

It has been said that visiting a prison is like visiting a foreign country. This “foreign land” has its own language, code of acceptable behavior, food, and way of dress. To help volunteers understand more about the prison environment, we’ve prepared a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) about prison.

1. What is the difference between a jail and a prison?
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10. What is protective custody (PC)? Does it reduce violence?
11. What are the consequences for breaking prison rules?
12. What is administrative segregation (“ad seg”)?

## **1. What is the difference between a jail and a prison?**

Jails are usually local facilities under the jurisdiction of a city, local district, or county. Jails are short-term holding facilities for the newly arrested and those awaiting trial or sentencing. Those sentenced to serve a small amount of time (less than a year) may be housed in the local jail for the duration of their sentence.

Prisons are institutional facilities under the jurisdiction of the state or federal government where convicted offenders serve longer sentences. People who have been found guilty of breaking a state law are usually sent to a state prison. Those who have violated federal laws are typically sent to federal prison located somewhere in the U.S.

Some states have jails and prisons that are privately operated – usually by a corporation. The state basically contracts with these private facilities to house prisoners and does not have as much control over how the facilities are operated.

## **2. Do all jails and prisons offer religious programs to inmates?**

Many jails and prisons have chaplains and are able to offer religious programs for inmates. Some do not. Typically, religious programming in a jail is fairly limited because of lack of space and lack of the security staff that would be required to oversee the classes and/or worship services.

Most state and federal prisons have a chaplain or educational director that manages religious and/or education programming for prisoners. Some prisons have extensive programs for inmates and others do not. It largely depends on the administration’s viewpoint on the value of religious programming and whether there are enough correctional staff and volunteers to operate the programs. Lack of space can also be an issue.

Many correctional administrators are beginning to welcome religious programs into their facilities because prisoners participating in the programs become a calming influence within the whole population. When there is less violence and fewer disciplinary problems, it increases everyone's safety, saves money, and makes the correctional staff's job easier

### **3. How available are chaplains to prisoners?**

The availability of a chaplain varies. Some only visit the unit occasionally or perhaps only on certain days of the week, while others are full time. If the chaplain is an employee of the Department of Corrections (DOC), he/she may have many administrative duties that restrict the amount of time available for inmates. Volunteer chaplains and/or volunteer chaplain's assistants are often more free to spend time serving the inmate population.

Chaplains come from all faiths. They may or may not be Christians. No matter what their faith, chaplains are required to provide services for inmates of all faiths.

Chaplains rely heavily on volunteers from local churches and communities in order to provide all the worship services and religious classes for prisoners. Volunteer-led programs must always be pre-approved by the chaplain and usually the warden. Approval is based on the needs of the facility, needs of the inmates, available space, existing program schedules, and the proposed volunteer activity.

### **4. How do prisoners typically spend their days?**

How prisoners spend their time each day is primarily determined by their classification level. Those whose previous crimes and current behavior qualify them for low or medium security classification have more freedom and more opportunities than those in high security.

A typical day for someone in low or medium security begins with breakfast around 4:30am. These prisoners may then report to their work assignments around 6am. If they have no work assignment, they may have a class to attend or spend time in their bunks reading, writing letters, or listening to the radio. Lunch is around 11am. Afterwards, they may report to work or go to the gym or rec yard for exercise. The third meal of the day is usually around 4pm.

Prisoners may spend evening hours attending classes, watching television, or playing dominoes. Those who have commissary supplies may use their hotpots to heat something to eat, and if the prison has an inmate phone system, they may call their families for a few minutes.

On weekends, prisoners may be allowed to attend chapel programs and/or worship services. If they are fortunate, they may have a visit with a friend or family member during visitation hours. All of these activities depend on prisoners having good behavior and obtaining necessary permissions and clearances.

Prisoners who have high security classifications or who have disciplinary problems have much fewer choices and many more restrictions. Life is very slow and boring for them.

## **5. What types of educational programs are available to prisoners?**

Educational opportunities vary widely from prison to prison. Many states contract with local schools/colleges to provide a variety of academic courses, life skills education, and career and technology education for prisoners in certain prison units. Inmates are selected for participation based on their academic skills, disciplinary record, level of custody, length of sentence, and program availability.

Most prisons offer basic literacy programs for prisoners functioning below the sixth-grade level and GED classes for those wanting to complete high school. For those who have completed high school, postsecondary educational opportunities may be available through contracts with community colleges and universities. If accepted into a college-level program, it is possible for a prisoner to earn an associate degree and perhaps even go on to obtain a Baccalaureate degree. However, some prisoners prefer to earn a vocational certificate.

Not all prisoners have these educational opportunities. Participation in college-level classes and/or vocational programs is based on the inmate receiving approval from prison administration, passing entrance exams, and having money to pay all or part of the tuition. Some prisoners qualify for partial scholarships and others are required to pay full tuition.

A few prisoners get permission to take for-credit correspondence courses offered by colleges or universities, although they have to pay tuition and keep up with class assignments they receive by mail. Some prisoners may also receive permission to take free or low-cost Bible correspondence courses offered by churches and other religious organizations.

Many prisons offer life skills programs, which are non-credit courses designed to help prisoners learn to manage anger, overcome criminal thinking, set and achieve goals, become more responsible, develop healthy relationships, and avoid substance abuse. Prisoners are also strongly encouraged to participate in 12-step programs such as Celebrate Recovery, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Narcotics Anonymous. Community volunteers often lead these classes.

Prisoners basically make a choice whether or not they want to use their time in prison to better themselves. If they truly want to change their lives, prison education programs and religious programming are very helpful. Prison ministry volunteers typically have more contact with inmates who are trying to better themselves. These are the ones who typically sign up for faith-based programs.

## **6. What types of jobs do prisoners have?**

The goal of many corrections departments is for all able-bodied prisoners to have jobs. However, there are not always enough jobs to go around.

Inmates typically work in prison-support jobs doing things like cooking, cleaning, doing clerical work, running the laundry, or performing maintenance chores. On prison units that have agricultural operations, inmates may do field work, raise livestock, or help maintain farm equipment. Some prisons have manufacturing facilities where inmates make signs or license plates, rebuild computers, make furniture, sew, process food, or do metal fabrication.

Some states pay prisoners a very low wage for their work, but most states do not pay inmates. Prison jobs help inmates learn job skills and develop a stronger work ethic. Inmates may acquire skills in food preparation, plant operations, warehousing, recordkeeping, freight

transportation, vehicle maintenance, animal husbandry, farming, construction, building maintenance, carpentry, plumbing, welding, and many other occupations.

Prisoners can apply for prison jobs that will help them be better prepared for employment when released. There is usually a certain amount of competition among inmates for the jobs that offer greater opportunity for future employment.

## **7. How does the prison commissary system work?**

Prisoners are not allowed to possess money. If they are able to earn money by working a job in prison or their family sends them money, it goes into their personal inmate trust fund. Most prisoners call this their “commissary money.”

While incarcerated, prisoners are provided meals, basic clothing, and a few very basic personal care items. Inmates with good behavior are allowed use their trust fund money to purchase additional supplies from the prison “store” or commissary. Prisoners look forward to commissary day, which is typically once every two weeks.

Although inmates may speak of “going to store,” it really means they take a list of items they want to buy and stand in line at the commissary window. When their commissary order is filled, they walk away with a bag full of precious commodities such as coffee, instant soup, chips, cookies, canned foods, shampoo, soap, toothpaste, writing paper, and stamps. With approval, prisoners can also buy things like hot pots, clocks, fans, typewriters, shoes, underclothing, and basic over-the-counter medications.

Prison food is very low quality, so life is much better for inmates who can afford commissary. Although it is against the rules, many prisoners trade some of their commissary supplies to get other things they need or want. If someone does not have money for commissary, they can often earn coffee, soups, or postage stamps by doing other inmates’ laundry, cutting hair, shining shoes, making greeting cards, fixing broken radios, etc. Prisoners in general are very entrepreneurial and there is always a strong barter system going on behind the scenes.

## **8. What type of medical care do prisoners receive?**

Each prison usually has a clinic or infirmary to care for sick inmates. However, most prisons do not allow a prisoner who is sick to “go to medical” unless he/she sends in a written request and is sent a “lay-in” slip giving permission. Receiving a lay-in may take 3-5 days. Meantime, the sick prisoner just has to find a way to get by.

Medical and dental care within a prison is very limited and medical personnel work in sparse conditions, usually for lower pay than their counterparts on the outside. Prescription medications are almost always in short supply.

Inmates are often not allowed to have possession of the medication they have been prescribed. When it is time for their medication, the prisoner has to go stand in line at the “pill window,” where the medicine is dispensed one dose at a time. A correctional officer stands at the window, making sure prisoners take their medicine before walking away.

Prison systems typically have contracts with regional hospitals to provide medical care for seriously ill inmates. This means inmates have to be transported to the hospital by bus, which

can be a grueling journey in itself. Extra security officers are required to transport inmates to the medical care facility, as well as to oversee them during their stay.

Some states charge inmates for their medical care and their medications. Although these fees are lower than an uninsured person might pay in the free world, the payments are a hardship for the majority of inmates and their families. Many inmates do not seek medical attention when they need it simply because they can't afford it or it takes too long and is too much hassle.

## **9. Why is respect so important within the prison environment?**

Respect is very important in prison and must be maintained. Disrespect in prison can lead to violent situations where prisoners may feel they have to prove they are not weak. Sometimes prisoners feel they have to do things they don't want to do in order to survive in the prison environment.

In general, prisoners consider those found guilty of sexual crimes – rape, molestation, abuse – to be “lowest of the low.” It is very hard for a prisoner to conceal that he/she is incarcerated for this type of crime. These prisoners are often in danger from other prisoners. On the other hand, violent crimes such as murder and big-time robbery are respected among inmates and these prisoners are sometimes viewed as heroes.

A “punk” is an inmate who shows fear or is homosexual. These inmates are perceived as being weak. Once classified by other inmates as a punk, a person is much more susceptible to attack. That is why inmates feel it is extremely important to “establish yourself” when you arrive at a prison unit.

A “snitch” is an inmate who goes to the authorities and claims to have knowledge about another prisoner's crimes or something the prisoner is doing that is against prison rules. Whether the information is true or untrue, snitching is the highest form of disrespect within inmate culture and may result in retaliation.

Even something as simple as borrowing something from another inmate can become an issue between prisoners. If the debt is not repaid quickly, it is considered disrespectful and can lead to violence. This is part of prison culture that doesn't always make sense. However, the reality is that most prisoners believe respect must be maintained at all costs.

Prison inmates do not respect a person they think is phony. This means that someone who professes faith in Christ will be closely scrutinized by other prisoners to see if their walk matches their talk. Plus, some inmates are watching to see if Christianity really works. Phony Christianity is called “jailhouse religion” and is not respected at all.

Our job as Christian volunteers is to bring Kingdom culture to bear on prison culture. We must never condone violence, but always seek to bring God's peace within the prison environment.

## **10. What is protective custody (PC)? Does it reduce violence?**

The Department of Corrections can take preemptive action and require high risk prisoners to be held in protective custody (or PC). Inmates who are repeatedly threatened or attacked can also request protective custody. However this classification is not automatically granted. The prisoner must usually prove he/she is in some sort of extreme danger.

If placed in PC, the prisoner is housed away from others, usually alone in a single cell. They are not allowed to participate in general population activities such as going to the rec yard, chow hall, open visitation, classes, or church services. They are more heavily guarded when being transported from one place to another.

Most prisoners would rather stand up and fight for themselves than go into protective custody. If this is the case, they will often seek to surround themselves with other inmates who will back them up if they are attacked. This increases tensions within the prison population and explains why inmates constantly watch everyone around them. They are aware that violence can erupt at any time and always seek to put themselves in the most advantageous position to avoid attack.

## **11. What are the consequences for breaking prison rules?**

All inmates are required to obey the rules established by the Department of Corrections as well as additional rules set by the prison unit where they are assigned. Prisoners are given written copies of the rules when they are processed into the unit.

Violations of rules may be handled informally by verbal reprimand or by a more formal process where the correctional officer “writes up” the inmate, which then results in a disciplinary hearing. These hearings are usually very short, informal proceedings without lawyers and without a jury.

Punishment for most infractions involves being given extra work duty, being temporarily restricted to their cell or bunk, or experiencing temporary loss of recreation time, commissary privileges, and/or visitation rights. For major infractions, the prisoner may be permanently demoted to a more restricted security class with fewer privileges or even placed in solitary confinement.

Prisoners usually get very upset when written up for a rule violation. All disciplinary cases they receive become part of their permanent record and may be used to deny them access to certain security classifications, prison jobs, educational programs, reentry programs, or parole.

## **12. What is administrative segregation (“ad seg”)?**

Administrative segregation means that a prisoner is housed separately from the main prison population. In most prisons, “ad seg” is another term for solitary confinement. Typically, prisoners get “put in the hole” if they violate prison rules, start fights, make threats, disregard officers, disobey direct orders, or make an attempt on anyone’s life.

Ad seg or solitary confinement usually means a person is placed in a very tiny cell by themselves, often without a bed or any other comforts. Sometimes a mattress or blanket is provided. There is no radio or TV and no windows – only a slot in the door where food trays are placed. They stay in the cell 23 hours a day and are taken out to shower and sometimes to exercise in a small pen, but otherwise they see no other human beings while they are in solitary.