

Step One: Don't Go to Jail

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In case you haven't heard, jail blows. This survival guide teaches you how to avoid very common legal pitfalls that land people in jail every day, plus how to survive "the hole." Penalties outlined are for first-time offenses. Subsequent offenses are always worse.

Most Common Reasons People Get Imprisoned For

I. "On the Road" Pitfalls

These charges stem from operating a vehicle, where police have high levels of discretion.

A. **Driving Under the Influence (DUI)** and **Operating While Intoxicated (OWI)**. Even if you have only a drink or two, you can be arrested on probable cause. In other words, 0.08% is *not* the only way to commit DUI. There are two types:

- **Per se DUI.** Your BAC is 0.08% or higher. This is an open-and-shut case.
- **Impairment DUI.** Here, your ability to drive is determined by the officer to be affected by alcohol, drugs, or a combination of substances, regardless of the exact BAC. Most people think if they blow under a 0.08% they are good, but that's not true. Blowing a 0.05% combined with erratic driving, slurred speech, bloodshot eyes, odor of alcohol, or poor performance on field sobriety tests can land you in jail. Even if they don't breathalyze you, if you admit to having had a few drinks that day, combined with one of the aforementioned behaviors, they may conclude there is probable cause to arrest for DUI.

In a majority of states, you can be arrested for DUI even if the vehicle is parked, the engine is off, and you are sleeping in the driver's seat. That might seem

ridiculous, but it's the law. Even if you are sleeping in the passenger seat or the back of the vehicle, if an officer really wants to, they may be able to arrest you based on the argument that you have the "ability" to move to the driver's seat and operate the vehicle at any moment. I think that's nonsense, but in many places, the law grants them the authority to interpret "actual physical control" that broadly. Your attorney would argue that by sleeping in the back, you "had no intent to operate the vehicle," but that's still after all the hassle of being arrested, locked up, car towed and impounded, bail, attorney fees, etc. Bottom line: courts rule that simply "being in a position to potentially operate the vehicle," even if sleeping, constitutes sufficient grounds for arrest.

A first-time DUI is typically a misdemeanor charge carrying up to 6–12 months in jail and fines between \$1,000 and \$5,000, depending on the jurisdiction. Now imagine having two drinks, getting pulled over, and being arrested on suspicion of DUI. Even before any conviction, you could face towing and impound fees, legal expenses, missed work, license restrictions, higher insurance costs, and the stress of navigating a slow court process. For some people, those consequences can snowball into lost employment, housing instability, financial hardship, and other serious disruptions to their lives. That is not a hypothetical concern: it has happened to many people caught up in the criminal justice system.

If you can't get someone to bail you out, you might end up sitting in jail for days, weeks, or even months while your case moves through the court system.¹ This

1 Bail serves as a critical mechanism in the American criminal justice system. The two primary methods are "cash bail" and "bail bond." Cash bail is paid directly to the court or the jail, requiring the defendant to deposit the full amount of the set bail to secure their release. Conversely, a bail bond is a service provided by a third-party commercial surety company. In this scenario, the defendant pays the bond agent a non-refundable percentage, typically 10% of the total bail amount, along with any ancillary administrative fees, which might range from \$30 to \$50 or more. The bond agent then assumes the risk by guaranteeing the full amount to the court on the defendant's behalf.

Regardless of the method chosen, the defendant must appear at every single hearing until the case is officially closed, meaning the final judgment or sentencing has occurred and the court's administrative processes have cleared. The refund process is neither instantaneous nor dependent on serving a potential sentence. The defendant just has met all appearances throughout the trial.

Bail is by no means "easy." Jails do not have ATMs for this purpose. An external party must formally sign for you and assume the financial risk of your compliance. If you lack an advocate with the necessary funds, you will likely remain in custody for weeks or even months while your case crawls through the system. This might be the hardest part of jail for poor people: the case moves super slowly, no one can post bail for you, and you just pace back and forth in confinement. It really isn't funny, but it's also crucial to maintain a "positive" outlook, take deep breaths, and do the others things I will explain in this article.

means you might lose your vehicle (impound fees can quickly accumulate and, in some cases, exceed the value of the car), lose your job, fall behind on bills, lose personal property, or even lose important relationships. This is a good time to emphasize that, in many ways, TIME STOPS when you are arrested. No, you generally do not get to "take some time" to "sort out your affairs" before being taken into custody. Your freedom is immediately taken away, and your ability to manage your property and responsibilities becomes severely limited.² Whatever requires your direct management and supervision may be left in limbo and, in some cases, may be lost altogether. Not even joking, you should set up automatic payments for bills in case something like this happens, otherwise you might lose whatever you are paying for.

- B. **Failure to Install a Court-Ordered Ignition Interlock Device (IID).** A DUI-related serious offense that can lead to immediate re-incarceration.
- C. **Negligent Driving.** This occurs when you operate a vehicle with a "lack of ordinary care." For example, causing a minor collision while distracted by your phone can lead to 90 days in jail and \$1,000 in fines.

2 When someone is arrested and jailed, their car is often towed and stored at a private impound lot. Those fees are usually set by the city or county contract with towing companies, not by jail itself. In many places around the U.S., daily storage fees are commonly somewhere around \$20–\$75 per day, but in some areas (especially near major cities or private lots) it can reach \$100+ per day once fees, admin charges, and "release fees" stack up. If you can't have someone "bail out" your vehicle, and you end up sitting in jail for a month or two, you might as well kiss that vehicle goodbye because it would likely cost more than it's worth to get it out. Towing and impounding is often outsourced to "private" companies. There is very little coordination between criminal courts, jails, and civil towing/impound systems. So even though it all stems from the same arrest, it gets treated as separate legal processes with separate bills. There have been reform efforts in some places:

- Caps on daily storage fees
- Requirements for faster notification and release procedures
- Reduced fees for people who are incarcerated or indigent
- Programs that allow payment plans or fee waivers
- Policies requiring quicker release when ownership is verified

But it's very uneven across jurisdictions. From a policy standpoint, this is widely criticized as an unfair "collateral consequence" of arrest, especially because it hits poor people the hardest and can spiral far beyond the original offense.

- D. **Reckless Driving.** More severe than “negligent driving,” this is a “willful disregard for safety.” Clocking in at 40 mph over the speed limit in a residential zone *can* result in up to 364 days in jail and \$5,000 in fines.
- E. **Vehicle Trespass.** Entering or using someone else's vehicle without permission can lead to 90–364 days in jail and \$1,000 in fines.

II. Interpersonal Conflict Traps

Disputes with family, partners, or roommates are the fastest way to end up with a domestic violence-related charge.

- A. **Domestic Violence (DV).** For this to occur, there needs to be an underlying charge (assault, harassment, unlawful restrain, etc.) committed by one person against another who is a family member, intimate partner, or other household member. As a result, conduct that might otherwise be charged as assault or unlawful restraint can be designated as domestic violence when it occurs between qualifying individuals. In some circumstances, something as seemingly minor as grabbing a partner's arm to prevent them from leaving can result in criminal charges carrying up to 6–12 months in jail and thousands of dollars in fines. I'm pretty sure most people don't even realize that.

The difficulty is that many domestic disputes occur behind closed doors. Emotions run high, stories conflict, and officers often arrive *after the fact* with limited information about what actually happened. Faced with competing accounts and the possibility that someone may be in danger, police frequently make an arrest based on the evidence available at the scene, even when the full facts remain disputed. Then, like pray in a spider's web, they are entangled in the very slow moving criminal justice system.

- B. **Interfering with Reporting Domestic Violence.** Grabbing a partner's phone to stop them from calling 911 is a specific crime, carrying up to 364 days in jail and \$5,000 in fines.
- C. **Exposing a Minor to Domestic Violence.** If a child is present during a DV incident, it is often an aggravating misdemeanor, adding up to 364 days in jail and \$5,000 in fines.

- D. **Assault and Battery.** In many other states, “assault” is the legal term used for a range of conduct involving either an attempt or threat to cause harm, or actual physical contact with another person.

What many people casually think of as “battery” (such as a shove or physical confrontation) is typically charged as assault under state law. For example, a shoving match at a bar can be charged as fourth-degree assault, which is generally a gross misdemeanor carrying a potential penalty of up to 364 days in jail and fines of up to \$5,000. Even relatively brief physical confrontations can therefore carry significant criminal exposure depending on the circumstances.

Words alone usually are not assault unless they create an “immediate threat of imminent harm” (and even then it’s very context-dependent). For example, yelling “fuck you” at someone from a distance, without any threatening movement or attempt to close the distance, is generally not considered assault. Similarly, giving someone the middle finger from across a room or from a passing vehicle is not assault. However, the analysis changes when words are paired with threatening physical behavior. If someone aggressively invades another person’s personal space, gets in their face, makes sudden or intimidating movements, or otherwise communicates an immediate threat of harm, the same language can take on a very different meaning in context and may be evaluated as assault depending on how a reasonable person would perceive the situation.

Thus the threshold for assault does not hinge on words alone, but the words plus behavior: does the combined conduct cause another to “reasonably apprehend imminent harmful or offensive physical contact”? If so, then it’s assault. The perceived harm must be *immediate and likely*, not just hypothetical or distant.

- E. **Harassment.** This includes cyber-harassment or persistent, unwanted contact that serves no legitimate purpose and is likely to cause substantial emotional distress. It can involve repeated phone calls, text messages, emails, social media messages, or other digital communication after someone has clearly indicated they do not want contact. It can also include following someone online or in person, creating new accounts to bypass blocks, or contacting someone indirectly through third parties. This can include sending a stream of unwanted or threatening messages, repeatedly contacting someone after being told to stop, or using multiple platforms to continue the contact despite clear rejection, all of which can support criminal harassment charges depending on the circumstances. In some jurisdictions, harassment can be charged as a gross misdemeanor carrying up to 90–364 days in jail and fines up to \$5,000, depending on the severity and circumstance.

III. Property and Order Issues

These crimes are often "crimes of opportunity" or public disturbances that judges view as disruptive to society.

- A. **Petit Larceny.** Shoplifting even a small \$15 item can result in a misdemeanor carrying *up to* 6–12 months in jail and a \$1,000 fine.
- B. **Malicious Mischief.** Intentionally damaging property, like keying a car, can lead to up to 364 days in jail and \$5,000 in fines.
- C. **Criminal Trespass.** Unauthorized entry onto private property carries up to 90–364 days in jail and \$1,000 in fines.
- D. **Disorderly Person.** A "catch-all" for public disturbances, like fighting in a park, which can result in up to 90 days in jail and \$1,000 in fines.
- E. **Public Nuisance.** Activities that interfere with public health or comfort can result in up to 90 days in jail and \$1,000 in fines.
- F. **Public Intoxication.** Being passed out or disorderly in a public plaza after a night out is one of the most common reasons for a "one-night stay" in jail.

IV. Law Enforcement Escalations

These charges usually occur after the police arrive. These are "tag-on" crimes that make a simple situation much worse.

- A. **Obstruction of Justice/Public Servant.** Resisting arrest or refusing to follow an officer's orders. Up to 364 days in jail and \$5,000 in fines. I sympathize with people here because sometimes, "trigger-happy" cops use this to their advantage. Some might approach you very disrespectfully (lacking any respect actually), and to an ordinary reasonable person, you're just like "Fuck this asshole." But you can't run away, or attack of course, because that will result in you getting tasered or shot and killed.
- B. **False Statement to a Public Servant.** Lying to an officer about your identity or a crime. Up to 90 days in jail and \$1,000 in fines.
- C. **Violation of a Protection Order.** Contacting a protected person is a "mandatory arrest" crime in most states. Up to 6–12 months in jail and \$5,000 in fines.
- D. **Carrying a Dangerous Weapon.** Carrying a concealed or prohibited weapon without a permit. Up to 364 days in jail and \$5,000 in fines.
- E. **Contempt of Court.** Missing a court date or ignoring a judge's order results in a bench warrant, leading to an immediate arrest.

If a first offense can't be won, one's lawyer should look for diversionary programs such as probation, community service, or treatment classes that can keep you out of a jail cell entirely and might reduce or even dismiss the charges. You want to avoid the permanent stain of a criminal record.

How to Survive Jail

Shit got cray and you ended up in jail. How to survive? Here are some pointers.

1. When you are being "checked-in," do not lie about your medical history. If you are abusing any drug or alcohol, make sure they know, that way you can see a nurse immediately and discuss withdrawal. If you fail to bring this up, you might sit in your cell for hours or days before seeing the nurse, risking your life to withdrawal effects. Also, tell the check-in person your dietary needs (vegan, vegetarian, pre-diabetic, diabetic, etc.). You may need to submit a "sick call" or "kite" (a formal written request) to the medical unit specifically requesting an evaluation for such dietary needs.
2. Come to grips that you are *not* "getting out quickly" ... most likely. The natural reaction and urge is to call anyone using the jail phone, ruminate about your case endlessly, including hypotheticals, and "stress yourself." Bad idea. A day in jail stressing out can feel like three regular days outside. Take a deep breath. Relax. Treat it as a "time-out" where you can sleep plenty. Enjoy the fact that you don't need to do anything. This might be challenging for some high energy people, but it is what it is, Adding stress to the situation is not going to help it. You truly cannot do anything, so submitting your ego to the situation and cultivating acceptance will save you gray hairs.
3. Don't talk to inmates endlessly about your case is. Immature, silly, and foolish inmates "can't help themselves" prattling. There is no need. Anyone can have their "theories and predications" of what will happen, but ultimately no one knows except the judge, prosecutor, and your attorney.

I will say, it's unrealistic to "never talk about your case" with the other inmates. Human nature wants to know and it's the inevitable. The correction officers know why you are there. It's hard to be too secretive about it. But still, the best policy to is keep it as "general as possible." If you are in for a domestic violence fight, theft, or DUI, just say the charge, but there is zero obligation to give details. You can use gray rocking: keeping responses brief, neutral, and emotionally unengaging, such as "I hear you," or "okay," giving minimal acknowledgment without elaboration. If you end up as that person who constantly talks about their case, you will be seen as annoying as shit. It's also depressing. Talk about positive shit: what you enjoy, what's good. It helps time pass better when the conversation is positive and not about your case. You may find certain inmates to talk about your case a bit more in detail, but even that, keep it short. Whether in jail or outside jail, remember "Trust No One."

4. Jail food blows. It's as if they are trying to kill you: mostly carbs, saturated fat, sodium, and added sugar. Very little protein and varied nutrients. Do not eat the bullshit, like baked goods (muffins, cookies, cakes, etc.). Don't drink the sugary stuff. Just have water. Although, the water blows, tasting like chlorine. Chlorine taste is a byproduct of municipal disinfection, though it can be intensified by aging pipes and stagnant plumbing systems. These levels are typically within regulatory limits, but not always. The concern often lies with outdated, corroded infrastructure that may introduce heavy metals or other contaminants. Institutions should conduct regular, independent water quality testing and replace antiquated pipes that compromise the purity of the supply. Not just for jails but anywhere, including schools. For the short-term, while replacing pipes, authorities should install high-capacity point-of-use filtration systems, as well as providing fresh bottled spring water to inmates. Hydration is crucial to maintaining the health of inmates.
5. Any item you can get from the guards, *do not give to others*. For example, someone might say or ask you, "I need soap, or a blanket, or whatever." DO NOT GIVE THEM ANYTHING. Redirect them to asking the guard. It basically sets up a "dependency" habit if you give them anything, and when inmates start exchanging stuff, it creates unnecessary tension, feelings of indebtedness, or some sense of leverage. It's a bad idea. There was one inmate who kept asking or declaring to everyone before meals, "If anyone doesn't want their x, y, or z, just let me know." They were trying to "get dibs," like a scavenger. Fuck that. Jail is a place of equity. Everyone gets served the same equal amount. The caloric intake for incarcerated individuals is not governed by a single federal standard, but rather by a patchwork of state, local, and institutional policies. On average, you will often see figures ranging from 2,400 to 2,800 calories per day for men and 1,800 to 2,200 calories per day for women. Unless it is truly a "no biggie" situation and another inmate is genuinely like, "I'm not going to eat this, do you want it?" then it's probably fine, but overall, just take your "equal share" from the guards and stick to that. You do not need to be eating other people's food.
6. *Prisoner rights* is an oxymoron. You have some rights, but it's the absolute bare minimum. Normally, there is a button inside cells so you can speak to guards at any point and make requests. You are protected by the Eighth Amendment's ban on cruel and unusual punishment, meaning you are entitled to adequate medical and mental health care (the facility cannot ignore serious health issues or emergencies). Additionally, authorities have a legal duty to keep inmates safe from violence, whether from other prisoners or the staff itself. You are also guaranteed the right to basic necessities like proper hygiene, enough food, and the freedom to practice one's

religion. The point is to maintain human dignity and preventing the system from becoming abusive. But don't be surprised: it's the barest of the minimum.

7. Your first court appearance is called an "arraignment."³ This is where you are read your rights, ask if you understand, and it's determine whether the state will provide you with a public defender. If you are adamant, you may request to represent yourself pro se, but it is generally not recommended for a number of reasons, even for highly intelligent or well-educated individuals.⁴ The judge may or may not set a bail. The judge may or may not release you on your own "recognizance," meaning your awareness and understanding that you *will show up* to your future court hearings. If you are considered a "flight risk," the judge will set a bail, or may not set bail at all. During the arraignment hearing, and you are appointed a public defender, if the judge says something you disagree with, do not speak up and answer them back directly. That shows impulsiveness and a lack of decorum. Instead, ask "Your honor, may I speak to my attorney." Remember, you are a pawn, your attorney is a knight or bishop, and the judge is Queen or King. The smart is to "default" to "speaking through your attorney." The judge will appreciate this; your attorney will appreciate this. It's best for everyone.

I could be wrong, but no one wakes up saying, "I feel like being locked up today." Imprisonment comes from a variety of reasons. Sometimes it's just poor human behavior and a lack of learning. But a lot of the time, it comes from places and histories of traumas. They grew up in toxic social environments; dysfunctional or nonexistent families; failed support systems; experienced significant discouragement or rejection; substance abuse; and mental health illness. Consequently, our perspective in treating prisoners *should not* be subjecting them to pain and suffering, but rather to treatment, looking at them as "trauma patients." No mistreatment. No disrespect. No hazing. No torturing. In my book *Miscellaneous Advice*, I write about how prison conditions can improve: turning off the lights during sleeping times; giving prisoners pillows; providing

3 Old French term *araisnier*, meaning to speak to, address, or accuse in a law court.

4 Having a lawyer provides procedural and strategic protection in a system with complex rules of evidence, procedure, and negotiation. Attorneys also act as a buffer in communications with the prosecutor, who is typically more willing to engage in structured plea negotiations when dealing with counsel familiar with the system.

Judges do not become more or less lenient based on representation, but proceedings tend to run more smoothly when parties are represented by counsel who understand courtroom procedure and legal standards. This reduces the risk of procedural mistakes that can negatively affect the outcome of the case.

blankets without holes; ensuring clean and fitted clothing; better, more nutritious protein-focused meals.

This advice also flows to correction officers: don't look at inmates as "less than" you. No one is immune from potentially ending up in jail or prison. In fact, correction officers sometimes end up in jail or prison themselves on charges such as abuse or misconduct in this very job. Not every inmate is a cold, hard criminal, nor a mentally ill or "crazy" person. In reality, most incarcerated people are ordinary individuals who merely "messed up" or are dealing with complex circumstances. When correction officers adopt a consistently negative or dehumanizing view toward prisoners, it can add to the already existing tension and hostility inherent in a high-stress, high-power-dynamic environment.⁵ If correction officers instead approach situations with professionalism, de-escalation skills, and an awareness of behavioral health and trauma factors, it can contribute to safer and more stable interactions for everyone involved.

A Brief History of Imprisonment

Prisons are a relatively recent institutional solution coming out of settled, hierarchical societies.

Back when we were hunter-gatherers (based on what we know from anthropology and modern foraging societies like the San, Inuit, Hadza, etc.), there generally were no prisons at all. Small bands couldn't really support them. If someone seriously violated norms (stealing food, repeated aggression, or sexual violence) the typical response was public shaming, compensation (like returning goods), temporary or permanent exile, or in extreme cases, violence or killing. The key thing is mobility mattered. If someone was dangerous or disruptive, the group could just refuse to continue sharing resources with them, and in a small survival-dependent group, that would be a huge penalty.

As agricultural societies began to develop along major river banks (Mesopotamia, Egypt, China, Indus Valley, later Europe), things changed. As property rights and fixed living situations increase, we see a "surplus" that needs protecting. Disputes need adjudication

5 The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted in 1971 by psychologist Philip Zimbardo, placed student volunteers into simulated roles of guards and prisoners. The "guards" began exhibiting aggressive behavior and abuse as a means to enforce "superiority," even at the outset, forcing the experiment to conclude after just six days. For example, they would force prisoners to perform repetitive push-ups while guards stepped on their backs; endure hours of standing in stress positions; run laps while carrying other inmates; they would shout profane insults and racial slurs at prisoners; and force prisoners to clean toilets with their bare hands to induce shame. The lesson: where there is unchecked power, the system can rapidly strip away empathy and transform even ordinary people into perpetrators of abuse.

so there isn't physical fighting. Thus, law codes emerged, like Hammurabi's Code=eye for an eye. Early punishments were not often imprisonment but bodily or financial: fines, forced labor, mutilation, exile, or execution. Prisons existed but mostly as holding spaces to detain people before trial or punishment, not as the punishment itself.

Many Asian systems historically leaned more toward corporal punishment, fines, exile, or forced labor rather than long-term incarceration. In imperial China, prisons existed but were often temporary holding spaces, and sentencing relied heavily on corporal punishment and exile. In many African pre-colonial societies, justice systems were often restorative or compensatory (repairing harm to the group) rather than isolating someone in a cell, though this varied widely by region and political structure.

Prison as long-term punishment is rather recent. In Europe, from the late medieval period into the Enlightenment (roughly 1500s–1800s), we start seeing incarceration used more deliberately. Even then, early prisons were often *debtors' prisons* or holding facilities. The shift toward long-term incarceration as primary punishment accelerated in the 18th and 19th centuries, influenced by Enlightenment ideas (reform instead of pure bodily punishment), Protestant work discipline, and industrialism-style control.

The "dark concrete box" model is mostly 19th and 20th century industrial design. This includes Bentham's "Panopticon" idea (surveillance and behavioral control), and later, American penitentiaries designed around isolation, discipline, and labor.

How Many People Are Locked Up?

About two million people are locked up in the United States at any given time.

- Local jails (county + city jails): ~600,000–700,000 on an average day
- State prisons: ~1.2 million (the biggest share)
- Federal prisons: ~150,000–200,000

The 2 million number doesn't include people on probation or parole, which is around 3–4 million. The U.S. is one of the highest incarceration-rate countries in the world per capita.

Jails and prisons look similar, operate similarly, but are different. Jails are for short-term stays (pretrial, minor sentences). They can be chaotic, and constantly cycling people in and out. Prisons are long-term and more structured. Paradoxically, that can make it psychologically "easier" in some ways because routines stabilize the mind: people know their sentence length, they form longer-term social patterns, and there is often more access to programming (even if limited). That doesn't mean prison is good; it just means the brain can adapt to routine more easily than to uncertainty. Both can produce time

distortion, boredom, claustrophobia, overstimulation, and loss of autonomy, but of course it also depends on the person. It's crazy but people in jail are actually six times more likely to die by suicide than those serving in prison—which reflects the “chaotic” and “uncertain” nature of these holding dormitories.

In either, you will likely find people going through tough times. Most people are still “with it,” but don't be surprised by mental illness, hallucination, and hearing some people talking to themselves. Why? First, untreated mental illness is generally overrepresented in jails, which function as de facto holding centers for many people the healthcare system often doesn't care for. Add on severe stress while in jail, which can trigger dissociation, and psychosis in general can be more obvious in confinement. Last but not least, withdrawal from substances can cause hallucinations or agitation.

Solitary Confinement

Not fun. The goal is to have something; a book to read, paper and a pencil, anything you can do to keep yourself from ruminating. Meditation is helpful during these times. You might get “bed sores” from sleeping so much, so be careful.

In everyday environments, individuals maintain mental equilibrium through continuous external stimuli such as social interaction, movement, and varied sensory input. When this input is drastically removed, it is more difficult for the brain to regulate mood and thought. Prolonged isolation often triggers severe psychological consequences including time distortion, obsessive thoughts, intense anxiety, paranoia, emotional blunting, cognitive fatigue, heightened stress responses, and, in some cases, psychosis.⁶ Extended periods are linked to lasting cognitive impairments, sleep disturbances, and a diminished capacity for social reintegration upon release. The common belief is that individuals eventually adapt, but “adaptation” is more psychological numbing or withdrawal, survival-based coping mechanisms rather than signs of healthy habituation.⁷ Over time, long-term incarceration in such low-autonomy environments facilitates “institutionalization,” a process wherein individuals lose the capacity for independent decision-making and develop hypervigilance. This

6 Craig Haney, “The Psychological Effects of Solitary Confinement: A Systematic Critique,” *Crime and Justice* 47 (2018): 365–416.

7 Haney, “Psychological Effects of Solitary,” 380.

psychological erosion makes transitioning back to everyday life significantly more difficult.⁸

Human rights activists categorized prolonged solitary confinement as psychological harm through toxic feedback loops: distress caused by the isolation results in behavioral withdrawal or agitation, prompting further disciplinary isolation and exacerbating the original condition.^{9,10}

Reform

Diversion. Instead of putting mentally ill or low-level offenders in jail at all, you route them into treatment, housing support, or supervised programs. This is one of the biggest levers, because a large portion of jail populations are there for non-violent charges or untreated mental health/substance issues.

Redesigning facilities. More natural light, less extreme isolation, more movement, better ventilation, and real programming (education, work, and therapy). Evidence from places that do this shows better behavior and lower reoffending rates, though it costs more upfront.¹¹

Reducing or eliminating solitary confinement, except for very short safety emergencies. It increases psychological harm without improving long-term safety outcomes.

And then there's the bigger structural question: whether we rely so heavily on incarceration at all for things like addiction, homelessness, and mental illness.

8 Craig Haney, "The Psychological Impact of Incarceration: Implications for Post-Prison Adjustment" (Urban Institute, n.d.), 5.

9 Craig Haney, "The Science of Solitary: Expanding the Harmfulness Narrative," *Northwestern University Law Review* 115 (2020): 211.

10 Haney, "Psychological Effects of Solitary," 405.

11 Giovanni Mastrobuoni, "Do Better Prisons Reduce Recidivism? Evidence from a Prison Construction Program," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* 104, no. 6 (2022): 1256–1271, https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_00994.

The Nordic Model

The core philosophy in the Nordic Model is that time spent incarcerated should resemble life in the outside world as closely as possible to minimize the damage of institutionalization.¹² The focus is on active rehabilitation, focusing on "dynamic security." Instead of relying on physical barriers, high-security walls, and sensory deprivation, dynamic security relies on the development of positive relationships between staff and inmates. Officers in these systems often act more like mentors or social workers, eating meals alongside inmates and participating in daily activities, which creates a social environment that prevents the psychological "shutdown" common in restrictive US facilities.¹³

To combat cognitive decay, inmates are granted high levels of autonomy: they prepare their own meals, have access to sophisticated educational programs, and are encouraged to maintain active links with their families and the outside community. Intellectual stimulation and meaningful social roles significantly mitigate the risk of institutionalization.¹⁴ "Humanizing" the confinement experience leads to lower rates of recidivism and better psychological outcomes for those returning to society.¹⁵

Other nations have also shifted towards rehabilitative frameworks. In Japan, legislative changes have promoted reintegration programs such as housing support and job placement.¹⁶ In 2026, China passed laws emphasizing the integration of clinical psychologists and social workers into the jail environment. It is worth noting however that simply increasing the headcount of professional inside prison walls can just become another layer of bureaucratic bloat, funding administrative oversight rather than directly improving the daily autonomy or living conditions of the incarcerated.¹⁷ Jails and inmates don't need more "perfunctory paperwork": they need daily life and outcome

12 Andrew Coyle, *A Human Rights Approach to Prison Management: Handbook for Prison Staff*, 2nd ed. (London: International Centre for Prison Studies, 2009), 34–38.

13 John Pratt and Anna Eriksson, *Contrasts in Punishment: Explaining Cross-National Differences in Prison Populations* (London: Routledge, 2013), 112–115.

14 Michael Jacobsen, "The Nordic Prison Model: A Study in Humanization and Rehabilitation," *Scandinavian Journal of Criminology* 15, no. 2 (2021): 88–92.

15 Benjamin Hajer, "The Effects of Normalization: Recidivism and Reintegration in the Norwegian Correctional System," *Journal of Correctional Health Care* 28, no. 4 (2022): 301–315.

16 Ministry of Justice of Japan, "The Ministry of Justice: What is the Rehabilitation of Offenders?," accessed June 11, 2026, https://www.moj.go.jp/EN/hogo1/soumu/hogo_hogo01.html.

17 Cao Yin, "China revises prison law to boost inmate rehabilitation," *China Daily*, April 29, 2026, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202604/30/WS69f2bba1a310d6866eb466cb.html>.

improvements. The goal must be the offender's successful reintegration.¹⁸ Education, library access, the ability to create, and communication with the outside world are essential factors against recidivism.

Conclusion

Going to jail might as well be called "rock bottom." In a common scenario, a person loses much more than their freedom: potentially their vehicle, apartment, job, and even savings (court costs and fines are a lot for the average person). Essentially, they come out "wiped clean" by Uncle Government, with nothing but the shirts on their backs. If that is ever you, don't be discouraged. Get yourself to the nearest homeless shelter and check-in. At that level of poverty, they are your best point of contact. From there, get the first honest job you can, no matter how menial. Work and save up as much as you can. In six to twelve months, you could be looking at a very different, much more fortuitous situation. You won't fold, you won't break. You will regrow anew, stronger and better than ever.

Hopefully this article will guide you completely away from this experience, but even if, stay strong. God is always with you, even when you forget. If you end up in jail, it's because you are meant to be there. No place you go in this journey is a mistake. Every place is supposed to be teaching you something.

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18 Maheen A. Shabbir, Gunter Bachmann, and Julie E. McGreevey, "Comparative Review of Global Incarceration Systems: A Human-Centered Perspective," *JSM Sexual Medicine* 9, no. 4 (2025): 1165.