

Abuse in Prison

by Steve McCain

Largely because prisons are closed institutions to which neither the public nor the press nor prisoner rights advocates have access, the abuse that takes place within them exists largely as an unknown. As one might imagine, this fact only exacerbates the danger. It is upon this that I wish to shed light.

Abuse in US prisons is far more dangerous than it appears because little of it appears to be either serious or physical. And while there are episodes of physical abuse, they are – perhaps miraculously – kept to a minimum. “Serious”, however, is oftentimes in the eye of the beholder, and therefore deserves more “serious” consideration. Most of the abuse doled out and experienced in prison is subtle and psychological, rather than obvious and physical, and it is this subtlety that allows it to perpetuate, that prevents its victims from crying out, and it is this same subtlety that defeats them when they do cry out.

Charles Dickens visited Philadelphia's Eastern State Penitentiary in 1842. Concerning the experience, he later wrote:

“The system is rigid, strict and hopeless... and I believe it to be cruel and wrong... I hold this slow and daily tempering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body.”

A victim will not cry out for fear of being labelled by both their peers and the courts; with derogatory terms by the former, and as a chaser of frivolity by the latter. Many that do cry out suffer a shared fate: Their complaints are labeled “frivolous” by the courts and dismissed on this ground. A singular incident may well appear frivolous, but when combined with other incidents, or influenced by exacerbating factors and continued over extended periods of time, the cumulative effect is anything but “frivolous”.

Consider this:

If someone comes occasionally banging on your door at 11 o'clock at night – or at two o'clock in the morning – you might consider it only a minor annoyance. But what might you consider it when it occurred more nights during the week than not? Would it still be only a minor annoyance, or might it come to present more serious connotations? Consider the following daily schedule:

Rack time (i.e. bedtime)	10:30
Roster count (if asleep, one is woken up more times than not)	11:00-11:30
Breakfast	2:30-3:30
Morning medication	4:00-6:00
Workers (slaves) called out	4:30-5:00

There are some small variations to this schedule, but this gives a good sense of daily life in prison. Weekends are worse yet, as there is also a roster count at 1:00am and showers are also in the middle of the night. So, at what point does a minor annoyance become something far worse? At what point does it become abuse, or worse yet, torture?

Sleep deprivation is a well known and commonly employed tool of torture – Tyrants do so love their implements of torture – and one that is in continual use throughout the US prison system. Sleep deprivation is a nasty implement of torture, but it is not prison's only implement. It is but one tool in a very large toolbox.

Perhaps it is time the courts reconsider what is and is not frivolous.
Perhaps it is time the people took up the torch and forced the issue.

Many believe that prisoners get what they deserve. This is a fallacy, a fantasy. No one deserves what prison does to people. Death would be less cruel and more humane by far. Prison is not the solution to America's crime problem; it is a primary contributor to it.