

©2004, Shane R. Hillman.

## Shane R. Hillman

Calgary Remand Centre, Canada

### Prison 101

I would like to start by introducing myself. My name is Shane Roy Hillman. I am 21 years of age. I have been an inmate at the Calgary Remand Centre since the beginning of April 2003. My experience as an inmate has been a process of learning and making choices. As an inmate, I enjoy observing and listening to everything that goes on in prison and thus have a good knowledge of my surroundings. In my opinion, most inmates become useless to themselves and choose not to try and better their lives. They just wait out the time they have in prison doing nothing and for the most part accomplishing nothing. Prior to my being arrested, I was on a road to nowhere. I was heavily into drugs and alcohol--so heavily that I turned to crime in order to pay for my partying habits. So when I came to jail, I was actually pleased to return to a place where I could become myself again, re-establish my direction in life, and regain control over my mind, body and soul.

Prison can be a cruel way to learn a lesson. And it can be a good way to learn a lesson. It depends on how you want to look at it. Some people come to prison and find that they fear it. They get beat up, harassed or just get scared of it because it is a whole different world. They fear prison so much that they do everything they can do to avoid coming back. Some people come to jail and consider it a refuge from the outside world. I have spoken to inmates who enjoy the freedom of not paying bills, not worrying about food, not worrying about where they will sleep, and most of all, not worrying about the many problems they face in the outside world. To them, prison is like a vacation or a break.

Then there are people that come to prison, learn the ins and outs (inside rules), and think of it as their second home. In this case, they don't care whether they come to jail or not. Therefore, they tend to not care about the mistakes or crimes that they commit in society. Even if they do get arrested for something, the consequence of coming to prison is like coming home, creating a vicious circle. The more they come to prison, the more they like it. I have also spoken to some inmates who were homeless, who like coming to jail because it is home to them from the cold, so they purposely commit crimes to come to prison.

Prison can be a really positive thing because people can change themselves

or better themselves. If someone chooses to, they can focus on themselves instead of the busy outside world. People can break deadly drug habits, or even alcohol addictions, that they had in the outside world. People can also lose weight, gain weight, get fit, and get healthy. Prison offers a simple routine with which people can learn to benefit themselves. Being introduced to controlled diets, inmates can gain or lose weight very easily. A lot of inmates complain that they don't receive as much food as they should. In my opinion, that is bullshit. Inmates seem hungrier because they don't have their old habits, so they try to replace those habits with consuming food. The amount of food we receive is, if not more than, equal to the amount a normal person in society would eat.

Prison can also be very negative because inmates like to talk or brag about how they did this and how they did that. Other inmates feed off of and learn from this bragging. Inmates refer to this process as CRIME 101: inmates teaching inmates how to improve their crimes. Prison also makes some people violent because they have to fight a lot in prison, whether to protect themselves or to make themselves known. Survival in prison can be easy and it can be hard, depending on three basic facts:

- 1) What you were charged with
- 2) Who you know in prison
- 3) Whether you are willing to defend yourself or not.

For example, if you were charged with a sexual offense, inmates will be very violent towards you. You will get beat up a lot or maybe even stabbed. Similarly, if someone wants to fight you or is verbally abusive toward you and you choose not to retaliate, the other inmates will take turns physically abusing you, because you show signs of weakness.

Between all inmates in all prisons, there are basic rules or laws that inmates must follow:

- 1) Always stand up for yourself, no matter who or how big your opponent might be, because even if you lose, you will still look good.
- 2) If you borrow something, always pay it back.
- 3) Never whistle, no matter where you are in the prison. Only inmates on death row can whistle before they are going to be killed. But that doesn't apply to Canada.
- 4) Never "rat" anybody out. What goes on between inmates, stays between inmates. Tell no one about what you see or hear. Keep it to yourself.
- 5) Don't be nosy, and stay out of other inmate's business. Don't ask questions that are none of your concern. We like to say, "Do your own time."
- 6) Never flush your toilet at night.

Inmates who break these rules or disregard them usually get beat up, pushed around and harassed to the point where they either fight with everyone or ask to be transferred off the unit. Once you get a bad name, it will follow you wherever you go, unless you fight to make it better. If you are a “rat” or a sexual offender, there is no way to clear your name. You are unsafe, anywhere in General Population. The only place you can go is into protective custody (P.C.).

When an inmate becomes a P.C. (transfers to Protective Custody) they are permanently labeled. Because Protective Custody consists of only rats, skimmers, and goofs, once you are a P.C. you can never be in General Population again. Even if you are released from prison and then come back again, you will automatically be put in Protective Custody, whether you like it or not.

Prison has a language all its own. In addition to more familiar terms like “shank” (sharp weapon) and “stick” (marijuana joint), in prison people also learn:

- To play the role—to act tough or to act dominant
- To shit talk—to tell lies or tell false stories
- To beak off—to be verbally aggressive
- To crack off—to argue in an offensive way
- To jerk off—to masturbate
- To play duck—to pretend to know nothing about something
- To suitcase something—to conceal something
- To hoop something—to conceal something in your anus (I honestly met an inmate who hooped a cell phone and a charger. Ouch!!)

In general, prison life is like a small and simple society made up of inmates and harsh jailhouse rules. It is like a community with its own laws and consequences. Some people adapt and accept it as a way to learn from their mistakes, while others make it part of themselves and their lives.

There are a few things you can do in prison to pass your time, depending on which institution you are in. Most inmates either play cards, read, draw, write, watch TV, or work out. Some institutions allow inmates to purchase hobbies, or even take courses. Some make you work in the kitchen, in an eyeglass shop, or outside landscaping, but that is only when you are sentenced.

I have chosen to make the best of my time here. I enjoy reading novels, drawing and writing poems. Recently, because of a hunger strike that we had, our weight room went from being open once a week to open all day, every day.

I have been one of the few inmates on my unit who faithfully works out every day, which I enjoy very much. I have also been blessed with the help and support of Kathryn MacDonell, whom I see once a week as a tutor to help me better myself and my education, so that when I am released I can become a successful member of society.