

# PUBLIC SECRETS:

## *A Sneak Peek Inside Alaska's Overcrowded Prisons*

By Ben Wilkins

A twenty something year old man was attacked and beaten viciously at Anchorage Correction Complex West during lunch in our noisy housing unit on a Friday afternoon. Blood was leaking wickedly as he was half carried, half dragged by two emergency response guards. From the top tier he was ushered down a flight of stairs to a waiting stretcher. Fresh blood dripped and smeared on the floor a few feet from our lunch table while he was being whisked away to medical. We continued eating and finished our meal. I commented to my tablemates, asking them if they thought we should have lost our appetites. One answered, "I don't see why we should, I mean it's hotdog day Bro, I could go for seconds". "Not our problem", shrugged another.

Turn on the TV or scroll through social media and you're not likely to find another prison story as real as this. I was nearing my fifth year anniversary inside and a harsh new reality was setting in. To survive in this crowded cage we must learn to *thoroughly* suppress our feelings and emotions. Heaven forbid anyone would care to talk about (let alone write about) expressing emotions. They would be shunned as a pariah in all but the most rare emotional support situations, or more likely a LGBTQ situation. That's another story. I wondered how bad the emotional desensitization would become. My favorite emoji has always been the winking smiley face; will I have to change that too? Only time will tell, but for now: suppress and survive.

The three most ravaging concerns of Alaskan prisons are overcrowding, lack of rehabilitation, and staff shortage. This trifecta can push us to the breaking point causing us to become irritable, tense, paranoid or antisocial--even violent. The clamor of an overcrowded prison incubates stress and violence. Case in point: the youngster described above took a week long field trip to the ICU on taxpayer's dollars. Because of overcrowding the guard wouldn't allow a routine cell change. The two combatants had both asked the unit guard for a cell change, "Before something bad happens", they plead. The officer's reply was curt, "we're too crowded, I'm not doing any cell moves period so try asking the next shift when they come on duty". Next shift was six hours away, the assault happened within an hour.

To be fair, many guards are more accommodating; they get it and don't want to see excess violence any more than we do. One guard recently voiced his opinion, "I don't like it [overcrowding] any more than you guys do, it makes my days seem *way* longer and more stressful for sure". For once we agreed on something.

Due to tough new sentencing laws and guidelines, stories like this become common as droves of younger offenders are packed in tighter and tighter alongside seasoned convicts. For example, a misdemeanor facing a three day sentence for his/her first DUI often may be placed in the same unit as an accused or convicted murderer. Not cool. "I didn't realize how bad it is in jail", a newb squawked to me after he moved into our unit and was celled with two other men in a twelve-by-eight concrete box. His designated sleeping area is the cell floor where his head is barely two feet from the toilet that all *three* cellmates share.

When the facility at ACC West opened for business every cell was single man, one bed per cell – by design. The larger units contained 24 cells and housed 24 men max capacity. The medium sized units had 18 cells, 18 men max. Fast forward forty years. Now those same units cram up to 60 men and 45 men respectively, making them burst at the

seams with two and a half times the original capacity. This overcrowding makes the guards' job more than twice as difficult. When the staff stresses out we feed off their negativity, it's the circle of life, prison style.

And it's even worse in the adjacent ACC East building. The herds still prattle like lost cattle as they roam the crowded pasture of confinement. However, the rec rooms are lined up with rows of boats. (A giant soap dish shaped piece of plastic that serves as a floor bunk) These boats take up the space intended for prisoners to walk laps or exercise to burn off steam. Having our rec time is the basic equivalent of letting the kids outside to play. Traditionally rec has been one of our only long standing "rights" and now it's quietly being squelched. Unfortunately, this sequestering causes many people to develop frosty coping mechanisms. The extra tension then rubs off on the staff making them act mean and snappy. A rookie female officer expressed concern, "you can't get away from the noise and the crazies they mix in here with you guys... it affects everyone here and gets downright hostile, especially when we're overcrowded", she said with her brows raised.

Being honest, the overcrowding tends to push us closer to mischief and further from self-improvement. Racial segregation, deception, and depressions grow rampant. These are not the characteristics anybody would want a person to bring back into society. For better or for worse, 99% of prisoners will return to the streets one day. Yet we have allowed covid and budget cuts to effectively kill rehabilitation. By canceling the much needed programs, classes, religious services, and visitations, we are set up to fail. It's like stacking a nice big row of dominos in front of a toddler and saying "now don't touch that!" They get touched and the rows fall like fate against a busted poker hand.

Behind the scenes some cons cope by getting together to cook pruno (homemade prison wine) seeking relief from the mayhem of overcrowding one sip at a time. In similar fashion, drug users band together and conspire ways to get a fix. Others gamble or deal in black market "state" goods, smuggled food from the kitchen, perchance. It's the economy unseen from people who tour prisons. When the big wig officials walk through it's a total dog & pony show. Clean up and act calm or get thrown in the hole for months on end, that's your two options. Even the guards don't see much of the prison underground unless they stumble upon trouble or have a snitch bitch.

When men are confined in a small cell there is no escape from one another's presence. Whether you are reading, ahem... *trying* to write, chatting, trying to relax, or using the toilet for a deuce, you are one with your cellies. Thus escapism becomes a cold hard fact of prison life. Some find temporary relief from the madness by accepting free pills at med line. They shuffle around like zombies while the latest experimental psychotropic drugs are tested on them. It's a sad sight to behold for those of us who refuse that route of insanity. The nurses do a great job, taking studious notes on the zombies to be passed along to whichever Doctor or big pharma company the facility is under contract with.

The melee created by covid's peak astounded prisons worldwide, Alaska included. It must be noted that the nurses were overworked *big time* and held it down like champs as dozens, hundreds, then *thousands* tested positive throughout AKDOC. (Shout out to Nurse Sonya and C.O. Hodges – you two are awesome professionals! =) Some staff was helpful and went out of their way to find us cleaning supplies or request medical treatment. They tried to help with countless other covid related problems. Other staff was extremely unhelpful; I'll avoid details here because it would likely keep this from seeing print. And so it goes.

Outside the cell isn't much better than inside. Long lines form for chow thrice daily, ditto for med line. Now that's to be expected, but what's not rational is how often we are locked down 23-24 hours a day, multiple times per week. "We're on lockdown again today because we're short staffed, sorry guys I know it sucks", the cool guards will say. Same 23-24 hours a day lockdowns when covid quarantine hits but those can last months on end. One hundred and six days straight was the worst stint I endured. After we're finally released to our normal schedule all those bottled up lockdown frustrations resurface. Fights over the phones break out and potential violence can come from any number

of perceived disrespect. Once, someone was stabbed repeatedly with a toothbrush shank because he ate an apple that had been left out on a dayroom table. I mean, really dude? It's an *apple*, WTF!? It wasn't even a good crispy apple; it was a mush apple, the kind they call "horse apples" down on the west coast. They call them horse apples because that's all they're good for, feeding to horses. Well and feeding to prisoners, I suppose. Anyhow, it's a shame the state has been cutting anger management classes for years now. Evidently we could really use them.

My friend Brian looked super stressed after breakfast one morning so I asked him, "What's up man?" He was a wreck because his Mom was dying from cancer at Alaska Native Medical Center and his visitation requests had all been denied. She had been sick a long time; Doctors had recently given her six months, best case. His relationship with her was really close and it was eating him up inside. He paused to swallow the lump in his throat, then sputtered, "I don't know what to do, this is bullshi\*, how can they get away with being so heartless?" His anguish was palpable as I struggled to console him. Normally she would have A) been allowed to visit him at prison or B) he could be approved for a one-time escorted "death bed visit of a direct family member". Covid canceled any chance of her visiting him at prison. And the escorted visit option was denied by the higher ups in admin, citing, "we don't have enough personnel at this time". When she died four months later he became a bitter husk of a man. If that wasn't bad enough, Brian didn't even get to pay his final respects to his Mother. His routine funeral visit was denied because of staff shortages and failed covid protocols. RIP indeed. ♡

I've seen firsthand what prison overcrowding does to the psyche of the people who live and work here. Our prisons have the good side of bad, the bad side of good and everything in-between. The public has a strong first Amendment right to know what really happens behind the barrier of prison walls. And prisoners have a constitutional right to shed light on these places which are famously secretive and inaccessible. Taxpayers are entitled to an accurate viewpoint of how our prisons are under staffed, overcrowded, and under rehabilitated. They should also be allowed to hear the thoughts, feelings, and views of the men and women in those prisons.

Most criminals deserve to be locked up for a time, granted. But it's our people, fellow Alaskans who are filling these prisons and working here. Our Brothers, Mothers, Daughters, Aapas, Nieces, Nephews, Primos, friends, Sons, acquaintances, and in-laws are being suppressed the right to rehabilitation. Think for a moment, why are they called *correction* facilities? Could their ineffectiveness be part of the reason for Alaska's spiraling epidemic of crime, alcohol abuse, and drug addiction? Perhaps this cause and effect contributes to our state's mountainous recidivism rate? If not, then what *is* it that ails AK's criminal justice system?

Nearly 7,000 prisoners die in custody each year in the United States. Arguably, most violent attacks could have been avoided if overcrowding wasn't so bad. I've lost count of how many brutal senseless fights I've seen. This is a true story about a broken system and the real people who suffer. I am determined to let their voices be heard, by continuing to paint pictures with brushstrokes of perseverance. Best case scenario, I'm hopeful to open any proactive discussion to reconsider how we can together build a more equitable and humane society; both inside and out. As many a great artist has said, "the paintings are up for individual interpretation". How might you interpret this one?

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Ben Wilkins is an Alaskan, a part time writer, and a full time optimist. He believes life is only 10% what happens to you and 90% how you respond to it. His goal is to spark any emotion that leads to productive conversation between people from all walks of life. His published work can be found in Spotlight on Recovery Magazine, National Buddhist Newsletter, and on the online publication Minutes Before Six. He is always hungry for feedback and can be reached by correspondence @ the address listed. Let's inspire something.