

CHAPTER 2

Life In Prison

In this segment I will discuss the top 10 reasons why you never want to break the law.

#10 The County Jail

The Los Angeles County Jail is one of the most violent, inhumane places on the planet. It houses more than 10,000 inmates. Petty criminals, such as shoplifters, who are awaiting trial, share cells with convicted murderers. The overcrowding is so bad that eight men are stuffed into cells that were designed for four men. This results in four sleeping on the floor, two of who are next to the communal toilet.

On my first day in the county jail I had a cellmate who had been previously convicted of a double-homicide and sentenced to the death penalty. He was down from San Quentin's Death Row to face trial for another murder he had committed while he was in prison. One of his homeboys brought him a three-foot long steel bar that was the diameter of my thumb. I watched as he sharpened the edge to a fine point by scraping the bar back and forth along the concrete floor, upon which he had sprinkled ajax. It took about two hours to fashion a deadly spear. There was no doubt in my mind that he planned to kill again. Needless to say I didn't sleep that night. To my relief I was transferred to a different cell the next day.

The worst thing that happened while I was in the county jail awaiting trial was the murder of a Mexican man who was serving a six-month sentence for his second drunk driving conviction. This guy had never previously been incarcerated, and he was unaware of the racial politics that permeate the California prison system. He was hungry, and a

black man gave him some food. For this reason about a dozen Mexican gang members beat him to death that evening. It was the most horrible experience I ever had.

#9 The Deeply Flawed Criminal Justice System

I was raised to believe that America has the world's best criminal justice system, but it's not true. For the most part prosecutors are self-centered rascals who only care about one thing: their conviction rate. The system breeds a "convict at all costs mentality" that blurs the line between right and wrong. The idea that as citizens we have constitutional rights that protect our liberty is an illusion. All aspects of the law are open to interpretation.

One of the most insidious laws in California is the Three Strikes Law. Under this law a person must be sentenced to 25 years to life if they are convicted of three separate crimes. This law was passed under the guise that all three crimes had to be either serious or violent. Unfortunately, most voters didn't take the time to read the fine print. The courts have held that the law in fact applies to non-violent offenses, as well as juvenile offenses. One of the CROP members named Kevin was actually "struck out" for committing three non-violent offenses.

Kevin committed his first crime at age 16. He and a couple of friends ordered a pizza to an abandoned apartment. When the pizza delivery person arrived, Kevin and his pals took the pizza and ran out the back door. When he was 19, he received his second strike for stealing something from a parked car. At 22 he was arrested for the crime of hanging out with the wrong person. One of Kevin's friends told him that he was going to rob a smoke shop. The police arrested Kevin because they wanted him to testify against

his friend. When he refused to testify, he was tried and convicted of the crime of accessory to attempted robbery simply because he knew about the crime and refused to tell the police. Kevin was sentenced to 25 years to life in state prison. Kevin's story is significant, because it illustrates the importance of choosing your friends wisely. If you are hanging out with gang members or other people who break the law, you may end up going to prison as a result of guilt by association.

Kevin's story is also important, because it demonstrates the flaws and unforgiving nature of the criminal justice system. Men live in the same cell block where I am currently housed who have been stuck out and given life sentences for (1) stealing Huggies Diapers from a supermarket; (2) check fraud; and (3) possession of a stolen license plate. None of Kevin's crimes were serious or violent, yet he may spend the remainder of his life behind bars. The message here is don't break the law - any law. The criminal justice system is a meat grinder of human suffering, and you do not want to get caught in it.

#8 The Culture of Violence

In prison everything is resolved through violence. It is a culture that is ruled by racism and prison politics. The inmates are segregated into four categories: white, black, Mexican and other, which is everyone else. If you are seen talking to someone of another race you will face problems. Someone from your own race will stab you with a shank, which is a make-shift knife. If you are mixed race, you have to choose a side. Even then there is no guarantee that you will be accepted by the racial group you select. The whites are notorious for attacking "White Crips", which are white guys or men of mixed race

who are in the Crips gang. A black man from a Hispanic gang will face similar issues. Each race has a "shotcaller" who is the leader. The shotcaller gets a 25 percent cut of any drugs brought into the prison by someone of his race. Most shotcallers are drug addicts who are wildly unstable. If you come to prison, this is the person who will determine your fate.

When a new guy arrives on the yard, he must show his paperwork to the shotcaller. The paperwork, which is generated by the administration, describes your commitment offense. If you don't produce your paperwork, or have been convicted of a sex crime or a crime against children, you will be "dealt with". This means that someone from your race will stab you. The person chosen by the shotcaller for this mission is almost always a new inmate on the yard, called a "Newbie." By going on a mission a convict earns respect, (makes his bones). Not all missions are stickings. Lesser offenses, such as not paying a drug or gambling debt on time, will only result in three or four guys beating you down on the yard. Prior to going on a mission, the convict will receive a package of drugs that he must "keester" - put up his butt. This is how all drugs are smuggled into and around the prison. Knowing this, the guards constantly strip-search the convicts. During a strip-search you must get completely naked, spread your butt cheeks, bend over and cough while a guard shines a flashlight at your asshole.

Missions frequently do not go according to plan. Not long ago two skinheads beat up an old white guy and stole his "canteen" which is the bag of food stuffs he purchased at the prison store. The skinheads knew this incident would not be tolerated by the other whites but they didn't care. They were drug addicts, and they needed the money to feed their habit. The shotcaller determined that their punishment would be to send them on a

mission to beat up a man named Tom whose drug habits were not being paid. The two skinheads attacked Tom in a blind spot on the yard where guards could not see them. Tom was prepared for the attack. He had a razor blade that was attached to a tooth brush, and he slashed both of the skinheads in the face. Both men were left with ugly, permanent scars.

Prison is a violent place. No one is going to show you any sympathy if you end up here. This isn't some two-hour movie. People are humiliated in here. They also die in here. They don't tell you that in the rap songs that glamorize gangs, crime and prison life.

#7 The Other Inmates

Prison is filled with society's rejects. Most of the men are drug addicts who will do anything - lie, cheat, steal, deceive - to obtain some drugs. Some convicts stink because they do not shower regularly. Some are loud and disrespectful. Many are mentally unstable. It's like being surrounded by a thousand hidden bombs; you never know what will set off one of them.

You do not get to choose your cellmate. The chances of you ending up with someone who shares your culture, values or interests is about a thousand to one. Over the years I've been celled with some real freak shows. One convict named Ray laughed at the top of his lungs continuously for hours. Another named Sam talked non-stop about all his fights, which I surmised was a defense mechanism. One dude from Tennessee cut the most God-awful farts all day, every day. It got so bad that I had to smuggle a surgical mask from the infirmary to prevent from getting sick. One of the worst cellmates I had made "primo" once a week. Primo is jailhouse wine that frequently makes people sick.

When this guy got drunk, he was loud and obnoxious. He frequently made racial slurs to the blacks who lived in the neighboring cell. This was a concern for me, because if the blacks attacked him, I would be obligated to come to his defense. If I didn't, then the other whites would send a "torpedo", an armed attacker, to deal with me.

#6 Sexual Predators

I know that it's cliché but rapes really do occur in prison. A few years ago in the prison where I am currently housed a man named Frank got in trouble with his cellmate. Frank was a genuinely nice guy. He had a big heart. Whenever he went to the canteen he spent a lot of money and shared with everybody who knew him. Unfortunately, in prison, people prey on weakness. Frank's cellmate started stealing Frank's food whenever he wasn't in the cell. Frank got tired of the stealing and asked some other convicts for advice. The other cons told him to man up and do what he had to do. Frank had to fight the guy in order to get him out of the cell. There are vicious men in prison. The guy beat Frank until he was unconscious. Then, he tied him up, gagged him and raped him repeatedly. Other cons looked in the cell while this was going on and laughed. No one did anything to help Frank, because snitching is a stabbing offense. After raping Frank, the guy strangled him to death. That's how prison is. This is a vicious place. No one cares about you in here.

#5 The Guards

I would say that most of the guards who work at the prisons where I have been housed are normal people. They just want to get their eight hours in, pick up their

paychecks and go home. But like every other realm of society, there are some guards who are sadistic. In prison the guards have absolute power over your life. They tell you what to do and how to do it all day, every day. If you don't like it, if you don't obey, then you are going to have problems. The guards have the power to write you up for a rules violation, which can add to the amount of time you have to do on your sentence.

The trouble with absolute power is that when it is given to a sadistic person, it corrupts. About five years ago there was a guard who was raping inmates by forcing them to give him blow jobs. One of the convicts who he was being violated in this manner got smart. He spit the guard's semen into a napkin and smuggled it to his family at a visit. The family member took the napkin to the San Diego County District Attorney's office, and filed a civil complaint against the prison. The guard was arrested, tried and convicted of rape.

Another, more brutal abuse by prison guards occurred at Corcoran State Prison, in the Security Housing Unit, which is known as "The Hole" or "The SHU". Prison politics are so bad in the SHU that the inmates have a fight on site policy. What this means is that whenever you see an inmate of another race you are required to fight him. In order to deal with the violence the prison administration adopted two new policies. First, they determined that inmates would be segregated at all time and second the guards were given the authority to shoot any inmate who started a fight without any consequences to the guard. It was a license to kill.

Some sadistic guards at the Corcoran SHU abused these new policies by setting up staged fights between the inmates, and betting on the outcomes. The guards would let two inmates from rival races out into a small recreation area, and watch them beat each

other up. Then they would shoot the winner. The guards used mini-14 rifles with nine millimeter bullets that exploded on impact. Three inmates were murdered by the guards and dozens more were permanently maimed before the federal government became aware of the abuse and put an end to it. The TV Show 60 Minutes did a special report on the Corcoran SHU, which was known as gladiator school. In the show Ed Bradley interviewed a Mexican convict who had been shot in the back while defending himself in one of the guards staged fights. The bullet shattered his spine, paralyzing him from the waist down.

#4 Access to Health Care

In December 2009, a panel of three federal judges ordered the State of California to release 40,000 inmates, because prison over-crowding had caused deplorable, unconstitutional health care conditions. Testimony from the trial revealed that at least one inmate dies every week due to medical indifference. The delay in seeing a doctor at the institution where I am currently housed is six weeks. Imagine being really ill and having no access to medical care.

Access to expensive medical procedures is often blocked. Back in the mid-1990's I shattered my ankles playing basketball. The x-ray revealed that in addition to a break, there was a multitude of bone fragments. I was sent to see an orthopedic doctor at a hospital in the city. He recommended surgery and ordered an MRI exam. When the MRI results came back, the prison's chief medical officer determined that surgery was not necessary. The prison doctor didn't even give me a cast. I limped around on crutches for

over a year before the ankle finally healed on its own. It still causes me pain from time to time.

Dental care may even be worse than the medical care. Most of the time the dentist's won't provide fillings for cavities, because it's cheaper to pull teeth. A toothless convict is a common sight on the prison yard. The longer a convict has been in prison, the less teeth he probably will have. I once heard one con ask another to punch him in the mouth to knock out his two front teeth. The poor guy had just learned that in order to get partial false teeth, the prison rules required an inmate to have only five teeth in his mouth, and he had seven.

#3 The Loss of Your Freedom

You know the old saying, "You don't know how much you love something until you lost it." There are so many things associated with freedom that we take for granted. The first ten years that I was incarcerated I was held in either the county jail or level 4 super-max facilities. The only thing I ever saw was concrete walls and dirt grounds. Then I was transferred to Donovan prison in San Diego, which is a level 3 maximum security facility. I was exposed to grass and flowers and birds for the first time in more than a decade. Being able to see and touch and be in nature brought me immense joy. I was also allowed to go outside in the evening. As I watched a magnificent sunset I could not control the tears that flowed from my eyes. Later I admired a full moon and the brilliance of the stars, and I felt immense pain over all I had lost when I lost my freedom.

If you choose to break the law, you risk losing the precious gift of freedom - the freedom to choose what you want to do and when you want to do it. In prison you will be

ordered around and told what to do in every moment of your existence. You lose the freedom to choose what you want to eat. The food in prison is horrible beyond description. Sometimes you even lose the freedom to choose when you can use the bathroom, and you are not going to be allowed to handle your business in private. When you go to take a crap, your cellmate will be sitting just a few feet away. If he isn't working with a full deck, he may even stare at you or try to speak up a conversation while you're on the pot.

The worse loss of all is the freedom to spend time with the people you love. The loneliness you will feel in prison is more horrible than you can possibly imagine. I cannot count the number of nights I cried myself to sleep. Prisoners are allowed to visit with friends and family members in the prison visiting room on the weekends. Prior to receiving such a visit your loved ones will be subjected to a humiliating and torturous process where they must wait in line for up to four hours and may be strip-searched, interrogated or told to change clothes. Is such treatment necessary? Of course not. It's a deliberate policy the prison has adopted to deter visitors. Think about that. Think about how the choice to commit a crime will affect the people who care about you. Think about the pain you will cause your parents. Do you love your parents? Then don't make the choice to break the law, because your parents will blame themselves. They will think that they failed as parents. When you go to prison, your parents suffer in ways you cannot now imagine.

#2 You May Never Get Out

When you are incarcerated in prison, there is no guarantee that you will ever be released. I am aware of numerous incidents where men were killed prior to their scheduled release date. One convict with less than a week to do on his sentence was on the yard when a riot broke out. He did the wise thing and moved away from the violence. However, a bullet fired by one of the guards ricocheted and hit him directly in the heart, and he died instantly. Another man I know about holed up in his cell during the final two weeks of his sentence to avoid any problems. Since he chose this course of action he was unaware of the fact that the other cons were on a work strike and had set up a picket line at the work-change gate. On the day of his release he unknowingly crossed the picket line, because he had to go through the work-change gate to be released. The men on the picket line wrongly assumed the inmate was challenging the work stoppage and beat him to death.

You can also catch a new case that adds time to your sentence, and with the "three strikes you're out" law, you can get a life sentence. I know addicts who have been struck out for a joint or a tenth of a gram of heroine. One parole violator who was only serving a six-month sentence was required to go on a mission with two other convicts to beat up a known snitch. The snitch suffered a broken neck and was partially paralyzed. The parole violator was charged, tried and convicted of attempted murder, which carries a mandatory sentence of 15 years to life in state prison.

If you have a "life" at the end of your sentence, there is also the possibility that the parole board will refuse to release you, even after you have served the mandatory - minimum part of your sentence. This happened to me. On April 1, 2008, after being

incarcerated for 16 years and eight months I reached my "MEPD", which means Minimum Eligible Parole Date. The MEPD underscores the "legislative intent" that a life-term inmate may earn four months of good time credit for each disciplinary-free year of imprisonment. The time that I had served was exactly two-thirds of my original 25 years to life sentence. I have remained disciplinary free throughout my entire incarceration. Therefore, based on the intent of the legislature, I had served my entire sentence and should have been released provided the parole board found me to be "suitable" for parole. The California Penal Code states: "The parole board shall normally find an inmate to be suitable provided there is not some current evidence that he is a threat to public safety." Despite the fact that the parole board's own forensic expert and my correctional counselor both recommended my parole, the board denied me for three years? How could such a thing happen, you may wonder? Recall the earlier that I said our criminal justice system is deeply flawed and that all the laws are open to interpretation. That's how. My next eligibility hearing will be scheduled sometime in the first quarter of 2011.

#1 Race Riots

I saved race riots for last because it segues into the next chapter titled "Riot In Cell Block A." In the next segment I will tell you the frightening story of the day I was forced to participate in a 300-man prison race riot.