

Survivors Guide to Prison: The American nightmare

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Directed by Matthew Cooke; narrated by Cooke and Susan Sarandon

“I got what I asked for—the first two symbols that were waiting to meet me were precisely the two most revolting objects on earth: a church and a prison.”—Paul Nizan, *Aden Arabie*

The American prison and criminal justice system is a collective nightmare that in and of itself makes a mockery of US government claims to be intervening on behalf of “democratic rights” or “human rights” anywhere on the planet.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative in 2017: “The American criminal justice system holds more than 2.3 million people in 1,719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 901 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 local jails, and 76 Indian Country jails as well as in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, and prisons in the U.S. territories.”

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world—with less than 5 percent of the global population, it holds approximately 22 percent of the world’s prisoners. Its incarceration rate is some three and a half times the European one.

This situation rightly alarms and outrages great numbers of people, including artists who want to expose this reality to the wider public. The US penal system is so inhuman that Matthew Cooke’s documentary, *Survivors Guide to Prison*, takes the form of bleakly ironic advice to those who get entangled in the prison web, with semi-serious pointers as to how to survive it. Along these lines, the film is divided into

segments such as “How to handle an out-of-control police officer,” “How to handle an interrogation,” and “How to survive county jail,” the latter apparently being some of the very worst of the worst.

Narrated by Cooke and actress Susan Sarandon, the movie also features a host of other celebrities including actors Danny Trejo, Danny Glover, Cynthia Nixon and Patricia Arquette, and music producer Quincy Jones. It dramatically opens with a number of the luminaries expounding on the present state of affairs.

Danny Trejo: “*This country is home to the largest prison population in the world.*”

Matthew Cooke: “*We put more people in prison than in China and in Russia.*”

Patricia Arquette: “*One third of all females incarcerated globally are locked up here.*”

Danny Trejo: “*Thirteen million Americans are arrested every year.*”

Matthew Cooke: “*Put that in perspective— imagine all of Los Angeles and all of New York City arrested every year. ... With record poverty, drug use and countless non-violent social issues left to our police officers to solve—guns, Tasers, hand cuffs—we have a national crisis on our hands...But how many Americans are so dangerous that they need to be locked up in a cage?*”

Danny Trejo: “*Citizens, the media, independents are all barred from recording or documenting anything that’s going on inside prisons .*”

Survivors Guide to Prison focuses in particular on the cases of Reggie Cole and Bruce Lisker, whose stories are told in fragments throughout the film. Both were innocent men who spent decades behind bars.

Cole, an African American, was 16 when he was arrested in 1994 and subsequently convicted of murder, largely based on the false testimony of an alleged

eyewitness. An endearing man, Cole coined the word “petranoid,” i.e., being petrified and paranoid simultaneously, to describe his own condition. Cole was exonerated and eventually released in May 2010.

Lisker, who is white, was 17 when he was arrested, tried and convicted for the March 1984 murder of his own mother. He served more than 26 years of a 16-years-to-life sentence in California prisons, including San Quentin, and was released in 2009. The Cole and Lisker stories are heartbreaking. Both point to the role of the police and prosecution as systematic organizers of frame-ups.

Prosecutorial immunity (the Supreme Court-enshrined legal protection prosecutors have in initiating a prosecution and presenting the government’s case, no matter how false and malicious the case proves to be) is another gem of the American legal system, incentivizing the obtaining of convictions at any cost.

Justin Brooks of the California Innocence Project notes that “It’s a joke the resources prosecutors have over defense attorneys. Prosecutors have the police force as investigators.” Prosecutors have a higher than 90 percent conviction rate.

Cooke’s movie also points out that an estimated 50 percent of those incarcerated have some kind of mental health problem, in part the product of the closure of state psychiatric hospitals and other austerity measures. “Who are the crazy ones?” ask the filmmakers.

On the other hand, the prison system is a cash cow for a layer of businessmen and women: for example, companies that charge prisoners for making phone calls (at exorbitant rates) alone rake in \$2 billion annually. The bail bond industry is another \$2 billion racket.

But there’s a special place in Hades for those who run the forced labor institutions known as private prisons. Over 1 million people work for—literally—pennies in prisons that subcontract to Fortune 500 companies, such as Chevron, Bank of America and AT&T, along with the military. Private prisons are paid billions by the federal and state governments to stockpile prisoners and it is in their interest to fill the beds or claim they are filled. One half of detained immigrants are being held in private prisons for indefinite periods of time—often years, with no right to legal representation or medical care.

Survivors Guide acknowledges that “if you’re rich and guilty you have a much better chance than if

you’re poor and innocent.”

Perhaps not as astonishing as it may seem, journalist Shane Bauer, who was detained for two years in Iran between 2009 and 2011, tells the camera: “Conditions are worse in California prisons than they are in Iran... the average time spent in prisons is more here than in Iran.”

Importantly, the filmmakers insist that the precept of “innocent until proven guilty” is “a shield against witch hunts,” a fact denied or dismissed by the reactionary #MeToo zealots.

Survivors Guide to Prison sheds an informed and heartfelt light on an unspeakable social atrocity. In an interview, director Cooke asserts that “I thought it was important to have a black man, a white man, a brown man and women. Every color. I’m trying to show that this affects everybody.”

The documentary is assertive, affecting and straightforward in regard to the material it presents. But as is the case with almost every film that emerges from the left-liberal milieu (Michelle Alexander, an identity politics academic, is one of the commentators in the movie, which also thanks Bernie Sanders in its credits), its overall perspective is its very weakest element.

Does anyone seriously believe that the horrific conditions described in *Survivors Guide to Prison* are going to be altered by a little good-Samaritan tinkering? The brutality of the prison system mirrors the harshness of social relations in American capitalism, in particular, the extremely advanced, and ever worsening, state of social inequality to which the filmmakers allude in passing.

Millions suffering in prison and a handful gorging themselves are two details of the same vile picture, a picture with unmistakably revolutionary implications.



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