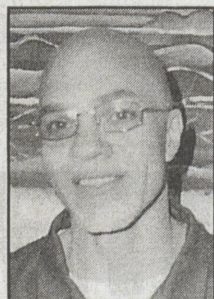


Questions And Answers



Matthew Hattley

By Matthew Hattley

Many people have questions about the world of New York's prison system. Matthew Hattley, a prisoner now at the Woodbourne Correctional Facility who has contributed many columns to the Shawangunk Journal, is answering questions from our readers.

How are prisoners allocated between facilities?

Once a person enters the state prison system they can expect to be sent to any facility where there is a vacant bed; their sentence and classification will determine if they go to a medium or maximum security facility. Unless, of course, they have a high profile case, suffer from a mental illness, or are seeing/hearing impaired. Then they will be sent to a specific facility to accommodate such cases.

In a tense situation, with police trying to arrest someone, such as yourself, is it unreasonable to expect the police to obey all rules and avoid doing things that might make it easier for them, but painful or degrading for whoever is being arrested?

First and foremost, all law enforcement members are supposed to be adequately trained on how to properly arrest/restrain a person. They should conduct themselves in a professional manner at all times (on & off duty). Unfortunately, police officers are only human, so many will take "shortcuts" and break rules, especially if it is convenient and they think they can get away with it.

Can prisoners visualize a situation where — if they were police — they would shoot someone unjustly?

I am in no position to speak for the entire prison population; everyone has his/her own opinion and/or agenda. However, if I were a police officer, the thought of shooting someone unjustly would not even enter my mind. If it did, there would be no difference between myself and the common criminal; our thought pattern is what differentiates us.

As a peace officer — depending on the situation — my first choice would be to utilize the taser; protect and serve the community, not destroy it by shooting everyone I deem a threat. Plus you have to seriously consider the fact that many police officers fear certain ethnic groups; they shoot out of fear, not common sense.

Would a more fair and balanced justice system have prevented anyone doing time where you are from going that route? To put that another way, in a more just society, with better access to good education, would fewer young people choose a life of crime?

Absolutely! If a person were granted access to a good education and a meaningful job (not simply minimum wage), most would not have had the desire to commit a crime. Having enough money to support your family and live comfortably — not simply going paycheck to paycheck (while accumulating debt in the process) — is key. This is a social issue for many communities, specifically where people of color are concerned. However, regardless of a good education and employment opportunities, you will always have a small group of individuals who will prefer to live a life of crime.

How many facilities does the average individual spend time in over, say, a 10 year sentence? A 20 year sentence? How is this allocated? Is there a system that governs this kind of thing?

This will vary for every individual and sentence. It can be as low as two facilities or as high as 15. Myself, serving a 25 years to life sentence, have been in seven thus far. How a person adjusts to his/her new surroundings and conducts himself or herself plays a major role in the process. The person constantly in trouble will be sent to more facilities over the duration of their sentence — which places a greater burden on his/her family and loved ones, especially where visits are concerned that can be 8+ hours away from home.

Among everyone you know, with all their accumulated experience of the system and various prisons, what might be the "best" prison in NYS? By "best" I mean lowest stress,

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best staff, least racial overtones, etc.

Again, depending on the individual, this will vary. For me, Shawangunk C. F. and Eastern C.F. were best (in that order). They both consist of a small population (approx. 550 and 1,000 respectively) and offer a variety of constructive programs such as General Business, Maintenance, etc. Plus with the violence level at a minimum in both facilities, I was able to focus on my own growth and development — not on someone possibly causing me any physical harm. Furthermore, Eastern was once classified as an "honor" facility. A large percentage of the population wanted to be there, so they stayed out of trouble in hopes of being transferred there. Today, there are no more honor facilities. The current trend is more focused on "securing" facilities by limiting movement within them. This leads to mediums being operated like maxis, which is counter-productive to rehabilitation.

What would be the worst facility?

For me, Upstate C.F. It's a "double bunked" — two persons per cell — special housing unit (SHU). It was initially constructed as a "solitary" confinement facility for the most violent incarcerated individuals in the state. However, the majority of the population, while I was there in 2000, were there for a "dirty urine" charge — testing positive for drug use. It was extremely difficult spending 23 hours a day in a cell with a total stranger, and an obnoxious one at that. An overhead light remained on in the cell 24/7. The reader materials — novels/magazines — were very limited. I was not permitted to have any of my personal property, clothes, typewriter, Walkman, etc. All cells were self contained: shower, toilet, sink, combo, desk/stool combo, bunkbeds and attached recreation area/pen. I had to take a shower, with no shower curtain, with my cellmate present, the same was true for using the toilet.

If there were one improvement to the system as it now stands that you could implement, what would it be?

The one departmental improvement I would implement is replacing all indeterminate sentences with determinate sentences, retroactively. This would eliminate the "life" from the back of all indeterminate sentences. For ex-

ample, a person like myself, serving a 25 years to life sentence, would now have a flat 25 years. That would mean, if I'd completed all mandated programs and maintained a clean disciplinary record, I would be eligible for early release, doing approximately 85 percent of my sentence, about 21 years and three months. This way everyone would have some idea of when they would be released back into society. Just knowing you have a date to go home gives you and your family hope. This hope inspires you to focus on your future by engaging in programs that will strengthen your chances of obtaining gainful employment upon release; activities that help you become a better person and keep you from returning to prison. Today, a person with life on the back of his/her sentence honestly has no idea when he/she may possibly be released — hope of being released is at a minimum, especially if he/she committed a violent crime. Regarding individuals who were convicted of truly horrendous crimes (think serial killer etc), the State would have the option of remanding them to a psychiatric facility for a mental evaluation upon completing their sentence.

Note: If you have any questions about New York State prisons and prison life, send them in to Prison Q&A, Shawangunk Journal, PO Box 669, Ellenville NY 12428 or email to chris@gunkjournal.com with Hattley Questions on the subject line. All questioners will be anonymous.

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