

6 Ugly Things I Learned About American Prisons (As A Guard)

Life behind bars remains but a terrifying possibility that haunts your every waking moment, perhaps. But for some people, it's where they go to work every single day. We sat down with one such person: a former prison guard from Texas with more than a decade of experience. She told us ...

Cell Phones Are Incredibly Deadly

Isolating criminals from society is what makes a prison a prison. So it might surprise you to learn that getting cellphone access is quite easy for incarcerated crime lords. Inmates aren't allowed to keep cell phones, of course, but at this point, they've turned smuggling them into a science. It's usually the guards who bring them in: "... they offer a lot of money. A cell can be up to \$5k, depending on the type."

Texas Correctional Officers can make as little as \$22,581 per year, so you can see why the opportunity to smuggle in a fancy iPhone for five grand would be tempting. One California prison guard made over \$150,000 smuggling cell phones in a single year. And while there are some distinctly oddball methods -- like sewing phones into the stomach of a dead cat and tossing it over the fence -- the consequences of phone-armed prisoners are less Hogan's Heroes and more The Wire: "... cell phones are pretty serious because you can call a hit. The cartels ... they are seriously involved with the different gangs."

Cell phones are actually one of the deadliest things in any prison. The Georgia Bureau of Investigation traced a rise in inmate deaths across the entire state to the use of cell phones by gang members in prison. Cell phones allow gang leaders to stay in contact with their people on the outside, meaning they can credibly threaten the families of officers and other inmates. In 2008, a death row inmate used his cellphone to call and threaten a Texas senator. Guards try to confiscate phones whenever possible -- which, as our source noted, can be dangerous: "I've seen officers get assaulted over cell phones."

And it's not always fights over the cell phones. Sometimes it's the device itself, and the ... feces it's covered in: "I've seen an inmate crap out a cell phone and throw it at somebody."

Most Prison Guards Are Just Kids

Prison security isn't a great job, and in most states it comes with basically zero training whatsoever. (Georgia trains guards for four weeks. Highway patrolmen receive 31 weeks of training, by comparison.) Our source recalled, "*I worked in General Population, and they gave me six weeks of training and said, 'There's your mentor; go and work.' I had to figure out a lot of stuff alone. The training ... they take you and explain what goes on in a prison, tell you the rules, but then when you get there, nobody follows the rules.*"

As you might imagine, turnover is incredibly high. In 2011, Florida hired 2,200 new guards ... because 1,400 had left during the previous year. Turnover is a problem in prisons all over the country. Hey, quick question: When you think of jobs with terrible pay, no training, and high turnover, what sort of workers do you imagine? Yep! Prisons often wind up filled with kids barely out of high school guarding other kids barely out of high school:

"It was a bunch of children watching children. Everybody was 19. One day, they had walked off almost the entire shift and had to have my shift come in from another unit -- mine was across the street. I got moved from that unit ... the place smelled like a bar, like alcohol and cigarettes. The inmates were tattooing -- they didn't care, and that spreads disease. And the officers were sleeping with the inmates. That's everywhere. It's a huge problem."

There's A Ton Of Sex Between Guards And Prisoners

Late last year, news broke that sexual abuse was rampant in the nation's largest woman's prison, with male and female guards alike using prisoners in situations akin to prostitution. Our source worked in a prison with male inmates, but that didn't mean there was any less dong-wranglin':

"I've seen women sneak into cells. [She'd] call the superior officer, who'd be like, 'Whatever, they know what they're doing.' They caught the kitchen captain bent over the beans and rice by an inmate. I've seen officers blow kisses at inmates, pass notes to inmates. It's a huge problem because you put these people here without a lot of training ... but the inmates can pick out who has lower self-esteem."

Obviously, this particular kind of corruption can lead to serious danger for everybody. As our source related, *"A nurse in one unit was fooling with an inmate and brought a gun in for him ... the guy escaped."* Of course, that nurse wasn't the only one at fault: *"He was in a wheelchair, and they didn't search him like they were supposed to because he was peeing and pooping himself."*

Our source says: *"It's just part of the job, performing a proper strip search. When I first started, you had to perform it with a professional walking you through it. You put gloves on, you pat-search them, you search the cells ... there are people who will not make the inmates squat, not check the inside of the inmates' nostrils -- they'll hide razor blades in their nostrils, in between their toes. They won't check shoes; I've found money and notes to officers in shoes."*

There Have Even Been Brothels Run Inside Prisons ... By The Guards

So what happens to guards who are caught romantically ... *entangled* with prisoners? *"It depended on who it was ... we had one lieutenant who'd go back to the officer and sleep with the officer and [he'd] let them do what they wanted. He gave them that option: 'You do this for me, I'll do something for you.'*

It got much more explicit than quid pro quo sexing. Our source reported an outright brothel in one prison she worked for:

"One officer started working there. She was the madam, and she got her other girls working there and they managed to get put all on the same dormitory buildings, table dance ... other inmates would sit around and....yeah. They've got video of a woman walking around in her stockings and garter belt ... the inmates would just come talk to [the madam]. They were having big parties ... they shut down the dorms for two or three months. They busted everybody at once. They put cameras everywhere, they took the girls ... started pulling them out one by one. If they gave it up, they let them quit. If they lied about it, they'd show 'em the footage. I think they only terminated one person. It's easier to give them the option

to quit ... in order to get fired, it takes everything but an act of Congress." And knowing Congress, you'd have a better chance getting Kristen Stewart to act.

Abuse Is Rampant

Despite what Cinemax tells us, prison isn't a great place to be gay. According to a survey of over 1,000 inmates conducted by the activist group Black And Pink, LGBT inmates are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted in prison than straight inmates:

"Oh yeah. I worked on one unit and they had an offender ... It was an issue with the field lieutenant. He hates gay people ... This HIV+ inmate refused to pull an aggie (use a hoe) because the other inmate was like, 'If you cut yourself, I'll kill you.'"

So the inmate decided that hoes ain't worth dying for, and the guards overreacted: *"They had to handcuff him to the gator to keep him from jumping off ... they pull him back there and beat the hell out of him and called him queer the whole time, and there was nothing I could do about it ... The LT rode up on his horse, and they beat this dude mercilessly. He had to have dental work done. If the dude wasn't gay, they still woulda beat him up some, but not that bad."*

Yeah, physical abuse of inmates isn't exactly rare. *"I'm not gonna say I haven't whacked an inmate with a clipboard, but I've not hurt an offender on purpose. A guy who hit me in the face with eggs, we had a fistfight. But that was a fistfight between us. And I didn't leave him beat up so bad ... neither of us had marks. And he hit me in the face with boiled eggs, I was pretty mad about that."*

Even when inmates are outright killed by guards, the perpetrators are essentially never punished. The Marshall Project looked into 126 prison workers convicted of "sexual misconduct and assault." Only nine served any jail time.

There's An Ulterior Motive For Everything

Inmates can be devious. Even when you think they're merely being spontaneously violent and stupid, like during a riot, there can be some ulterior motive at play:

"They'll have planned riots. They usually end rather quickly. Never any hostages when I've been there. They took over an entire day room once before ... [the guards] threw in a bunch of scat rounds, these rubber balls with CS gas and tiny pellets. That was the entire day room, it was terrible. Probably about 75 people. Most of them trying not to be involved, probably a third of them were fighting ... originally each other. And then they were fighting the officers when the officers came in. And then they threw the gas in there."

And what practical role could those planned riots serve? *"... one guy causes a fit to distract so they can make a cell call somewhere ... Or have a riot in one pod so in another pod they can ... it's stupid, because it's usually about something like smoking weed, or passing stuff around."*

Hey, we said devious. Not smart.