

# Prison survival guide



A guide to surviving prison or preparing yourself to go to prison, with tips on staying safe, prison etiquette, how to deal with guards and other prisoners, how to get involved in organising and struggle, and more.

## Introduction

Imprisonment as a form of punishment can be traced back to Greek times, but until relatively recently long-term incarceration was extremely rare, only flourishing in modern times after transportation to 'the colonies' became unviable (in no small part due to the American Revolution).

Traditionally, those that offended against society were punished publicly, generally in the most brutal way, from the stocks to the gibbet. Public executions, often with attendant torture and/or mutilation, were the norm in this country until the 17th century. Even when they were abolished it was not out of any sense of decency or humanity, but according to the Oxford History of the Prison, because they had "become the occasion of rowdiness and disgust - both because the crowd had begun to identify with the victim, not the executioner, and because the spectacle had become revolting, offending a new sensibility about pain and bodily integrity. Thus, it became desirable to mete out punishment away from the public gaze."

Today, prison is still very much a closed world, and while within the past two decades TV cameras have occasionally been able to show a very limited view of life behind bars, they rarely capture anything more than that which the authorities wish them to see. The true misery of imprisonment is deliberately kept secret from the general public, while the right-wing press and unscrupulous politicians conspire to present a picture of cushy 'holiday camps' and 'health farms'. The prison authorities do everything within their power (legal and illegal) to prevent investigative journalists having contact with prisoners and vice-versa, while Michael Howard and Jack Straw imposed a ban preventing visiting journalists reporting anything at all. Though the ban has subsequently been deemed unlawful, the vast majority of journalists are so lazy, cowardly, and/or clueless that it might as well still be in place.

With the British prison population currently growing at a rate of four hundred a week, and New Labour's draconian policies criminalising dissent, as a political activist it is more likely that you will see the inside of a prison cell than at any time in recent history. For those committed to the overthrow of the state, imprisonment has to be seen as an occupational hazard, and as such it's better to consider it beforehand, rather than when it's too late.

During my life I've spent time in over 20 British prisons (plus at least a dozen more I've visited or 'stopped over' at) including local prisons, remand centres, long-term Category B prisons, all Britain's maximum security dispersal prisons, a couple of Category A units and 16 segregation units. I've been around a bit, but I've never been anywhere near a low security or 'open' prison, and though I correspond with a number of women prisoners, I've obviously never been held in a women's prison. So while I think I'm pretty well qualified to talk about the prison experience, there are limits to what I know, and inevitably this piece reflects that.

## Preparing for prison

If you know you're going to be imprisoned, at least that gives you a head start. Maybe you can even talk to someone who's been in your local nick, and who knows the rules and can give you an idea what to expect. The 'unknown' is the scariest thing of all, isn't it? Prison is the worst thing our society has.

The most common fear, certainly among men, seems to be that if they get locked up they'll 'have to go in the showers with Mr. Big.' Forget that - predatory homosexuality is as rare in British prisons as malt whisky, in fact in some prisons it's a great deal rarer. There's probably more chance of you being raped or sexually assaulted 'outside' than in here. I have never actually come across a single occurrence.

Then there's the fear of non-sexual violence - are you going to be locked up with a load of thugs and psychopaths who'll cut your throat as soon as look at you? Again, this is largely exaggerated, but violence does exist in prison. However, it's a relatively simple matter to minimise the likelihood of being attacked. In my experience there's far less random violence in prison than in wider society. I was in an adult long-term prison at 19, and the only time I've ever been attacked it was by the screws.

Staying safe comes down to basics. Stay alert and learn some manners - prison is a close environment containing too many people, so manners are extra important. Be polite to people, treat them with mutual respect, don't be nosy or impinge on their limited personal space, never borrow things without asking, don't boast or bullshit, never grass anyone up, and even more importantly, avoid drugs (heroin) and stay away from junkies. When I was at Full Sutton in 1996, there was an average of one stabbing a week, but almost all of them were related to smack.

While adult prisons, particularly long-term ones, tend to be a fairly mature environment, 'Young Offenders Institutions' (for those under 21) can be different, and violence less easy to avoid. The general advice still applies though - be assertive not aggressive, but don't let people take liberties with you, and if necessary be prepared to fight. Some self defence training may give you an edge, but be warned that prison fights are always dirty - you can expect to be bitten, scalded, stabbed, coshed, and/or attacked by multiple assailants. Attacks are likely to take place in the showers or when the victim is still in bed.

In reality, it's not other prisoners you should be worried about, they will become your friends and comrades. In the harsh prison environment bonds will be forged that can last a lifetime. Your problems will come from the system, and from the screws, particularly if you're a person of integrity. From the very first moment you enter prison your principles, your sense of selfhood, and your very humanity will be under attack. If you are to survive unbroken, you must resist all attempts to turn you into a numbered, subjugated, compliant piece of jail-fodder, a 'Stepford Prisoner' who has had their spine and brain removed. You are, after all, not just an individual, but a member of a movement, and those that come after you will be judged by how you behave.

### **The prison lexicon**

While some words of prison slang are hundreds of years old, others are being introduced all the time. Here are just a few examples:

*Adidas sex-case*: prison issue plimsolls.

*Apple or Apple core*: Score - 20, hence 20 years or £20.

*Bang up*: time locked in cell.

*Bed-leg*: a homemade cosh. The word comes from the small section of steel pipe used to separate prison bunks, which would be put in a sock to make a weapon.

*Burglars*: security or 'DST' ('Dedicated Search Team').

*Chip-net*: safety net strung between landings.

*Cucumbers (or 'Numbers' or 'Protection')*: 'Nonces' or 'Bacons' (sex offenders) and other 'Protection-heads' (debtors, grasses, cell thieves etc.) are usually segregated for their own safety under Prison Rule 45 (formerly 43). They should not be confused with prisoners held in the block (the segregation unit) under Prison Rule 45 GOAD (Good Order and Discipline).

Unfortunately, for those of you entering prison today, the level of political consciousness among British prisoners is at the lowest point for many years. Divide and rule scams like the loathsome 'Incentives and Earned Privileges' scheme have undermined solidarity, and in-cell TVs and heroin have helped a culture of selfishness to develop. You will hear people come out with things like, "I can't afford to get involved" or "I've done my bit" or "I just want to get out." Ignore these wankers, they're just trying to justify their own cowardice. Everybody wants to get out of these rotten places, but how do you want to get out - on your feet or on your knees? Resistance and solidarity will always exist within prisons, and if you have anything about you at all, your place is with that resistance, not with the grovellers and forelock-tuggers who shit on their fellow cons in the foolish belief that they can make a comfortable life for themselves in here.

Prison Receptions, the entry point into any jail (unless you go straight to the punishment block - the segregation unit), have changed a lot since the days when you were very likely to be met with a beating, but they are still inevitably an unpleasant experience. It is here that your prison file will be opened, that you will be given a number, where strangers will begin to address you by your surname only, where others will decide what clothes you can wear and what possessions you can have, and where you will receive your first strip-search. It is in Reception that the battle begins.

The first Prison Reception I was ever in was at Canterbury in 1980. There were certainly worse places back then, but there were still some vicious screws working there. In every nick in the country they used to read you a little speech at Reception, part of which went, "You will call all prison officers 'Sir'." So it didn't take long for my first confrontation to come, I would not, and will not, be forced to call anyone 'Sir'. Nor was I prepared to substitute 'boss' or 'guv'nor' as was acceptable in some prisons. Like a lot of principles it's ostensibly a small thing, it would be so easy to compromise, especially when almost everyone else does, but what are we without principles? Once you start abandoning them for the sake of convenience, who's to say where it will end? I remember a few years ago when I was forced onto a blanket protest at Durham. Having failed to intimidate and bully me into putting on the prison clothes, the screws tried persuasion - "You're alone down here in the punishment block, away from your mates, nobody will even know you've put them on." But I'd have known, and the screws would have known, and that was enough.

Today there's no longer an obligation to call your captors 'Sir', and many nicks no longer require you to wear prison clothes, but your integrity will still be tested, and you will have to struggle to retain it. Relinquish it, and I imagine prison will have far more of a lasting effect on you than if you spend the whole of your sentence in the block.

*Diesel*: prison tea.

*The enchanted*: prisoners on the 'Enhanced Privilege Level'.

*Ghosting*: to be transferred to another prison, suddenly and without notice.

*Jam-roll*: parole.

*Jimmy or Jimmy Boyle*: foil used by smackheads to smoke heroin.

*Kangas (or 'Scoobys')*: screws.

*L-Plates*: a life sentence.

*Little fellers*: cigarette butts.

*Midnight*: Midnight mass - grass.

*Pad*: a cell.

*Patches*: a prison uniform with prominent yellow panels worn by prisoners captured after an escape or following an attempted escape.

*Peter*: an older name for a cell, also for a safe.

*Pie and liquor*: the vicar.

*Salmon or Salmon and trout* -

*Snout*: tobacco.

*Shit and a shave (or shit and a shower)*: a short sentence.

*Spin*: a search (as in 'pad-spin').

*Stiff*: a smuggled note.

*Stretch*: a sentence or a year (a '10 stretch' is a 10 year sentence).

*Tram lines*: a distinctive scar caused by a prison-made weapon which uses two razor blades melted into a toothbrush.

*Wet-up (or Jug-up)*: to scald someone, usually with a mixture of boiling water and sugar.

Screws often behave like playground bullies and when you come into a new nick, they'll try it on to see how much they can get away with. A classic example is to try to get you to 'squat' or bend over during a strip-search - tell them to fuck off. Every prison has its own rules about what you can and can't have, and they change constantly, but if you know you're getting sent down you can still try to be prepared. Often, little can be sent in after you're imprisoned, so have anything you need and might be able to have with you. Most prisons allow you to wear your own training shoes these days, so get yourself a good sturdy pair. Prisoners generally wear sports clothes, which are easily cared for, avoid black and dark blue colours which aren't always allowed, and go for cotton fabrics that will survive the prison laundry. A radio or small stereo will be useful, as will one or two books, and some basic stationery. A watch is more or less essential, ideally get one that doesn't require batteries, is tough and waterproof (so you can wear it in the shower), but not unduly expensive or ostentatious. While highly desirable, food and drink and toiletries won't be allowed. If you smoke (and it's a big advantage not to), you may be permitted to keep a small amount of tobacco. Make sure you have cash with you, so that you can buy phonecards and other items you need from the prison shop.

There was a time when every cell contained a copy of the prison rules, and prisoners were required to read them. Now the prison authorities generally do their best to keep them secret, because they are so regularly broken. You will find it useful to consult the Prison Rules and Standing Orders, which outline your few rights and entitlements, and they should be available in the prison library. The Prison Service also publishes its own information booklets, but the contents are very selective. If you have difficulty getting hold of a copy of the rules, or think you are not getting what you're entitled to, as regards diet or exercise for example, either contact your solicitor or the Prisoners Advice Service at the address given elsewhere in this section. Prisoners' letters are generally censored, and so have to be handed in or posted with the envelopes unsealed. However, you may write to a solicitor or the Prisoners Advice Service in confidence under Prison Rule 39. Contrary to what you may be told, you do not have to allow a member of staff to seal the envelope for you, and if you do not have stamps you can ask for a 'Special Letter', which should be sent at public expense. Simply seal the envelope, write your name and 'Rule 39' on the back, and hand it in or post it in the box provided.

There is a good deal of variation in prison architecture, from the ancient cathedrals of human misery to the stark modern control-units. The accommodation parts of prisons are known as 'wings' or 'houseblocks', and they generally have cells on 'landings' or 'spurs' on more than one level, known as 'the ones', 'the twos' etc. Most modern prison cells are approximately 7ft x 11ft, but some are a good deal smaller, and in some prisons each cell may contain 2, or even 3 prisoners. Personally, I am not prepared to share a space that small with another person, and if necessary will opt for a single cell in the block. Prisoners are having to spend more time locked in their cells than for many years, but you should not be 'banged up' for more than 23 hours at a time.

Prison really is a bizarre institution to come into, and it'll take you a while to get used to it. Humans are an adaptable species though, and within a few weeks you'll probably find you're cracking on like an old lag. If you're on remand though, this can be a time when you fuck up, and it's something I always warn people about. Time is different in jail and particularly when you're first locked up, a couple of days can seem like a month. It's a harsh environment, and you'll be spending a lot of time with the same people. Many of these will turn out to be good friends, but always try to bear in mind that in reality, you've known them for days or weeks, not years, and that not everyone in jail tells the truth about themselves. In particular, be wary about discussing the details of your case with those you hardly know - too many people wind up in court with former cell-mates giving evidence against them. Also be careful about giving out your home address or personal details until you know your new friends a lot better.

There's a thousand scams and tricks in jail - cons are extremely inventive people and are always one step ahead of the screws. As you pick up your jail-craft, you'll learn everything from how to pass a cigarette from one end of the wing to the other, how to make prison 'hooch' without yeast, how to make weapons out of next to nothing, how to defeat electronic door systems, how to make a cup of tea without a kettle, and all sorts of other survival skills. When you first get locked up, you'll doubt that you could last more than week in this environment, but in all likelihood you will, and will even share in the gallows humour endemic to this otherwise joyless existence.

The human spirit can flourish and triumph in the face of the darkest adversity, but I'm not going to tell you that prisons are anything other than utterly rotten places, particularly for those of us who have to endure year after year of long-term imprisonment. Prison kills you physically and psychologically - it's a living death, like being buried alive. I once read about a Native American woman who suddenly woke up from a coma as if from sleep. She wanted to know where her husband and her children were, but she'd been unconscious so long her husband had remarried and her children grown up. It's a tragic story, but at least she didn't have the slow torture of having to watch, helpless, as her life slipped away from her, together with everything she cared about. That's how it is for most long-term prisoners, and many lose their families, homes, jobs, savings, and possessions even before their cases come to trial. Hang onto your integrity, because when the system's finished with you and spits you back out on the street, it may be all you have left.

But hey, nobody said it was going to be easy - if it was easy they wouldn't call it 'struggle' would they? As political activists we're the lucky ones in here, given a rare opportunity to get inside the machine and act like a virus. As an activist, you're not locked up to take a holiday - there's a real struggle to be fought in here, so keep militant and get involved...

By Mark Barnsley, Whitemoor Prison, England

### **More notes on surviving prison**

Britain has the largest prison population per capita in Europe and if the government has its way it'll carry on growing! More and more people are likely to do time for crimes they did or didn't commit, partly because the state is always creating more + more laws that we can break, especially laws criminalising political protest. The fear of prison is one of the state's ultimate deterrents to stifle dissent and protect the ruling classes from the wrath and poverty of the masses. This deterrent only works as effectively as we are fearful of it, and this is an attempt to dispel some of the fears and myths that surround prison.

Experiences of prison can vary greatly from person to person and from prison to prison. Obviously there's a big difference between a short stay and a long stretch, not so much on the experience while there but mentally it can be harder to remain unaffected, and will take longer to re-adjust to the outside world as it will have changed more, and old skills will have to be remembered. Being in prison on remand can be mentally and emotionally taxing, because of the uncertainty regarding length of sentence, and the stress of an approaching court case, etc. Women's prisons are also quite different, not only are you likely to be further from friends and family because of the scarcity of women's prisons but my women are in for gender/poverty related in a way that men aren't, basically because most coppers/judges are male chauvinists. Category 'A' prisoners (high security) also have less privileges than Category 'B', 'C' and 'D' respectively. It should be remembered worldwide, British prisons have a reputation for being soft compared to elsewhere especially outside of Europe.

If you know in advance that you're going to be going inside it's helpful to talk to others with experience of prison. It's good to tie up any loose ends regarding family, housing, money, support before you go in.

Also get a few good reading books together!

This section is aimed mostly at those who do time for political 'crimes' or crimes(?) of conscience although it can apply to anyone. Some political activists see going to prison as a natural extension of direct action. Political prisoners have the advantage of being part of a wider movement, which can offer practical support and boost moral. Having a good understanding of why you are there can give a degree of inner strength, calm and confidence and so from this perspective prison can be an empowering experience, and can also be somewhat amusing at times as well!

Most folk on knowing they're about to go down have a flood of varied emotions and/or passing attacks of anxiety and fear. It can feel like the whole weight of the world is falling upon your head.

with the threat of prison hanging over my head I try and find out as much as I possibly can about the prison I am likely to be sent to... I worry about what the other prisoners are like; will I fit in? How much stuff I can take with me? Will I be on my own or sharing? When I arrive different questions become a problem: where do I go to eat, to shower, where is everything, this place is big. After you come out of prison, take a holiday, or rest, to give yourself time to adjust to being out again and having space to move about. Give yourself time and tell others how you are feeling.

"Prisons and prison experiences vary enormously.. the first time I went to a British prison was one of the most hellish weeks of my life: I was beaten up by the guards, denied a vegan diet, taken before the governor three times (and threatened with everything from the punishment block to the psychiatric wing) and put in a cell with someone in for murder and someone in for manslaughter. In contrast, much of my five months in another prison was a leisurely rest - badminton, jogging, table tennis, evening classes, my own cell, passable vegan food, friendly enough screws

I had sort of expected I was going to prison and actually felt quite prepared and calm. As the prison van pulled up at the gates I felt a strange sort of excitement mixed with a bit of nervousness and uncertainty. I found it fairly easy to settle in after the initial 'crikey! I'm in prison' type feelings. Getting used to the regime can be a bit hard - so many rules. When your life is totally in the hands of authoritarians you just have to adapt and get used to it, and know that they can't confine your thoughts or hold your true freedom. It's important to use the time well with things to focus your mind. There lots of potential for self development and learning from people of different backgrounds. I really benefited from doing lots of meditation and tai chi, which helped me keep calm, especially when dealing with some of the screws who would try and draw me into confrontation because of my beliefs

However the reality is a lot easier than the fears, and when you start meeting the other cons you realise most of them are just ordinary enough people brought here by unfortunate circumstances, rather than the social monsters the government and media would have you believe. Obviously there are some nutters but they aren't that common, and let's face it there are plenty of nutters on the outside as well! Very few people are looking for a fight because that can mean time in solitary and less parole, so if you're not looking for trouble you're unlikely to find it. If you try and act hard, someone's going to challenge you, so just be yourself and be calmly confident, and, keep a good sense of humour!

Political prisoners tend to get a fair bit of respect in prison, if not a few strange looks for having somewhat alien beliefs. Most trouble in prison is over drugs and addictions (including tobacco) and

bullying to get them when personal supplies run low (the prison shop's only open once/twice a week and everyone's skint anyway)... Time to give up? Sometimes, especially if it's obviously your first time inside, you may find yourself challenged in some way by other prisoners, as a kind of test of strength which as long as you stand your ground in a calm but confident manner, will generally pass off without incident. Backing down to any threats or bullying leaves you wide open for abuse and bullying later if you become seen as an easy victim, so stand your ground. It's pretty similar to school playground philosophy really.

An open mind and a bit of common respect can go a long way in prison meeting half-way the many different lives, experiences and expectations that you'll meet there. It can be a time of learning and an insight into the inner workings of Babylon, both in the oppressive and overly bureaucratic organisation of prison and in the inmates themselves, most of whom are in for some kind of poverty (class) related crime. Prison can be a lonely place, it is designed to isolate. Communication and solidarity is essential, both with other inmates and with the outside world as well. Political prisoners usually get a lot of support correspondence from the wider movement, this gives a big boost to morale and in some cases can be a lifeline (make sure they know you're there - see contacts below) It also makes a prisoner feel less anonymous, less of a number in a system to be pushed about.

Adapting to prison regime can be strange (if not interesting)... it's a culture unto itself- so many new rules and regulations, new behaviour norms, respective routines, social hierarchies, different language. You can expect some overcrowding, frustrating and irritating levels of noise and distraction and little personal space or privacy. It may be difficult to sleep properly, radios blaring, bars, loud arguments etc. Food will be starchy and dull. You will learn to wait...for a phone call, a shower, a meal, the answer to a question even the time of day. Time can become distorted, days will slip by but each hour could seem like an eternity. Focusing your mind on something like a campaign, reading, studying, drawing, yoga etc. can be a great help in dealing with the monotony and stresses of prison life.

Different diets can be catered for upon request although you are only guaranteed a vegan diet if you're a member of the Vegan society before getting sent down. Some progress has been made recently on getting GMO-free diets, although such decisions (as are most decisions regarding personal welfare) are at the arbitrary discretion of the individual prison Governor. Visits and the sending of books, money, stereos, what you can and can't send in/out varies greatly from prison to prison so check with the Prison Visitor Centre concerned. The screws are generally alright, if not a bit uptight, with a predisposition towards having authoritarian fantasies. Their prime concern is to preserve order through obedience and submission. However you don't have to indulge them in this fantasy and as long as you don't take the piss they generally leave you alone. Let them be responsible for keeping order while you stay responsible for keeping your conscience.

A sense of humour goes a long way in dealing with the daily routine of being inside, and a smile can disarm all but the meanest screws and cons. Sometimes it's hard not to laugh at those in authority when they take themselves far too seriously especially if their authority and power is not having the desired effect on you. Just because your body is behind bars doesn't mean you've got turn in your conscience or convictions with all your other belongings at the gate. Whether in prison or not, the freedom we enjoy is the freedom we claim for ourselves, and while the body can be incarcerated the spirit is as free as it wishes. Being in prison can be an incredibly empowering experience by bringing this message home.

When you come out, give yourself time to adjust. If you've been in for a while, take it easy, it can take a while to psychologically adjust to looking after yourself again - cooking, cleaning, socialising. Tell friends how you're feeling and above all keep smiling, 'cos there's nothing you can't laugh at...

From the [UHC Collective](#) website

**Notes on this text**

The first part of this guide is taken and edited from an article "Preparing for Prison" by Mark Barnsley, from Whitemoor Prison, England written for [Do or Die](#). We are glad to say that at the time of printing Mark Barnsley is now out of prison. Prisons Mark Barnsley has been in are:

HMP Canterbury (x3), HMP Maidstone (x2), Ashford Remand Centre (x2), HMP Wormwood Scrubs (x5), HMP Armley (x3), HMP Hull (x2), Wolds Remand Centre, HMP Doncaster (x2), HMP Lincoln, HMP Full Sutton (x3), HMP Brixton, HMP Wolds, HMP Garth, HMP Durham, HMP Long Lartin, HMP Cardiff, HMP Woodhill (x2), HMP Parkhurst, HMP Wakefield (x2), HMP Frankland, HMP Whitemoor.

The second part is edited from the article "Surviving prison" from the [UHC Collective](#) website.

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