see is darkness. The illusion makes it seem as though there's no other world other than these prison walls.

I was a few months shy of turning 22 years old entering into what they called "the system". To make it worse, I walked right into the pit of hell when North Branch opened its doors. Surrounded by other men who were already years ahead of me in dealing with the ups and downs of being incarcerated. Honestly, could you stand the chance of interacting with someone who had been down 15 years or more on 3 consecutive life sentences or the person next to him whose doing life for murder and facing another life sentence for the murder he committed at another max-security facility. Surviving these conditions was real tough for me in the beginning. I never seen racism in full force until I seen it the ways of these Caucasian Correctional Officers. Along with the emotions amongst us classified as "convicts", we knew the real match up was us against these hillbilly mountain white boys posing as C.O.'s. Having to battle with the fact that I could potentially get stabbed up by a lifer over something as small as a gambling debt to laying up in the hospital for weeks after being viciously assaulted by the hands & feet of them racist C.O.'s made me develop a set of thinking skills quick in order to stay alive.

Now as a 33-year-old, with 13 years of incarceration, I been through some things that would have caused a mental breakdown but I'm one of the few who remains vigilant in not allowing this place to kill me. The reason why all prisons should be abolished is because it's designed to bury you in a mental grave until you die physically. With me experiencing the general population

and the disciplinary segregation of both North Branch Correctional Institution and Western Correctional Institution (which is also located in Cumberland), I seen how this environment led men especially those of color to an early death. The scene here is really gloomy these days. You would think that there's all sorts of help programs to help one rehabilitate into a law-abiding citizen but sadly in a region where roughly 3,000 inmates are held, there's not enough funded programs to provide one with the tools to transition into a better all-around person. Both prisons are maximum-security and they hold a majority of those who were sentenced to life sentences. Cumberland is what is known as "the last stop" among other inmates, as a way of saying that this is as worst as it get. It seriously plays a part of why a lot of inmate-on-inmate assaults happens because most of the general population doesn't have anything provided to them except for dietary and sanitation jobs. Everything else is real limited and you have to meet certain criteria to even be recommended for the good, preferred jobs. Then race plays a huge factor on this location because with most of the Correctional Officers being white, they treat everyone differently. I don't need to explain because you should feel where I'm going with it.

But as one begins to do his time in here, you really can watch your years just wither away with no remorse. That's the most stress I feel that I go through because it seems as most everyone moves on in their lives without you. Even when I make collect calls home to family and friends, I feel like I'm such a huge burden to them. It's never easy being dependent on asking help from the outside world. I started out as just being a 20-years-old and now I'm in my 30's with more knowledge about how the world works. The only thing that holds me back is the fact that if none of my state (or federal) remedies grants any relief in my case then I'm looking to say goodbye to all my 30's and most of my 40's before I can say I'm eligible for parole. That's me having to deal with the constant changes prison makes as the years go by.

I understand that one should be punished if one breaks the law but the disparity amongst how one is treated while incarcerated has truly fallen to shit. Recidivism rates are so high not because one enjoys being locked up, but the turmoil and stress that prison took him through created the malice to build up in his soul. Once one steps back into society, you have to fight through so much that's against you and that creates more anger along with whatever you already brought home with you.

No one will truly know the psychological factor of being incarcerated until they been incarcerated. You can do all the research in the world to get a grasp of what incarceration feels like but until you become just an I.D. number, you would never know the feeling. How can I better myself if those who dictate if I get my freedom again are against me? As soon as you walk through the prison doors gang intelligence will tag you as a member of one of the many security threat groups (S.T.G.) without any validations other than the tattoos on your body. Half of the time the tattoos are regular tattoos anyone gets. My problem is being faced with the possibility of being charged with additional charges after being found guilty for rule infraction. For example, I can get caught with a homemade knife in my possession which is a rule one infraction. A hearing officer found me guilty, gave me 180 days to do on lock up, and took away 120 days of good conduct credits pushing an already long release date back further. On top of that, I get re-booked for the same charges at the District Court in Cumberland and had to take a plea deal which added six more months to my sentence.

You might ask what I'm doing carrying around a weapon in the first place but after seeing on numerous occasions men dying from inmate-on-inmate knife fights, I usually need to keep access to some sort of weapon if a confrontation comes my way. These guards aren't equipped to come in and save you in record time, so through experience I learned that I have to defend myself. The dilemma between surviving a place like this and changing for the better is definitely farfetched. I can be self-taught all day on acquiring the knowledge and skills to be productive once back in society but if the prison is not providing those adequate skills then what is one suppose to do?

No matter how much I say 'bout problems, involving being in prison, it seems as though it will fall on deaf ears. I can complain all day but the real question is "will we ever see a day when there's no more prisons?" Prison has become a huge commodity in the world of capitalism here in America. Anything that takes away from profiting and re-investing large sums of money is frowned upon. I'm only one of the 2.7 million that's incarcerated, so the \$42,000 that I'm costing taxpayers every year might not mean much, but times that by the 2.7 million which frees up people not paying the government, and then we looking at a big problem.

Like right now, this institution is always testing the limits to what constitutional rights (an inmate holds) are basically being violated. What I mean is this place has in progress to move inmates out of one housing unit (until its empty) to make repairs to that building. But one of the fixtures they trying to put in place is controlling how many times an inmate can flush his toilet. Meaning if I use the toilet and flush it twice then there's a timer in place to where I have to wait five minutes for the toilet to reset. If I flush a third time then I have to wait a full hour to be able to flush again. It creates a problem for when you have to defecate while locked in the cell with your cell mate and you can't use courtesy flushes to mask the smell because of the "3-flush rule". We already have one casualty with an inmate killing his cellmate in result of the new rule.

Then the kitchen and chow hall have been shut down until further notice due to repairs being made to sewage pipes. So, we will be fed brown bags breakfast, lunch and dinner which contains nothing more than bread, fruit and a snack. Rumors are swirling that repairs in the kitchen can take up to six months. The institution is trying to find a way for inmates to receive a hot meal but in all they could care less what we eat.

As all these problems relates to this institution, me being incarcerated forces me to just be immune to whatever happening and not make a fuss about it. As much as I want to change for the better, everyday I wake up in here makes me feel as though I'm in a life-or-death situation. Changing for the better goes out the window when you have correctional officers overstepping their boundaries forcing one to become rebellious to everything. I look out my cell window and try to find hope but when barbed wires and steel fences are staring back at me, I just sit back down on the bunk look at the walls and wonder, "how did I end up like this?"

The penal system might never become abolished but what if people put plans in place for an ex-offender to truly have a second chance at life. I would love to have a second chance to show how much I never want to be in a position like this ever again.