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Prison Can’t Be That Bad, Right?

You’re a working, middle class man who had a run in with the law. You didn’t pay your parking tickets and you got caught doing illegal things. One day, the police catch you in the act. You’re arrested, and a judge sentences you to a few years in prison. You’ve heard good and bad things about prison. They’ll put you in your own cell where you’ll stay while your only other social interaction will be with the other inmates in the lunchroom and common area. It’s not going to be like a hotel, but it won’t be like living on the streets; at least that’s what you’ve heard. As long as you stay out of everyone’s way and don’t cause trouble, you should get through prison without any problems. It’s not going to be that bad, right?

When you first arrive at the prison, you are processed and assigned a cell. The guards lead you down your new home for the next few years. Its loud, smelly, and you always feel someone’s eyes boring into the back of your head. After passing rows and rows of cells, the guards stop you at yours. In your cell are two other inmates, sizing you up as if trying to determine whether you are friend or foe. The guards leave, and you are left standing in the small, dark cell. The first thing you notice about your cell is the size. It looks like it was meant for one person, yet there are three inmates living in the same cell. When you are allowed outside, there is honestly, nothing to do and everyone is all up in everyone’s space. The hard truth is that prisons around the globe are overcrowded.

Around two or three inmates are place in rooms meant for one person, or even put in common areas that were never meant to be used as cells (McLaughlin). Lunchrooms have more inmates than they do seats. When inmates are released outside, they are packed together like sardines, unable to move and properly release the pent-up energy resulting from being inside all day. Eventually, these conditions will lead to forms of misconduct between the inmates. This negatively affects both the safety and security of the inmates within the prison (McLaughlin).

It’s been about a month since you were first incarcerated. Problems already exist here because of things like boredom, staying in one place for too long, and no personal control (Dhannyya). It seems that the over crowdedness of the prison is starting to stress people out. There are just too many people in their way and they always feel claustrophobic. They have to fight for seats in front of the tv and books from the tiny prison library. It has led to some pretty nasty behavior and reactions from the other inmates. They’ve started to become more anti-social and aggressive towards each other as a result of the number of people in the prison (Dhannyya). Fights have been breaking out over the smallest things and rarely anyone smiles anymore. You’ve also seen a good amount of people get sent to solitary confinement because of the heightened violence (Gaes). You heard from one of your cell mates that one of the guys who was sent to confinement had finally gotten fed up with the amount of people in his way. He got too stressed and finally snapped, attacking another inmate who took the last seat in the tv lounge. Just last week, you yourself almost had a close class because you got had an intense argument with someone who bumped into you for the fifth time in a row. You were never this violent and aggressive before you came to prison. So why are you so edgy all of a sudden and what could be causing these new emotions?

Prisons are supposed to provide prisoners with a chance to renew themselves and reenter society as a better person. This can’t happen when the prison is overcrowded. In crowded prisons, stress is heightened, resulting in more anti-social behavior from the inmates. They have to fight for limited resources within the facility, leading to less cooperation between prisoners. Over-crowding has also led to a deprivation of rehabilitative programs provided for inmates. This leaves prisoners idle and frustrated with no outlet for these destructive emotions. With no proper outlet, the inmates start to take these feelings out on each other. A study by Gaes and McGuire observed that overcrowding was the strongest indicator for violent behaviors in 14 federal prisons in the United States (Garcia-Guerrero). More fights break out among crowded prisons, further criminalizing the inmates. These negative behaviors developed by prisoners in over-crowded prisons make them more likely to commit more violent crimes once they are released back into society (Dhannyya).

It’s also really gross around the prison. Because there are more people than the prison was meant to hold, dirt and filth piles up a lot faster than a normal prison. The janitorial staff can only go so fast around the prison. There are a lot of prisoners that smoke, but with the lack of proper smoking areas and ventilation, there is always a haze in the air from the smoke (Garicia-Guerrero). Inmates are also getting sick a lot around here. Just two days ago, one of your cell mates contracted strep because he drank from a cup that wasn’t properly cleaned. Now you’re afraid that you’re going to get sick because he’s in your cell. There are only so many places you can go in the entire facility where there isn’t a sick person or a possibility of getting sick. And HIV is spreading like crazy around here too. Some of the guys in the prison are getting on edge a lot and look for ways to relieve their stress. Sometimes one or two of them get really desperate and resort to rather unclean and unsafe methods of relieving the stress. These unclean methods have led to the spread of some pretty unsavory diseases.

Overcrowded prisons have resulted in the decline of inmate health within the prison. The increase in physical contact, the lack of ventilation and light, and the shortage of time outside has favored disease spreading among inmates, especially infectious diseases (Garcia-Guerrero). A lack of separate smoking areas leads to passive smoking among unwilling inmates. This causes lung and breathing problems in inmates who don’t even smoke. They were just unfortunate enough to be packed next to someone who does. Overpopulation can also be an indicator in reference to STIs, like syphilis, HIV, and hepatitis B, since it favors the risk-taking behaviors among inmates (Garcia-Guerrero). But it’s not just the physical health of inmates that is declining. Over-crowding can cause behavioral disorders and affect the psychological health of inmates (Garcia-Guerrero). In the same study conducted by Gaes and McGuire, they found that the anxiety produced by the overpopulated environment of prison can generate self-aggressive behaviors. Higher numbers of self-aggressive behavior, like self inflicted wounds by incisions and the ingestion of foreign bodies, has been associated with overcrowding in prisons (Garcia-Guerrero). This means prisoners are put in conditions that leave them susceptible to harm caused by other prisoners and harm caused by themselves. Suicide has also been linked to overcrowding in prisons. Research has shown that the stress of overcrowding creates an atmosphere that makes adapting to prison life harder and increases the likelihood of suicide (Wolff). These problems affect not only the United States, but prisoners in countries around the world. Overcrowding has caused and increased number of suicides in French prisoners, HIV among South African prisoners, inhumane living conditions for prisoners in the UK, and prison fires in Honduras have put the inmates in more harm than should be allowed (Nguyen). All over the globe overcrowding has put inmates in harm’s way for no reason except “they have to go somewhere.”

The staff don’t make it any easier. One of your cell mates got moved to solitary confinement for aggressive behavior towards another inmate. Your cell now only has two people in it. You think that you are finally going to get some space to breathe when the guards come around dragging along another inmate. He’s the new guy that is going to place your old cell mate. You’re back to being three guys being cramped into a cell meant for one. To make things worse, the new has a few screws loose in his head. The staff have to give him daily medications to keep him calm and stable. The problem is, the staff never get here on time. They always come either too late or too early to give your cell mate his medication. There are too many other prisoners that need attention, so they can’t get your buddy his medication when he needs it, and he really needs it. You don’t feel safe whenever he isn’t medicated. Your cell mate really should have been put in the psych ward, but there wasn’t enough room, so they put him with you. What are you supposed to do? You can’t kick him out and you can’t go anywhere else. You’re in prison.

Overcrowding in prisons creates difficult and widespread challenges for maintaining the health and safety of the prisoners inside (Morag). Some inmates have serious medical conditions, like diabetes, heart problems, or psychiatric illnesses that need constant medical attention. If these prisoners cannot be cared for properly because of overcrowding, these inmates could potentially suffer or worse, die. Criminal justice policies over the last three decades have led to budget cuts and staffing cuts among prisons in the United States. These cuts have led to prison systems becoming overstretched and unable to provide safety and health standards expected by international standards (Morag). This is a serious problem when it comes to providing for inmates that require more attention. Roughly 15% of prisoners suffer from psychotic disorders (Applebaum). Overcrowding means there is no privacy to prisoners when they are being evaluated. With not enough staffing in prisons, there are not enough personnel to distribute medications or bring inmates to and from necessary appointments (Applebaum). Mentally ill prisoners are unable to get the care that they need when in prison because of overcrowded environments. Inmates are neglected and forgotten when placed in prison, with no chance of seeing better treatment anytime soon.

This stinks. You knew that prison isn’t supposed to be a great place, but what you have seen and experienced is just ridiculous. Everything is dirty, crowded, and the standard of living is awful. At some points, you think that living on the streets might actually be a better alternative to where you are now. How are you going to survive two more years in this place? Who is to blame for this? Who let the prison systems stoop to these low standards?

The government has failed to recognize the severity of overcrowding in prisons and how it is affecting the inmates within. “Prisons, due to overpopulation and neglect of prisoners, have become indicators of nations’ failures to uphold stated standards of human and constitutional rights,” (Nguyen). Once a person is dropped into a prison, society seems to forget about them. When confronted with this problem, people tend to think of excuses. “They’re a criminal and don’t serve to be in society with everyday citizens.” “It’s safer for the criminal and us if he is put behind bars.” “He’ll be fine, it’s only prison.” Comments like these show how everyday people and the government forget that inmates are still human beings. Any human doesn’t deserve to be put in unsanitary and unsafe conditions that can lead to injury, illness, and death. Overcrowding the nation’s prisons puts human beings at a risk that can be easily avoided.

It’s the end of your sentence and you finally get to go home. Now that you’ve seen what it’s like on the inside, maybe you can do something to fix it.

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