

6 Ways Prison Is More Horrifying Than Movies Make It Look

We sat down with "Stonewall," who spent 15 years incarcerated for burglary and armed robbery. Here's what he had to say ...

Let's Get The Worst Of The Horror Out Of The Way First

Do you know what sound a man makes when he gets maced in the arse?

I should probably provide some backstory: We were in lock-up, and our cells had these trap doors that flipped down so the guards could slide a food tray in. One of the guys had a lover across the hall, and their cells were positioned in such a way that they could see each other's trap doors (that was definitely an innuendo).

The guy on my side of the hall started putting his naked ass in the door and pushing it open, so his lover could see it. Because in prison, social stigmas against public nudity are much more lax than they are at, say, your local Starbucks. The guards found out about this and, since this was way back in the '90s and they'd just been issued pepper spray, it was decided that a butthole was a fine place to test it out.

Test results? Screaming. Lots of it.

That sort of "testing" was a pattern that repeated whenever the guards got some sort of new toy. Another such toy was ... well, imagine a leaf blower hooked up to a container that sprays tear gas. It puts that shit out like a fog. Once they got those in, the CS gas "fog machine" became their duct tape, used in any situation they could tenuously justify employing it. A few of us fighting in the gym? Time to turn all the air into poison.

The guards didn't get off easy, though. One of them pissed off an inmate named Pinkie Mitchell. Pinkie had been in for 25 years and was never getting out. That means there's only so much the law could do to Pinkie, short of killing him. One day Pinkie catches the guard off ... uh, guard ... so he stabbed him, dropped his *own* trousers, and proceeded to *shoot a load* onto the guard's bleeding body. The guard lived, but they had to transfer him. Everyone knew he'd been not only stabbed but ejaculated on by a prisoner. That's how you earn some very hurtful nicknames.

And yes, the sodomy: I was playing cards with a friend when this white kid ran in pursued by a bunch of black dudes. They jammed him up in his cell and started raping him. I was gonna step in on his behalf, but someone mentioned they'd been beating on that guy for a while and he'd never fought back. Well, forget it. If you ain't gonna stand up for yourself, I ain't gonna stand up for you. In prison, what matters isn't so much that you're able to win fights; it's that you will fight.

So, hey ... welcome to prison!

About now, you're probably realizing something that's immediately apparent to everyone inside ...

Rehabilitation Is Not A Priority

I got a 37-year sentence for burglary and armed robbery. I was 16, on the streets, shooting crank, and stealing to support my habit. One day I broke into a house and someone was there, so they gave me my own place, with a big yard, a fence, and some guard towers.

For a while they tried DART: a solid program for getting people off drugs. It worked really well -- it was actually a model substance abuse program copied all over the world. Incoming prisoners were screened for their eligibility and then sent for 35 days of treatment before going off to regular prison. Even inside, there'd be regular after-care to check up on them. It helped people improve their lives and become productive members of law-abiding society again.

Like a maced asshole, there's a big red "but" looming around here somewhere: Basically no one got to use DART. Their entire treatment facility had only 100 beds. They figured that the need for the program outstripped the supply by 286 percent.

So there's not much help available while you're inside. And while you're out? Good luck getting a job. My family's friends hired me and got me the training that let me eventually go to work for myself. But most employers won't take the risk on a felon.

All the guys I know wound up back in for stupid stuff: caught with drugs, robbing a store, just asking for money -- not even with any kind of threat. A guy I know named Jonas went to prison for throwing bricks through a window when he was 19. He had an 18-month sentence. He's been in for the last 37 years because, while he was there, he wound up killing a couple of people, stabbing a few more ...

Look: Take a bunch of 18-year-old men, put them in basic training, stick them with some 30-year-old soldiers, and eventually the new guys figure out how to soldier. Now do the same thing with young people and career criminals in lock-up and you'll see the problem with prisons. And it's not a matter of criminals even teaching each other how to commit crimes. What does get transferred is the attitude that living like an outlaw is acceptable, if not necessary. After all, if someone's in prison for robbing a bank, I'm not about to ask them for advice on how to rob a bank ...

There Are Strict Unspoken Rules

In prison, personal space is important. We can have 700 people walking down a 12-foot hallway and no one bumps into anyone. It's just not done. That's a fight if you're lucky and a stabbing if you're not. You want a smoke, so you grab one of your cigarettes, but pick up *my* matchbook? I am liable to bust your head open. Those are *my matches*; you don't take my matches. It doesn't matter how minor it is. People will get bloody-violent over a pack of sugar.

Don't sit on a man's bunk. Don't sit on a man's chair. You see a photo on the wall, don't tell the guy his wife is hot. The little stuff is so important, because people in prison have almost nothing.

Reputation is the truest currency that exists in prison. But we also got maybe \$30 or \$40 a week for the work we did in there. You mostly used it to buy soda, toothpaste, and coffee. I loaned money to make

extra money. Say I loan you \$2, so when payday comes you get me \$4. I'd make \$200 and even \$500 a week that way. I might have had to bust somebody's head a few times, but the good thing about prison is that once someone gets a reputation for busting heads they usually don't have to do it again.

You Can Get Anything Inside

We had a lot of drugs. Some people used Jimson weed, which can fuck you up or kill you depending on the dose. In those days they handed out Sudafed like it was candy, so people would eat 50 to 60 pills and get jacked up on the allergic man's meth. Most of our pot had to be brought in by the guards, though. A matchbook's worth of weed sold for \$75 -- and that was 20 years ago. To a guard making \$25k to \$30k per year, an ounce could sell for more than they made in a month.

Keep in mind that most guards were only there because they failed the test to be cops.

I had a few things smuggled in to me by guards: an electronic scrabble dictionary the size of a credit card. I had a Casio 9900 SFX graphing calculator smuggled in, because I was taking some college algebra classes. All it takes is money -- people who have money get stuff.

You are probably familiar with this concept already.

Solitary Will Drive You Mad

In one stretch, I did three years and nine months in isolation. I went in because I hit a sergeant in the mouth. He and some guards were standing at my door, the door opened, and I thought they were gonna beat my ass, so I decided to get them first.

Listen: Solitary is an absolutely useless form of punishment. It doesn't reform you; it just drives you crazy. You get no sheets, no blankets. You showered with a fire hose. You drank water and ate meal loaf. That's where they take all the leftovers -- corn, green beans, peach cobbler, mashed potatoes, gravy, literally whatever's on hand -- and blend it all together in a big bowl. Then they add eggs and milk, pour it into a 2.5 inch high loaf pan and bake it. When I was in solitary I got a 4-by-4-inch square for each meal.

It's disgusting. We eventually got that stopped with some lawsuits, thankfully. But that was after my time, so I took every meal for nearly four years in loaf form.

It's the boredom that gets you, though. I only stayed sane by playing so, so much scrabble. Against myself, of course. I also read a lot: educational books, sure, but I also ordered every D&D book I could find. I worked on some really incredible campaigns. I couldn't play, of course. Dice weren't allowed, and there was no one to play with. But I could build worlds in there.

It Doesn't Work For The Right Reasons, But It Does Work

Ultimately, prison was good for me. When I went in I was a violent, obnoxious junkie with no impulse control. I was a danger to myself and others. But I took classes, I read, and I learned a lot in prison. Most

people don't bother, because there is absolutely no structure set up inside to encourage them. My motivation was simple: I hated it. I didn't want to be there anymore.

I got paroled after 14 years, and even though prison was a long time ago, the effects still haunt me. It's hard to get good data, but many former prisoners suffer from PTSD. Last summer I was riding in my work van, listening to NPR, and they did a thing on mental institutions. Some reporter was walking through one. You know the ambient sound effects they do on that sort of piece? They played the clanking sound of a cell door closing, and I vomited right there in my vehicle.

But the lessons stuck: After I got out, my wife cheated on me. In all honesty, in the heat of the moment, I wanted to kill them both. But I didn't. Because that would have meant going back to prison.

And possibly getting maced in the arse.

Just making sure you don't forget about that mental image.