

Big Changes Taking Place in Massachusetts Prisons:
Prisoner's Witness Evolving Culture at Historic Facility

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MCI-NORFOLK is well known as the prison that was home to Malcolm X, the civil rights and Nation of Islam icon during his brief incarceration during the 1940's.* Malcolm X would hardly recognize the correction facility today. Besides the addition of a modern state-of-the-art cellblock, closed circuit camera's have just been installed in the institutions original 85 year old housing units.

Gone is the wide open freedom of movement MCI-Norfolk was known for and slowly, bit by bit, is the taking of privileges that once made the institution famous.

Guards now patrol housing units under the unblinking eye of modern technology. A once extensive facility store, "the canteen", is being stripped of sugary foods, and other items prisoner's have come to rely on over years. A positive development, a "dog program", inmates help train service dogs for the benefit of disabled people. Many inmates point to the animals saying: "The institution has gone to the dogs".**

Heavy handed tactics have always been a part of prison life in Massachusetts prisons. Lately, and as a result of years of administrative neglect, a runaway opiate addiction crisis behind bars, and the Covid-19 pandemic, the Department of Correction is emboldened in its determination to strip away many hard fought privileges and fundamental civil rights.

Prison's nationwide never allow a crisis to be wasted. In the name of addressing the opiate addiction crisis, as an example, all incoming non-legal mail must be photocopied. It's the copy of the correspondence inmates receive. Soon, privileged legal mail will get the same treatment;

* Malcolm X served in MCI-Norfolk under the name 'Malcolm Little' in 1946 on a charge of burglary. He converted to the Black Muslim Faith (Nation of Islam), the same year. Source: Merriam-Webster Collegiate Encyclopedia. (2000 edition).

** The "dog program" has been suspended as of 1/12/22 due to Covid restrictions.

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Advancing technology is just one aspect of the big changes being made to Massachusetts prisons. A program engagement strategy embraced by administrators demands inmates participate in various behavior modification group counseling. Program engagement is destructive and demands inmates must participate in group treatment therapy like alternative to violence and drug treatment recovery fashioned after familiar alcoholics anonymous style meetings.

Prisoner's who refuse to participate in behavior modification groups like sex offender treatment or the Correction Recovery Academy, an intensive drug and alcohol therapy program, find themselves excluded from institutional jobs and good time opportunities.

Prisons have evolved over decades. Remember, for instance, the brutality of chain gangs, or the silent system of early "penitentiaries". Today, modern correction institutions have evolved into social science laboratories. Inmates are victims of behavior modification experiments. Experiments that politicians and law enforcement apply to the general public when it suits their interests and goals.

As an example, in the early days of the 1980's when the economy was struggling with recession, inflation and stagnation; President Ronald Reagan demanded this nation stop "codling" criminals. Reaganomics allowed the construction of thousands of prisons across rural America.

In cities like New York, a "broken windows" police policy locked up millions. Millions more were locked away by this nation's war on drugs, in an unprecedented expansion of police power resulting in the hiring of millions of police across the United States. America's experiment with mass incarceration is what we

live with today.

Prison populations grew to what it is today: 2.2 million.

Today, the Covid-19 pandemic has given prison officials license to crack down and lockdown institutions across the country. Lessons learned behind bars - these experiments in deprivation - are applied to citizens nationwide. Mask mandates, lockdown's and "work-from-home" tactics, among many other schemes born and routinely enforced in jail, are applied to society at large.

In MCI-Norfolk, inmates are tired of being used for political purposes. Prisoner's are immediately subject to executive branch edicts like mask mandates, quarantines and testing. Over the years prisoner's have been subjected to the knee jerk reaction by politicians to every manufactured crisis real or imagined from artificially imposed overcrowding that ushered in double bunking of inmates to the opiate addiction crisis allowing jailors to photocopy incoming mail.

Old school institutions, like MCI-Norfolk, are changing. For many inmates what they are witnessing is a grotesque evolution of culture. A future guided by politicians sensitive to what is popular, trendy and expedient. Cookie cutter institutions are becoming uniform from coast to coast. Correction facilities with unique historic qualities, like MCI-Norfolk, are fast becoming as antique and passé as the chain gang and silent system of old fashioned penitentiaries.

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