

A memoir of a worker's experience in the American gulag

Ethan Osborne
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More people are behind bars in the United States than any other country in the world. According to the World Population Review, the US prison population is over 2 million and makes up 25 percent of the world's incarcerated. With more than four times more people than the US, China comes in second with 1.5 million people locked up.

The World Socialist Web Site has reported on a recent slew of atrocities committed by authorities in US jails that have come to light this year. In March, we wrote about Irvo Otieno, a 28-year-old Kenyan émigré, who was killed by police while being admitted into a hospital after he had been jailed for suffering a mental health crisis and been denied his medication for three days.

In April, we published the story of two inmates who died barbaric deaths while in jail. Lashawn Thompson was found dead in his cell, his body riddled with sores and bug bites in a Georgia jail last September. Joshua McLemore, an inmate in Indiana in the throes of schizophrenia, died of dehydration and malnutrition in 2021 after spending 20 straight days in solitary confinement.

Last month, we reported on three inmates who are suing Central Detention Facility and the Correctional Treatment Facility (D.C. Jail) in Washington D.C. for failing to provide medication on time, or at all, despite medical orders from health providers.

The US government hypocritically derides other countries' criminal justice systems on humanitarian grounds and lauds itself as the champion of freedom throughout the world while in its jails and prisons nightmarish abuses and inhumane conditions are rife—thousands die in state and federal prisons every year.

The following is from a reader who shared his experience of his time in jail with the WSW. It is an account that exposes the brutality of life behind bars and the depravity of society under capitalism.

Built in 1969, the old Kenton County Detention Center (KCDC) was one of the worst, most dilapidated and notoriously foul corrections facilities in Kentucky. The jail was fined thousands of dollars a month while I was housed there and had actually been condemned because the building was in violation of numerous codes.

After years of facing fines and a mountain of lawsuits for overcrowding, abuse and inhumane living conditions, a new jail finally opened in 2010.

But let me take you back in time, to my first day in this “tower of tyranny” as we called it. The first thing I remember while being processed into the jail was the waft of stench that hit my nostrils as I entered booking which was in the basement of the building. It was an unforgettable noxious and acrid reek that I would soon become accustomed to. The foul odor and the cold concrete and glass cage I found myself confined in quickly sobered me from my drug and alcohol induced blackout.

This was truly the lowest moment of my life. I remember kneeling over a filthy toilet heaving up bile while suffering a pounding migraine. A guard entered the holding cell and informed me of my charges, which included felony wanton endangerment. I had never been in serious trouble

with the law before that time. I had just been discharged from the US Marine Corps. I was homeless, without healthcare and suffering from untreated PTSD and bipolar disorder.

Some of the murky memories of what landed me in jail started to resurface. I had been suffering a mental breakdown and was suicidal when I had ingested a near-toxic cocktail of liquor, Adderall and Valium. I had recklessly pulled a gun in public and fired it in the air with intentions of committing suicide by cop. Thankfully, a bystander I encountered disarmed me and I was taken into custody.

I was held in the “fishbowl” or “drunk tank,” as the booking cell was called, for three days before I was processed into the general population. During those three days I went through agonizing withdrawal. When the delirium tremens hit, my hands began to shake and my vision blurred into a fuzzy white light. I could not hold water down and had vomited bile all over the cell, which had started to attract the roaches and ants which infested the jail. I would learn to live with them, as well as the mites, flies and bedbugs.

A nurse and a guard entered the cell, mocking my misery. “You can’t eat or drink anything. We’re going to have to give you a suppository to treat these withdrawal symptoms. Face the wall and spread your cheeks inmate!” the burly nurse commanded. She proceeded to aggressively thrust a capsule in my anus while she and the muscle-bound, jack-booted guard towering over me cackled.

Withdrawal from alcohol and benzodiazepines can be deadly, so I imagine this is why I was given treatment for mine. The policy of the jail was not to treat inmates who were withdrawing from other substances such as heroin, which, although the symptoms of withdrawal are excruciating, are not life-threatening. I watched many new inmates go through the torture of heroin withdrawal, vomiting and not being able to eat for days. Other inmates loved it when a heroin addict came in because they would give away their food while they suffered through withdrawal.

“How’s that feel Osborne!? Enjoy it. It’s the last touch you’re going to feel from a woman in a long time,” the guard guffawed and they both erupted in laughter.

“Welcome to Hotel KCDC,” shouted the nurse as they exited the cell, the heavy door clanking shut behind them, a sound that still follows me to this day. Already suffering from PTSD, my experience in jail only compounded the damage.

After I recovered from the detox, I was corralled into a single-file line with the other new inmates and escorted to my new home in the GP [general population]. The inmates in each cell we passed crowded into the windows to taunt the fresh meat coming in. They flexed, puffed their chests, leered wild-eyed, laughing and screaming.

“Fuck you lookin’ at bitch?!” an agitated inmate yelled as he beat on the glass window.

Finally, I arrived at my assigned cell, numbered 955. I was handed an itchy blanket roll and a slimy, sand-filled sleeping mat as I entered the cell. The condition looked very much the same as this picture below from

inside the old KCDC. Black mold stained the walls like rash. Everywhere there was rusted metal.

The cell was designed for a maximum occupancy of fifteen inmates; that's how many "racks" there were. It measured 20 by 20 feet—the equivalent of a medium-sized living room. All of us shared one toilet that leaked, forming a stagnant puddle in the center of the cell. Steel bunkbeds lined the walls, save for the rear wall which was the side of a steel cage called the catwalk, where the guards could observe the cell. At night they would walk by raking their flashlights or nightsticks against the cage when inmates might actually be asleep. I recall with clarity the sound as if it were yesterday.

At times the cell was overcrowded with up to thirty inmates who slept on the floor in plastic containers called "boats" or "coffins." At the center of the room were two steel picnic-style tables. The sleeping boats for the inmates not fortunate enough to get an actual bed were staggered in the lanes between each of the beds wherever they could squeeze in. You had to literally step over inmates to move around anywhere in this cage.

When I entered the cell, I was famished, dehydrated, filthy and horrified at my new reality. The space was jam-packed, almost shoulder to shoulder. Inmates sat on top of the table slamming dominoes and playing cards. I went to the only available coffin in the back corner of the room and plopped down my mat and sat.

"Ethan Osborne! You best hit that shower!" someone shouted laughing from across the room as everyone grew quiet and stared me down.

I recognized the familiar smiling face of the inmate who was approaching me, an old friend I had not seen since high school. I was incredibly fortunate to know someone in there, someone who had a bottom bunk next to the TV, indicative of the fact that he was one of the inmates who had been in the cell the longest. He came and sat on the boat next to me and gave me the rundown.

"First thing everyone does when they get in here is hit that water. Now I'm going to give you this shit because it could be weeks before you get it from the jail," he explained, tossing a bundle containing a pair of socks, a bar of soap, a tiny tube of toothpaste and a white t-shirt into my lap.

Typically, no "hygiene" was issued. One or two rolls of toilet paper would periodically be tossed into the cell to be fought over or claimed by a "podfather"—someone who called shots in the cell—to be distributed to the other inmates, sometimes in exchange for other jailhouse valuables like sweets from the meals. Hygiene kits called "indigent packs" were not distributed, but necessities could be bartered for with leftover food or other contraband.

I was stuck in that cell for a few months while awaiting trial. There was constant argument and violence; a day without seeing a fight was a good day. Although weapons were not common in this facility, there were occasional shankings.

On my first day, a homosexual inmate in an adjacent cell was strangled to death by his rack-mate, who was facing murder charges. It was 15 hours before guards discovered the body. The other inmates had not reported the death so they could use the murdered inmate's ID bracelet for extra food at chow time. A complete description of this horror outlining the incompetence and dereliction of duty by the corrections officers can be read [here](#).

Despite learning how to make improvised earplugs out of toilet paper and scraps of plastic garbage bags, a full night of sound sleep was nonexistent. There was always someone yelling, playing dominos or flushing the toilet. The echoes of jiggling keys, the static, squelch and beeping of the guards' radios and the distant slamming of iron doors never stopped. This is what we call "jail noise," and I, like many others, still hear it in moments of quiet, long after we have been released.

It is widely accepted that doing county jail time is far worse than actually being in a state or federal prison facility. There are many inmates who are stuck doing all their time in county jails because of varying

factors. It is also common for inmates to be held beyond their sentences for arbitrary reasons trumped up by the courts.

There is an unwritten code of conduct in prison, enforced brutally by the most hardened inmates.

Child molesters and police informants, who are considered the two lowest lifeforms in the prison hierarchy, are held in "protected custody." In many institutions, the unwritten law is that both types of prisoners are KOS (kill on sight) and if you interact with them or cross their path without taking action, you will be treated just as them. This is how many inmates who enter the system end up with extended sentences, because they rack up more offenses while incarcerated, many times due to situations beyond their control.

Trying to go against the status quo on the inside can get you killed. But sometimes the worst predators lurk in the general population, preying on the weak. There are criminally insane inmates, who should be in isolation, not in the GP. I will never forget waking up to an inmate getting beaten to a pulp because he masturbated and ejaculated into the face of another sleeping inmate. Biowarfare was a tactic sometimes, with inmates making fecal bombs from collecting their excrement and bodily fluids in bottles to be weaponized.

After a few months awaiting sentencing in cell 955, I was transferred to the "honor dorm," cell 560, for good behavior. Cell 560 was on the lower fifth floor. It was a wide-open large dorm like the one pictured above. It was larger than cell 955; there was actually room to walk around.

We also had private shower stalls and a hot pot to make coffee. Of course, the hot pot could also be weaponized to deploy what was called a "hot mask"—boiling water mixed with salt and lotion. I witnessed this being thrown in someone's face while he played cards. I remember him wiping the skin off of his partially melted face.

Though there was always a corrections officer on duty in the dorm, that did not stop the violence, it just gave smaller windows of time for it to happen. For those of us who lived inside or the staff who had enough consciousness to quit and try to expose what was going on there, the corruption of this facility was legendary.

Violence was not limited to inmates. Staff routinely brutalized inmates and many times would receive promotions in rank after killing a prisoner. During my time in KCDC, an inmate was killed by a CO (corrections officer) kneeling on his neck. I, too, had knees and boots on my neck, a reason the George Floyd murder had such a profound psychological effect on me.

The guards would often enable inmate-on-inmate violence for their entertainment. It was not uncommon for them to house weaker inmates, or those whom they disliked, with violent or mentally ill cellmates. Rape, beatings and other forms of torture were routine.

Serious degeneracy was going on between all these guards, for example, I remember the lower-ranking CO showing up to work with black eyes after being beaten by the captain she was dating. The captain not only got his kicks out of torturing inmates and even other guards, he was a domestic abuser, too.

A KCDC CO was fired in 2019 after brutalizing an inmate on video. Another Kentucky guard was fired, charged for raping an inmate in 2021.

I learned that jail has its own economy. Everything is a racket, a scam, or a hustle. The jail cut corners with the distribution of hygiene products. Every single inmate is supposed to be issued their own toilet paper roll and hygiene packets. Instead, an entire cell would be given one roll. In the kitchen, cooks were ordered to skimp on food by watering it down or omitting ingredients. The savings from this unofficial rationing would be pocketed.

A crude and barbaric form of marketplace existed within the inmate population. Without money you cannot write letters or use the phone. With it you have the power to bribe guards who smuggle in high-priced commodities like drugs which are so prominent in jail that overdoses are

commonplace. The inmates with the most money can manipulate the others. This stratification was most obvious through the commissary system. The jail commissary, or canteen as it was called, made snack foods and hygiene products available for purchase by inmates. Inmates with money on their accounts could buy up items in the canteen to sell at a profit to other inmates. These entrepreneurs created their own stores and banks run from their lockers or bunks. They even developed a credit system. Defaulting on debts to other inmates incurred severe punishment. Everything is enforced with violence inside. This was the inner-institutional capitalist economy.

Fresh air? Forget it. We were fortunate if we got to go to the “rec yard” once or twice a month. The rec yard was just a room on the roof with an open ceiling covered by a cyclone fence. That’s the only fresh air or sunlight we had.

This was where most fights took place. On one occasion the entire rec yard erupted into a gang fight, which caused everyone, even non-participants, to be gassed, tased, zip-tied, black-bagged and beaten by the “goon squad,” aka CERT (Correctional Emergency Response Team).

Beside the asbestos, mold, pests, contaminated drinking water (frequently acquired from the fountain on the top of the toilet), leaking plumbing and sewage issues and corruption, one of the most revolting aspects of the old KCDC was the food.

After I was sentenced to five years for felony wanton endangerment, I briefly worked in the kitchen. The kitchen was located in the basement of the building adjacent to the intake unit. Never in my life had I seen so many cockroaches. They literally would fall off the ceilings like rain into the food, much of it expired and labeled “not fit for human consumption.”

Working in the kitchen, I was sometimes tasked with the duty of delivering trays of food to the different cells under the supervision of the COs. It was during this time that I would come in contact with female inmates and what I witnessed deeply disturbed me. Women and openly LGBTQ+ are the most vulnerable and victimized people incarcerated, but I felt the worst for the pregnant inmates, who looked underfed. They were barely given any extra calories, so I always tried to sneak them extra food as much as possible.

It was rumored that their malnourishment was by design because the administration wanted pregnant inmates to have miscarriages: the institutions do not like dealing with pregnancy and birth in jail. This has been exposed in a previous WSWS article about female inmates in Arizona being forced into labor.

This should be shocking to no one, considering how immigrant detainees also suffer reprehensible abuse including forced sterilization. Imagine all these conditions I have described thus far. Now imagine children subjected to these conditions. It is happening right now, all over the US, immigrant children still living in cages. Repugnant.

I befriended a Muslim inmate in the kitchen, Abdul. We became progressively disgusted with the food situation. To Abdul, this extreme violation of the Halal diet was an abomination. He was also my rackmate and he would lament being denied a prayer mat as well as a copy of the Quran because it was deemed subversive literature. The available chaplains were Southern Baptist.

There was talk going around the jail of rioting over the food and Abdul and I plotted a hunger strike after a bunch of us quit working in the kitchen en masse. One of the benefits of working in the kitchen was that we had cells connected with the kitchen and could smuggle its contents and luxuries to be sold as contraband and we could eat as much as we wanted.

Even so, we had had enough. Quitting the kitchen meant we would be sent back to ninth floor, back to the most squalid section of the jail, where I was swiftly punished for attempting the hunger strike. One thing the COs hate the most are political agitators. Before being sent to “the hole” (solitary confinement), I was taken into a holding cell, black-bagged,

strapped to a restraint chair and beaten. When they took the bag off my head, I beheld the captain, looking like an arrogant frat boy smiling at me.

“Eyeballing me, reckless?” he said as I called him a pig and he body slammed me to the ground. Then the boot on the throat. I remember looking up at him thinking that it was over, I was going to die in there. But I survived and returned to the hole where I stayed until my bruises and swelling healed and then I was sent back to cell 560.

Not a few days after returning to 560, I experienced my first real taste of institutional racism. After discovering someone had stolen my phone card, I was confronted by a group of neo-Nazi inmates.

“That fucking loudmouth nigger Jefferson is the one who stole your phone card. Now you better go handle it, or we’re going to handle you, Oz.”

I had managed to make it this far without getting into a serious fight. I was wise enough to not gamble, not borrow anything and to stay away from the TV, which was one of the main sources of fights. But now I had no choice. There is no room for weakness in there.

I confronted Jefferson and he beat me up and it was back to the hole for me. They put him in the cell next to me where we argued for hours and he finally told me he did not steal my phone card. It most likely was the Nazis. Checks out. After spending a week in solitary, I was moved back to 955. Jefferson spent another two weeks in solitary after I was released. Why? Because he was black.

Finally, I was later transferred out of KCDC to a minimum-security work camp on the other side of the state. It was like a vacation compared to what I had just come from. We could leave each day with the warden, working on a county road clean-up crew, picking up trash and scraping up roadkill. Here, the guards treated us with respect and the facility, a former fire station converted into a detention facility, was cleaner.

But our labor was exploited. We were paid seven dollars a day for working six to eight hours a day. The inmates did not care because we were outside. Sometimes the warden would have us working on private property, cleaning up on cattle ranches. That was illegal and the warden was most likely pocketing the money paid by the farmers for our work. Who would complain? The only alternative was being sent back to a county jail and being reprocessed all over again.

“Osborne, pack it up!” Those magic words every prisoner fantasizes to hear woke me early one morning followed by applause from 20 other inmates. I had made parole. I was outta there. But not quite free just yet. I had to stay at the York Street Halfway House back in my hometown for a month and complete a “reentry class” before I was permitted to live anywhere else.

The halfway house was another dump, complete with the familiar bedbug and roach infestation I had grown accustomed to in KCDC. The staff, including guidance counselors, were high on drugs. They made every new inmate apply for food stamp cards, which they kept for themselves. Endless corruption, from arrest to incarceration to parole!

After completing the reentry course, I moved in with my aunt, the only person I could find without any alcohol, drugs or firearms in their house. I slept on a cot in her laundry room for months. I had nothing of value but a Civil War diary I had inherited from my granduncle which I in time auctioned for \$800. I can only speculate its true value, but it enabled me to move out into my own place and buy a car after having to bicycle 10 miles a day to my landscaping job.

I served nearly a year in jail and a work camp and spent the next few years on parole, which was another nightmare in itself. The probation and parole office was yet another cesspool. I will never forget the dehumanization of my parole officer (PO) refusing to shake my hand during my first report in. The marshals and the PO would show up randomly at my apartment and search all my belongings, even my trash, making a humiliating spectacle for my neighbors to watch.

One of the main differences between probation and parole, the latter

being exclusively for felons, is that if you get a probation violation, the time you had already completed does not count and you have to start your probation over. This is why there are people who might spend most of their lives on probation. Being caught up in the criminal justice system is like trying to wade through quicksand.

After completing my parole, I maintained my sobriety for years. The horrible ordeal of KCDC was behind me, but it will always haunt me. I was damaged and, unfortunately, my problems with the law did not end there.

Years later, I moved to California to start a new life and family.

I relapsed and endured a debilitating breakup and custody battle with my ex-partner. I made the mistake of getting a DUI [driving under the influence], landing me in Shasta County jail for a couple of months. The California Department of Corrections was entirely different from the facilities in Kentucky. It was rigidly segregated. I had no idea how bad it was.

There was racism and segregation in the Kentucky jails and prisons, but it was more subtle. In Kentucky, it was acceptable to interact with other races. Not so in California. You could not so much as touch the railing in the chow hall after another race might have touched it and to do so would get you a beat down at minimum. You could not sit at the same table or even speak to another race unless they had some kind of alliance with your own racial gang. You have absolutely no say in the matter of who you can associate with in that situation. If you are white, you are rolling with the white gangs: the skinheads, peckerwoods, or at the very top of the hierarchy, the Aryan Brotherhood. Questioning any of the prison politics or policies enforced by the gang leadership would lead one to a violent end.

One thing all the prison gangs have in common, regardless of race, is that they are all fascistic in nature: homophobic, misogynist and nationalist. They meet all opposition with unquestionable and unrelenting deadly force. The only solidarity existing outside of racial solidarity behind the bricks is the “code of silence.” That means you do not snitch, you do not associate with COs and if a riot pops off, you better support it. Retreat means to be disciplined later, in blood.

It has often been observed that prisons are a mirror of the society that builds them, that prison life is a reflection of the broader social and economic conditions under capitalism. The United States is the world’s largest jailer and is also the biggest perpetrator of world imperialist violence and social inequality. There is no barbarism or cruelty committed in prison that the ruling elite have not committed in the name of capitalism. Its behemoth penal system has been erected to protect the property and profit interests of a tiny oligarchy.

Only a society that has ended class antagonism by overthrowing capitalism and instituting a program of socialism will have no need to maintain this hellish system of prisons. Rather than being warehouses of punishment and control, prisons would focus on rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

After struggling for a decade to obtain Veterans Affairs healthcare coverage, I finally succeeded and received treatment for my PTSD and bipolar disorder. I am not healed, but I am recovering. A broken spirit mended is twice as strong. My experience is what fuels my politics. Mine is just one star among billions in a constellation of corruption, institutional crime and the misnamed criminal justice system—a system itself operated by some criminals far worse than those in the cages they manage.



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