

Experience in the Essex County Youthhouse Detention Center During the 1990's

Omar Austin

I have been inside of institutions all of my life. I was first put inside the Essex County Youthhouse in Newark, New Jersey for stealing a car when I was 12 years old.

Inside of the youth house it was always apparent to me that the jail staff wanted to take a hard role on us juveniles. I believe that, in their mind, their tough demeanour would make us not want to come back. There were times when correctional officers instigated fights between juvenile prisoners and the loser had to go sit in his cell to “cool off”. There were other times when a guy could not handle being inside of the cell and started to hallucinate. They were subsequently recommended for psychiatric medications. Some of the people who started using medication due to the stress of dealing with the misconduct of jail staff still take psychiatric medications to this day in adult maximum-security facilities they eventually made their way to. I am aware of this because I am around them.

I have not experienced solitary confinement as an adult like I did as a juvenile. The cells had boarded-up windows so there was no outside light. There was also no light switch inside of the cells. We were told the lights did not work so the only light we had was from the hallway. There were no toilets in our cells, so we had to bang on the door for assistance to use the bathroom. Sometimes if we had the wrong correctional officer (CO), they took us banging on the door personally, as if we were trying to disrespect them. In reality, we just needed to go to the bathroom. Many began to urinate right on the floor so that it would flow like a yellow river under the door and into the hallway.

On one occasion, after officers threatened him one particular prisoner took it a step further and smeared his own feces all over himself so that the COs would not want to beat him when they arrived with an extraction team. The guy had to be relocated to a cell in the nurse's station and was kept under suicide watch.

The COs wanted payback for this so they took it out on us by keeping our lunch up front on their desk instead of bringing it to us. We could smell it and this made us even more hungry. One officer told us to blame a certain guy for making him have to work hard today. Our food had to sit out and get cold before they would give it to us. We ended up paying for a situation that we had nothing to do with, nor agreed with. When shift change occurred,

they alerted the upcoming officers about the day and those officers carried the torch by punishing everyone by placing us back in the cells. These tactics were often used to make us mad enough to start threatening each other over blanket punishments that we all had to deal with.

Whenever they punished us like that, it made other juveniles start to act out. We would join in unison and kick the doors as if we were a marching band. The sounds of doors being kicked usually rocked the entire building. The superior officers were able to hear it from their office so they would send an officer to the isolation unit to see what was going on. The superior officers would ask the officer what the deal was. The officers would agree to silence us. They would surround a chosen a cell and enter it with five grown men. They would beat the guy up and hog-tie him, handcuffing his hands first and then cuffing his ankles to bring his hands and ankles together. Finally, they would add another pair of cuffs to connect the ankles with the hands. They would drag the guy out of the cell on his stomach with ripped clothes (in most cases, with his buttocks exposed) while he yelled and cried as he was being kicked. They would then take the guy to the nurse's station and put him on suicide watch as if he was the crazy one.

I want you to understand that some of these guys were no older than 12 years of age. At that time, I was a measly 13-year-old. I look forward to sharing more of my stories about the institutional failures that I have lived through. At some point, adults in positions of authority have to be held responsible.

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