

What is Prison Like?

Colin Scholl

A few times people have asked me what prison is like. I have never known how to answer that. It is such a huge question. It is a whole different world. It would take reams of paper to tell someone what prison is like, because it is like nothing people on the outside have ever known.

Some people on the outside have queer ideas of prison. They think it is something akin to a vacation. Let me assure you, it is nothing like a vacation.

Since I cannot really tell you what prison is like in terms that you would really understand, I will not try. I can, however, tell you what a twenty-year prison sentence means to me.

A twenty-year prison sentence means a million things to me, because as twenty years in prison suggests, it is the major part of my adult life.

It means enduring my reduction to a third-class citizen in the eyes of most people. It means decades of discrimination from the courts and public. “Inmate”, “prisoner”, “convict” – each has a unique, and strictly pejorative, use in the media and pop culture. Those terms slowly work themselves into my psyche and become the defining characteristic of my being, changing me in a way that hurts my soul.

It means the court will turn a blind eye to any act against me unless it causes “demonstrable and permanent injury”, so when I am stripped naked and left in a concrete box with nothing but a toilet for four days without cause, as a prisoner, I have no recourse in the courts. When I am beaten to a bloody mess while in handcuffs, as a prisoner, I am more likely to encounter a jury that will conclude that I deserved what I got, regardless of the circumstances.

It means that if I am killed by another prisoner, my murderer will have twenty-four months added to his sentence, the same amount of time you would receive for killing your neighbour’s dog.

It means that after being spared a life sentence, anything that happens to me is well deserved, because I am getting out.

It means two decades of censorship where I am told what books or magazines I can read, what photos I can look at, what things I can write, what films I can watch, what clothes I can wear, even the way I can cut my hair, and where every letter coming in and going out is read and inspected.

It means a complete lack of privacy and a complete lack of concern for my well being for twenty years.

It means a cold indifference to my suffering, my physical, emotional and mental health.

It means three meals a day of the poorest quality food that the least amount of money can buy without killing the prison's population.

It means that I am constantly told, in a thousand ways, that I cannot be rehabilitated, that I am not worth the resources to even try to help, that I am morally and mentally inferior, and to try and help someone like me is foolish.

It means being told for twenty years that I will never amount to anything.

It means convincing myself daily that my life has value, even when the rest of the world tells me that I am worthless.

It means twenty years of wondering what my potential is and yearning to find out.

It means being subjected to incomprehensible punishments deemed "necessary to maintain institutional security", such as being sprayed with burning chemicals that blister my skin and make patches of my hair fall out.

It means being placed in cages for hours that are just big enough to stand in.

It means being zip-tied and made to lay face down in the dirt, mud, and snow, stripped naked every day and inspected with a flash light, placed on "potty watch" with an adult diaper duck-taped to my waist and legs, without a shred of clothing, barefoot, and belly-chained, forced to fill a diaper with excrement three times before they will consider my release.

It means I cannot hold a woman or experience a gentle loving touch for two decades.

It means being incapable of taking care of my grandparents and parents as they reach their final years.

It means not being able to have children or a family.

A twenty-year sentence means constant contemplation of a wasted life, a continued despair as to my inability to accomplish anything significant with my remaining years. A life spent watching as each of my family members and friends die or slowly drift away, leaving me in a vacuum, devoid of any enduring relationships.

It is a persistent dashing of my hopes.

It is a permanent experiment in self-delusion, as I struggle to convince myself that there is still hope.

It is a compounding of second upon second, minute upon minute, hour upon hour of wasted existence, and decade upon decade of mental and emotional torture.

These are futile attempts to describe the indescribable. It is like trying to describe a broken heart or communicate what it is like to mourn the death of your soul mate. The words to convey the pain do not exist. It is as if I am experiencing the broken heart of knowing I will never love, or be loved in any normal sense of the word, while mourning the death of the man I could have, and should have been. The only difference is that I can never recover, because the pain is renewed each morning when I wake up to realize I am still here. It is always a fresh day of despair, lived over and over for twenty years.

So as you can see, this is not like a vacation.

Putting it to paper I can see more clearly that, although you may understand the words, you cannot understand the experience and how it affects my soul. And that is a good thing.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Colin Scholl is a prisoner at California State Prison, Los Angeles County. He is currently pursuing an M.A. in Sociology.