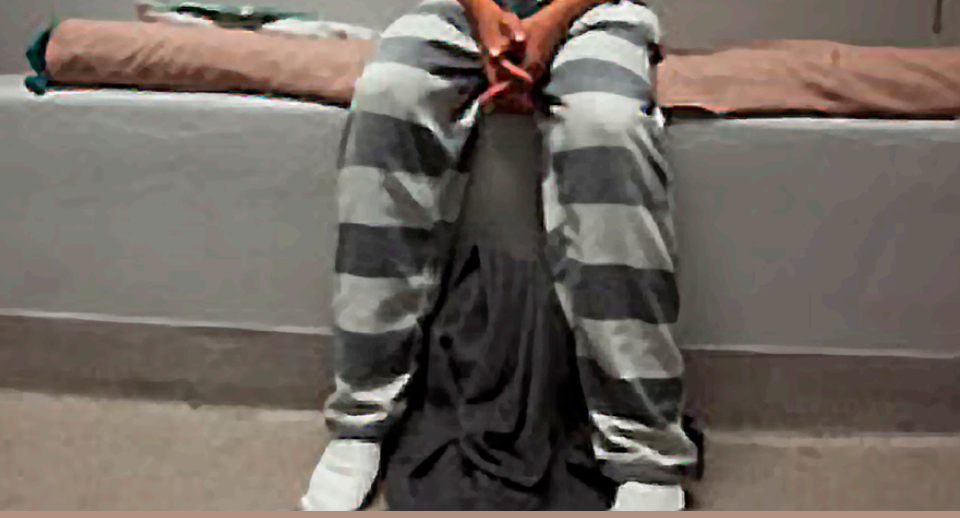
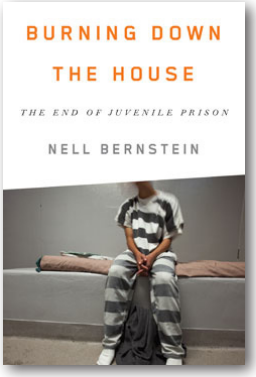


Inside Juvenile Prison

A 36-Page Excerpt From

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

By Nell Bernstein



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An Excerpt From
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The End of Juvenile Prison

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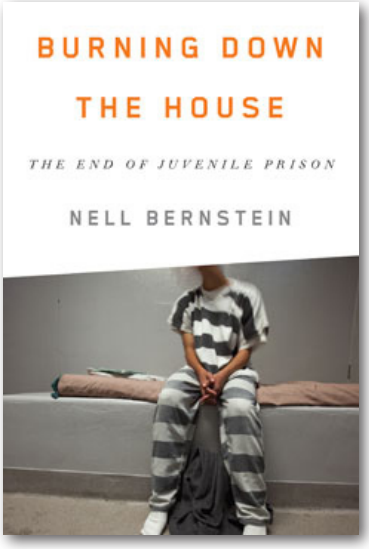

An excerpt from the book

BURNING DOWN THE HOUSE

The End of Juvenile Prison

By Nell Bernstein

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Chapter One

Even if I got away with a few years only, on account *of my age, it was forever. It wasn't even possible that Monday should come, when at least I'd get a walk up the stairs. The clock was not made that would pass the time between now and Monday. It was like what we were told about the last day, "Time is, time was, time is no more." And Jesus Christ, even now, I was only locked up ten minutes.* — Brendan Behan, Borstal Boy

On the day of our arrival to Oakley, we observed a 13-year-old boy sitting in a restraint chair near the Ironwood control room. Reportedly, he was placed in the restraint chair to prevent self-mutilation. No staff approached him, and he was not allowed to attend school or receive programming, counseling, or medication. This boy had been severely sexually and physically abused by family members . . . prior to being sent to Ironwood. Just before our arrival, he had been locked naked in his empty cell. His cell smelled of urine, and we observed torn pieces of toilet paper on the concrete floor that he had been using as a pillow. – Findings letter, Department of Justice investigation of Oakley and Columbia training schools in Raymond and Columbia, Mississippi, June 19, 2003

The places where young people are confined in the United States operate under any number of euphemistic titles, each as soothing as it is implausible: guidance center, boys school, youth ranch, camp. New arrivals test the door and know exactly where they are.

Most get the message long before they arrive. A teenager headed for a state juvenile prison likely rides in a van for hundreds of miles, shackled in leg irons, a belly chain, and handcuffs. He passes the outskirts of his hometown or city and enters an unfamiliar rural landscape. He may ride for hours before he arrives, passing through gates topped with razor wire into a compound inhabited by two hundred or three hundred others, ranging in age from twelve to twenty-four (juvenile facilities hold young people for offenses committed as minors but are often permitted to keep them past their eighteenth birthday). His jaw muscles may tighten as he composes his face in an effort to hide the fear that constricts his gut as his senses fill with what appears to be a prison.

Despite the fact that the very notion of a separate system for juveniles is predicated on the need to keep youth out of adult prisons, most state juvenile institutions look and

feel very much like the adult correctional institutions they were intended to supplant. Sited in job-hungry rural counties far from most wards' homes, holding as many as two hundred or three hundred uniform-clad bodies, fitted with cell blocks or closely packed dormitories, and surrounded on all sides by angry coils of razor wire, many seem custom-made to inspire the kind of fear the new arrival has been warned by veterans to conceal at any cost.

These institutions are run by the states, and there is certainly great variation among them, from size and site to policies and procedures. But an overriding focus on custody and control and a persistent climate of dehumanization make it possible to offer a broad outline of what a new arrival might generally expect.

After he is escorted into the building (unless these things have already been taken care of at a separate intake facility), he will be photographed, fingerprinted, and, in some states, required to submit a DNA sample. He will be assigned an identification number, which anyone who hopes to reach him by mail will need to use. Before he can enter the general population, he will have to hand over any personal belongings – shoes, belt, watch, jewelry – though most arrive at state facilities from local juvenile

halls and so have already been stripped of these effects. Anything that remains will be either stored, mailed home at his expense, or destroyed.

Next, he will be required to strip naked, surrender what is left of his clothing, and submit to a search. He may be ordered to turn this way and that, run his hands through his hair, lift his genitals, or spread his butt cheeks in order to give officers the most thorough view. He may also be asked to squat and cough to expel whatever might be hidden in a bodily orifice.

He will then be required to shower and may have delousing chemicals sprayed on his head, underarms, and pubic area, whether or not he shows symptoms of lice. Next, he will be given a uniform – sweatpants and a t-shirt or baggy khakis, sometimes in bright colors, socks, and underwear, all of which have been worn by others before him. Here and there, young wards still wear prison stripes.

He may go through an "orientation" in which guards who are not called guards (youth workers, counselors, youth development aides, team leaders; here also imaginative euphemisms proliferate) will spell out the official rules and sometimes the unofficial as well, letting him know he has reason to fear both his neighbors and

his keepers. More than one young person paraphrased this part of their orientation as the *Don't be a bitch* talk – a "bitch" being a youngster who shows fear or other weakness, opening himself up to abuse and exploitation. One young man recalled sitting handcuffed with three or four other newly arrived wards while a guard broke it down for them: "You won't die," the guard promised. "You'll get beat up, get unconscious, probably go to the hospital, get your tooth broke, your nose broken, probably get a black eye, but you won't die. So don't sweat it."

Only after these initial rites have concluded will the new arrival be led to a bunk in an open dormitory, or to a narrow cell, which may or may not house a roommate.

If the new arrival is a first-timer, he is likely terrified and struggling not to show it. His stay, he will have been warned on the outside or in county juvenile hall, will be nasty, brutish, and long. Watch out for gangs, he will have been cautioned; everyone's going to want to know what you're claiming. Stick with your own race – especially when it comes to the drug trade inside. Never show fear or walk away from a challenge. *Don't be a bitch.*

Fear is omnipresent inside a youth prison, hanging over the place like a persistent fog. Its companion is boredom, dense and unrelenting, sapping the spirit

as one day bleeds into the next and then the next. The days are a carefully synchronized march between cell, showers, cafeteria, schoolroom, dayroom, yard, and cell, punctuated by the sound of doors swinging open and gates clanging shut. None of this activity seems to counter the omnipresent lethargy that hovers over the place. Lights-out comes finally, a moment to oneself, but many describe this as the worst time of the day, as thoughts of what might have been and fear of what's to come crowd out sleep's relief.

Walk into the dayroom of a state juvenile prison (the common space intended for rest and recreation) and one is hit with a wave of collective ennui so powerful it can be soporific. Lanky teenagers slouch in an open-legged stance in plastic chairs that are, for some reason, always too small to contain their growing frames. Some turn the chairs around and sit backwards, their heads hanging forward in a posture of surrender, beneath motivational posters peeling from the walls. There may be a game of cards on a bolted-down table, the drone of a television tuned to an approved channel, or laconic conversation, but mostly there is a sense that time has slowed down.

Even when marching or walking in formation – as they are generally required to do – young prisoners often

appear to drag their feet, as if in an effort to fill the empty time. The baggy sweats or droopy khaki uniforms and hospital-style slippers collude to enforce this slow shuffle and heighten the sense of being somehow underwater. The boisterous energy one finds virtually anywhere else that teens congregate is replaced behind bars by a sort of hibernation, as if children kept in cages somehow slowed their metabolism in an instinctive response to the winter of their exile.

In fact, that may be exactly what they are doing, intentionally or not. Young people describe the food inside juvenile facilities in terms of quantity, not quality. Growing boys describe themselves as "hungry all the time" – so much so that they do, perhaps, become lethargic.

Will spent six years in juvenile prisons across California. "I don't know if you can call it a meal," he said of the thrice-daily offerings, consumed quickly in forced silence. "They feed you enough not to starve, but never enough to satisfy you." The hardest part to get through was the empty-bellied stretch between dinner at five and breakfast at seven.

"Young people are growing, and fourteen hours without a meal is not sufficient," said Will, an athletic six-foot-something who spent his growing years on a

prison diet. "You're hungry all the time."

That, he added, was a best-case scenario. During the stretch he spent in a maximum-security lockdown, there was no communal mealtime at all. The delivery of food became, instead, another means of ritual humiliation. Wards were required to lie on their bunks, facing the wall, hands behind their backs, while a guard brought a tray in and set it on the toilet. The boys could lift their heads only once they heard the cell door close. This ritual was repeated when the tray was removed. Those in solitary confinement were granted even less: bag meals consisting of bread, two slices of bologna, Kool-Aid, and a container of room-temperature milk. The more experienced learned to ration the food to make it through the day.

Even out in the general population, the food young people described sounded barely edible, but very few complained about the menu – they spoke of food as fuel, not flavor or comfort. The one specific dish that will could call to mind was SOS (shit on a shingle), a "chunky gravy on biscuits" that my father ate (and called by the same name) as a soldier during the privations of World War II. Will looked forward to it, he said, because it was filling.

Showers, like meals, are a mixed blessing. "I've never seen a group of guys so into their hygiene," Will recalled.

"When guys go to jail, they really keep their bodies clean."

Nevertheless, he added, "for me, showering was one of the worst parts of jail." The company of peers and the scrutiny of guards are hard to get used to, as is the three minutes allotted each bather. At one facility where Will spent time, things were made worse by a regimen of "broken" plumbing that mysteriously produced only cold water in the winter months and scalding hot in summer.

School, although legally mandated, does little to break the monotony. Luis was sixteen when he was shipped off to a state facility for violating his probation on an earlier, bungled burglary attempt. On the outside, teachers had urged him to stay in school and fulfill his potential. On the inside it was different. "Very little emphasis on education," said Luis, who spent what would have been his high school years in prison. "Books are outdated; teachers are pissed off." Groups of one sort or another – Anger Management is a staple, as are Life Skills and Relapse Prevention – are sometimes helpful but more often perfunctory. Count to ten, rage-filled youth are instructed in Anger Management, while those in life skills report being told to watch their step on the outside, or else. (There are always exceptions – brilliant teachers

or dedicated group leaders – but most youths I spoke with had not encountered them.)

Mental health care may be mandated by law, but that does not translate, for instance, to therapy. One of the sadder rituals I have witnessed is the nightly arrival of the "meds cart" on a wing: a nurse rolls in and half the kids line up without a word, downing handfuls of psychotropics with a single gulp of water from a flimsy paper cup.

Measuring about nine by eleven feet, a cell (or "room," to use another common euphemism) in a juvenile prison seems more like a stall than anything else. Most have minimal bedding – a thin mattress on a bunk bolted to the wall, a steel toilet and sink. The fortunate may have a desk, also bolted to the wall, or a locker or shelf to store a few belongings. In some facilities, large dormitories filled with bunk beds replace individual cells; in others youths have roommates, sometimes bunked four to a cell. There will also be a yard, sometimes a field, and a gym. Classrooms. A cafeteria. An infirmary. A chapel. And miles of empty sky – the practice of siting juvenile prisons in remote rural outposts leaves even those with windows little to see. If the facility is on lockdown – as can happen because of a fight, gang concerns, or something

as mundane as a shortage of teachers – the dayroom may be empty, while young people spend twenty-two, twenty-three, or sometimes, despite regulations, twenty-four hours locked in their cells.

Just as all hospitals or high schools seem to have the same smell, so do juvenile prisons – the astringent odor of industrial-strength soap mixed with the sour sweat of fear. Sound echoes hollowly off concrete floors and cinder-block walls. Every aspect of the institution, cold to the touch and harsh on the ear, seems designed to convey that those who abide there are all alone and very far from home.

Rules vary from one institution to the next, but most places require that wards march three or four across from unit to classroom to meals and back again. Some also require young people to hold their hands behind their backs when they move together from one place to another, or to do some version of the "chicken walk" (hands folded across the chest and tucked into the armpits). Justified as a means of preempting fights, this odd posture of self-containment also functions to sap any residual dignity.

Most juvenile facilities have some version of "the hole": stripped-down solitary confinement cells, sometimes whole wings of them, used to house the victimized, the

victimizer, the vulnerable, the suicidal, or the simply defiant, with little distinction made among them. Youth deemed in need of protection (from themselves or others) or discipline spend up to twenty-three hours a day in these barren cells, with the mattress removed during the day in the name of safety, and meals and education (sometimes worksheets and a crayon) slipped through a slot in the door. When these young people leave their cells for any reason, they must first slip their hands through a slot to be cuffed.

Even in the "general population," the young prisoner generally has little to call his own. There are strict limitations on "personal effects"; even photographs of family are rationed, if not banned. Rooms must be kept military-style neat, although guards may also ransack them in the name of a general search. The young ward will eat, sleep, and shower with strangers, under the eye of yet more strangers and often surveillance cameras, and wake to the sound of a clamoring bell.

"When you walk into the living quarters of a lot of our places, it's very intimidating," a clinician who works with multiple New York youth facilities acknowledged. "When you drove up to the facility, it was a huge campus surrounded by a fence with razor wire," he continued,

speaking of a particular institution that had recently been closed. "You had to drive [through] a fence. They closed the gate behind you and then the next gate opened up and you drive through it. Just the physical layout is . . . very intimidating." For those new to institutional life, he explained, the effect was often overwhelming.

He was not talking about the kids who are held in these places, sometimes for years. He was explaining why turnover is so high among newly hired guards.

As California's Preston Youth Correctional Facility loomed in the distance, Luis's palms began to sweat and his heart rate accelerated. Instinctively, he balled up his fists, ready to fight before he even stepped off the bus.

"I did not know what to expect," Luis recalled of his arrival at age sixteen. His first stop on the state juvenile circuit was known colloquially as "the Castle" because of its site just beneath the now empty Preston School of Industry, a massive, romanesque revival stone edifice in California's Gold Country that housed young offenders until 1960.

Evoking a medieval torture mill more than any kind of industry, the Castle is rumored to be haunted by the

ghosts of former wards and an unlucky housekeeper. Ghosts, however, were not Luis's top concern. A slight and handsome teenager with the eyes of a deer, Luis had picked up a gang affiliation in an effort to protect himself inside the local juvenile hall. Until now, though, he had just been testing out the identity. Here, he feared, he might be pushed further. "I thought if it was gonna be hella crazy, then I would have turned crazy and kept fighting and defending the gang that I represent," Luis explained.

Each unit at Preston was named for a different tree, as if the complex were a suburban subdivision. First, Luis went to Cedars, the reception unit. L around, he saw no familiar faces – no potential allies but any number of possible foes. As he passed by the Sequoia unit, empty metal cages loomed before him, used (until subsequent litigation challenged the practice) to hold young men during their legally mandated hour of "large-muscle exercise."

"I was lost," Luis recalled of his arrival at Preston. "Swear to God, I was lost."

Luis was lying on his bunk in boxers and sandals, trying to orient himself by staring at the rows of triple-tier bunks and the locked command center, when he

heard a catcall that represented a direct challenge to his local gang. Luis returned the insult, and then it was on. He charged his provocateur at full speed and was ready to fight a second belligerent when guards arrived and hauled him away.

Others shouted taunts as guards escorted him past the showers and down the hallway to Ironwood, Preston's secure unit. It was his first night, and already Luis was on lockdown.

"Where the fuck am I?" Luis wondered. "I am hella skinny, my shirt is off, I am in my boxers still . . . and I am just pondering. Am I going to be this self-proclaimed gangster that goes all out for this stupid set that I am not a part of? That is really just hurting me, not loving me – hurting me in every way possible?"

What was the alternative? The conflicts and alliances that defined life in a juvenile prison held little interest for Luis, who had entered the system an abused kid toying with a criminal identity. But could he survive without the protection of a gang? Challenged within hours of his arrival, he had already landed in solitary confinement.

He tried to fall asleep on the bare concrete slab that served as his bed – he had no blanket and had cast away the shit-stained mattress – but these questions kept him

awake deep into the night.

The next day was little better. Released from isolation, he was placed in a cage (an actual metal cage, ostensibly for exercise) with two rival gang members, who told him to plan to "get down" in the showers.

"Shower time, and you are gonna box me when I'm naked?" Luis cast his eyes to the sky: What next? He'd soon find out.

"When kids go to prison in California, it's not pretty," Luis summarized. "I witnessed how Cos [correctional officers] would put you in your place, and if you weren't in your place, they would beat the shit out of you and put you in your place."

Technically, the young people held in juvenile institutions like Preston are not prisoners. They have stepped outside the lines of the law, but they have not been convicted of any crime. Instead, under the rubric of the juvenile justice system, they have been adjudicated delinquent and mandated to a stay in a state institution in the name of their best interest as well as public safety.

But walk down a cellblock or visit a dorm inside one of these places anywhere in the nation and ask the kids to describe their situation: they will make it clear that they are locked down. The distinction we make between

a juvenile facility, by whatever euphemism, and a prison means little to the kid who enters through a sally port and sleeps in a barren cell, watched over by uniformed guards wielding pepper spray, and surrounded on all sides by coils of razor wire.

A national survey by the Federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention paints a picture of state juvenile prisons as an environment of nearly unremitting victimization, where young people "experience violence, theft and assault at an alarming rate." The majority of youth in state custody – 56 percent – told investigators they had been victimized, most of them repeatedly, at the hands of staff as well as their peers. Sixty-one percent of those who had been victimized reported that they were injured in the process. Nearly half of those surveyed had their property stolen, 10 percent were directly robbed, and 29 percent had been threatened or beaten. Most who were robbed behind bars had been robbed repeatedly, and about a third were injured badly enough to require medical treatment.

All of this conspires to underscore a central message: that the young ward surrenders the right not only to freedom but also to safety and bodily integrity the moment he crosses the threshold. Young people who have

been sent to juvenile institutions to learn "accountability" discover that there is a powerful double standard when they are the victims and their keepers are the perpetrators. According to a large-scale federal survey, fully 41 percent of incarcerated youth who told investigators they'd "had property taken by force or threat" reported that a guard was the perpetrator, as did 24 percent of victims of assault. A comprehensive federal investigation into sexual abuse in juvenile facilities found that the vast majority was perpetrated by guards. One in ten youths nationwide had suffered sexual assault at the hands of a staff member, while a far lower number – one in fifty – were sexually victimized by peers. Staff are rarely called to account for these offenses – which are often more serious than those that propelled their victims into custody – and criminal prosecution is particularly rare.

The ward-on-ward violence, at least, may appear self-explanatory: These are violent kids; what else do you expect? In fact, the dynamic is more complex. Certainly, some youths are already acting out violently by the time they are locked up, but more are not. Only one-fourth of youth held in state juvenile facilities, ostensibly reserved for more serious offenders, are locked up for Violent Crime Index offenses. But whatever their charge, or

demeanor on the outside, new arrivals often feel pressed to make a stark choice: victim or victimizer. Neutrality is rarely an option.

Even as young prisoners are given the message that they must be confined because they pose a threat to society, many live in constant, if well-hidden, fear themselves. More than one-third of youth (38 percent) told federal researchers they feared being attacked while locked up, 25 percent by another resident and 22 percent by staff.

On top of the violence cited above, more than one-fourth of youth in custody reported that staff used "some method of physical restraint on them – whether handcuffs, wristlets, a security belt, chains, or a restraint chair." Another 7 percent had been pepper sprayed, while 30 percent live on units where pepper spray is used. Taken in the name of "safety and security," these and similar measures more often serve to heighten young people's fear and constant vigilance.

Guards often use hands-on physical restraint, not only to break up fights or avert other violence but in response to minor infractions such as horseplay, talking in line, or simply talking back. The most dangerous method is known as "prone restraint." Guards, sometimes two or three, force a youth to the ground and then lie or sit on

him until they are convinced he has been thoroughly subdued. A number of young people have died during or shortly after being restrained in this manner, leading a few states to ban the practice.

Also striking is the pervasive use of solitary confinement, given widespread agreement that the practice is damaging and potentially dangerous, especially for youth. Nevertheless, more than a third of youth in custody reported being placed in isolation, more than half for longer than twenty-four hours (a clear violation of international standards).

In a particularly bitter irony, the stricter the means of custody and control at a particular institution, the higher the odds that youths will be victimized there, by guards as well as peers. The more often young people are handcuffed, strip-searched, chained, or bound in restraint chairs, in other words, the higher the odds they will also be assaulted, robbed, or raped.

Much of what is done in the name of institutional security only adds to young people's sense of degradation. For Enrique, the frequent room searches were a particular affront. "That's your sanctuary," he said of the few feet of cell space allotted each inmate – "that's our place of peace.

"Some guys' floor is so clean, the toilet is spotless, the walls are clean, the bed is made, all your clothes you have are folded neatly, your letters, paper, and pencil, everything is perfect."

During a search, he said, order gives way to chaos. "All your mail is thrown on the ground. Body washes and shampoos are open and [spilled] on the mail. Blankets are on the floor. The blankets you sleep on, and it's on the floor! Your clothes, your boxers, it's on the floor. Why throw it on the floor? Why can't you just put it on the mat?"

For many young people, connection with family – their link to the outside world and the life they knew before – is especially precious. Even in this sacred realm, according to Enrique and others, staff seemed to go out of their way to convey disrespect.

"The mail – some of them hold the mail for years. They throw out the letters," Enrique said. Room searches provided yet another opportunity to insult those on the outside whom young people most love. "The pictures that you have of your family – nieces, girlfriend, grandma – everything is taken out, thrown around. Your letters, your papers? All wrinkled. Your schoolwork, your court letters, it's all mixed up."

In the four years that Enrique was locked up, he went through this more times than he could count, he said. "Sometimes twice a week. Once a week. It happens a lot."

Some young men on his unit registered their objection by tearing out the relevant section of the facility handbook (which calls for guards to leave belongings as they find them) and placing it in full view on top of their lockers. "What are you gonna do? You gonna write a grievance?" Guards would mock in response. It was widely understood that grievances went nowhere.

Rochelle was fifteen and pregnant when she was locked up in New York State for fighting. "They treat you like dogs," said Rochelle. "The worst thing about it is the search. When they surprise you out of nowhere, wake you up from your sleep and trash your room. They don't have no kind of respect there. You have to get naked and squat. It is just degrading."

"I never thought I would be someplace like that," said Rochelle, whose pregnancy made intrusions such as squatting naked before strangers particularly humiliating. "It was horrible. I didn't like being away from family. I was trapped. I felt lonely. It was like I was in another world."

Young prisoners learn in multiple ways that their bodies are no more their own than are the cells they maintain so carefully or the uniforms they wear. On top of strip searches and supervised showers (which may come with catcalls or disparaging remarks from guards), some institutions force young people to endure pat searches multiple times each day. At one Florida facility, according to a Department of Justice investigation, youth were subjected to frisk searches more than ten times a day, even when they were under constant supervision, "purportedly for recovery of contraband. During the six month period we reviewed, the most dangerous contraband recovered were pencils."

"Many of the youths informed us that some [staff] were especially intrusive in conducting the searches," federal investigators wrote. "We heard a number of reports of youth being groped by [staff] during the searches. One youth noted, 'some staff rub on your privates.' Another stated, staff 'touch too much.'"

Reading the results of this investigation, I thought of one of my first visits to a county juvenile hall, where I had gone to conduct a writing workshop for two units, boys and girls. Breaking a rule I had not been informed of, I failed to count all the pencils before we handed them out

so they could be counted again before we left.

Because of my mistake, everyone who had joined the class was strip-searched. There was no evidence that a pencil had gone missing, nor that any of the young people subjected to the search had done anything wrong. The error was entirely mine, but no one suggested that I be penalized for it. While the girls and boys who had, moments ago, been my "students" were being stripped naked in front of their keepers, I was on the road, headed for home.

Prison dehumanizes, not as a side effect but as a central function. A child who is forcibly removed from home and society and placed inside a cage receives a powerful message about herself and her place in the world. Assigning a number in lieu of a name; taking away clothing and personal belongings and replacing them with uniforms and cold metal bunks; the bare-bones environment with its spare furnishings, harsh lighting, and round-the-clock surveillance; the lining up and other militaristic affectations; and, above all, the stripping away of human connection – every aspect of institutional life conspires to diminish a young person's sense of herself as someone who matters, to wear down her sense of individuality. Because adolescents are at a

stage of life where building a sense of self in relation to others is central to their development, this assault on identity strikes them with particular force.

"When you're in a place where you are segregated, ostracized – a physical environment that is corroding, that is black, that is dark, that is isolated – all these things do something to your brain, to your psyche, to your self-esteem," Luis said. "It is something that your body internalizes, and it is obviously negative. A place that is dark and eerie? This is something that no human being should adapt to. We are not made to. You are supposed to be out in the sun, for god's sake!"

The notion of "prison culture" may have the ring of sociological jargon, but inside the gates its pull is undeniable. Each time I drive into a compound surrounded by razor wire, pull up at the guard station to verify my clearance, and leave my identification with the guard at the front desk, I feel as if I've just had my passport stamped at the border.

Young people acculturate, but at a cost. Treated like an animal, I became an animal. Over and over, as they described growing up in institutions governed by the law of the jungle – adapting to a culture of captivity and power where the worst thing you could be was somebody's bitch

– this is the transformation young people described.

Many referred to the institutions where they spent their teenage years as "gladiator schools" or simply "schools for crime." Their assessment is borne out by the research, which finds that spending time in a state juvenile facility increases the odds that a young person will advance in delinquency and that he will go on to be arrested as an adult.

"I saw more violence in those six years [locked up] than I've ever seen," said Will, a rangy, long-limbed young man with wire-rimmed glasses and piercing brown eyes, "even on TV. If you can imagine it, then I've probably seen it."

"The mind games," he elaborated, were "the hardest part. 'Oh, you're new? Here goes a ramen noodle. Yeah, I'll take care of you.' Then, like a week later: 'Oh, you gotta go stab this dude.'"

Mark was stocky, tattooed, and muscular, a veteran of more locked facilities than he cared to name. "As far as being aggressive and not trusting anybody, that's what the system did for me," he said flatly. "The weak get run over. You gotta be strong and stick to your guns, and you can't trust anybody."

As a teenager inside a California youth prison, Mark

was forced to participate in what became known as "Friday night fights." Guards would place known gang rivals together in a locked room and stand idly by, watching while captive youth beat each other bloody, intervening only when they'd seen enough, using pepper spray or riot guns to break up the staged battles.

"I know where my anger stems from," said Mark, who struggled with what he called "blackout rages" well into adulthood, "and my inability to trust. If you tell me this is a cup of coffee, I'll turn it over and over and over till I find out what it is."

"Which I'm trying to work out," he added, glancing at his girlfriend – who, he acknowledged, had sometimes been the target of those rages – and seeming to deflate as the anger left his voice and a rueful tone replaced it. "It doesn't happen overnight."

On top of the violence, chaos, fear, and degradation, the defining aspect of life behind bars is isolation. A young person who spends part or all of her adolescent years in a locked facility, away from friends and family, her every action subject to the dictates of strangers, misses many if not most of the central developmental tasks of adolescence: learning to navigate intimate relationships; forming the capacity to make independent

decisions; taking on increased responsibility; discovering and expressing one's personal identity. None of these goals can be met in isolation. All require relationship, human connection. That is what prison, by definition, takes away.

Walk a straight line.
Don't be a bitch.
Don't ask questions.
Talk is dead.
Machine down.

These are the lessons young people who are locked up learn instead: to close off their emotions, shut down their intellect, quell their individuality, avoid forming connections, and view all interactions through the prism of power.

Gladys Carríon, the iconoclastic head of New York State's Office of Children and Family Services – which runs that state's juvenile facilities – makes no bones about the impact of severing relationships during the crucial passage that is adolescence (not coincidentally, she is also rapidly shutting down the juvenile prisons under her jurisdiction). "Kids are punished when they're removed from their home," she said bluntly. "We don't have to put them on the chain gang. They're removed.

That is punishment. I keep reminding my staff, that is the punishment: removing the kid from their family, from their school, and from their community. I don't think you could do anything worse in the formative years of a child, of a young person, than to remove them from their community. We are interrupting their developmental process. We don't need to punish them any further."

Luis offered a related analysis of the impact of incarceration on a young mind and spirit. "Prison makes you hate yourself," he said flatly, as if stating something that was widely understood. "The way prison is developed is to keep you oppressed, and in a state where you cannot believe in yourself. Everyone looks down on you, instead of looking down at you and helping you up."

"The way that you are treated, the way that you are stigmatized, the way that you are labeled . . ." Luis trailed off in frustration but quickly recovered his train of thought.

"If society wants to see a decline in victimization, then you need to help the person who is hurting," he insisted, "because otherwise, he'll end up turning on himself, and you. That is just our nature."

Jared turned to metaphor to describe the emotional impact of incarceration. Not long after his release, he told

me, he went down to the San Francisco Bay and swam out into the open water, just because he could. Intoxicated by the freedom, solitude, and motion, he swam too far and panicked, nearly drowning before he recovered enough to make it back to shore. The sensation of near drowning – the struggle for air, the terror of the depths, and the fear of slipping past the point of no return – was the best analogy Jared could find for the pressure he felt on the worst days behind bars. These were the days when he felt his lungs might implode as confinement sucked the very air out of his spirit.

"That feeling, almost drowning," said Jared, "is the only thing I've ever experienced that even came close to being locked up."

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