

A Review of Torture: America's Brutal Prisons

By

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Video Review: *Torture: America's Brutal Prisons*

Film by Nick London

Reporter: Deborah Davies

Nick London's film entitled "Torture: America's Brutal Prisons" (2005) (48 minutes) portrays correctional institutions across the United States as violence warehouses. An institution in Brazoria, Texas, Northern Florida, Phoenix, Arizona, and Sacramento, California were all included in this film. Based on this film, there are two million prisoners in the United States and a \$40 billion prison industry budget that is bound to produce a bit of unethical behavior.

"America's Brutal Prisons" opens with a discussion of prisoner mistreatment as "the American way," comparing the violence seen here to the recent abuse and humiliation of Iraqi prisoners by American guards. Displaying grotesque images of disrobed Iraqi prisoners being tortured by American guards, this film seeks to send the message that such Americans may be a reflection of the incivility seen in their own correctional institutions in the United States.

Captured images of prison raids juxtaposed to images of naked inmates crawling on the ground as they are screamed and yelled at details the Brazoria, Texas prison experience. Seen here are videotaped images of raids to prove that no excessive force was used during a cellblock search for illicit drugs. Strip-searching is portrayed as necessary. Inmates are depicted as subhuman. In one instance an inmate with a broken ankle was dragged, as he was unable to walk. Tasers, electric cattle prods, and dogs are also shown as necessary elements used to manage inmates. Utilized in most American states, tasers may be employed to subdue inmates. However, an inmate is seen later in the film being stunned for not getting into his wheelchair on command.

"America's Brutal Prisons" also details the repercussions of prisoner maltreatment, as in the case of two officers who were sent to prison for inmate abuse with compensation being issued to the prisoners involved. Poundings, inmates dying after being shackled, inmates being beaten to a pulp, and a growing death toll have also been used to describe Brazoria's prison "in a hidden world of astonishing violence."

The situation described in Northern Florida is no less inhospitable. In a local economy that is described as dominated by the five state prisons, chemical sprays are illustrated as a primary tool to manage inmates who are deemed unruly. A tortuous picture is painted of inmates screaming and in a constant state of noise, heat, and an odor

of sewage and urine. For banging on the door, swearing at staff, and refusing medication, inmates may be sprayed with chemicals. According to this film, two-dozen inmates have taken legal action against prison authorities due to burns from chemicals that have been sprayed upon them. A violent image of teary eyes and nose burns is depicted as chemical agents are used to subdue riots and violence, among other reasons. A prison doctor is filmed noting that inmates are chemically sprayed between two and three times weekly. In some cases, cardboard is shoved in the cell door to ensure that the cell is airtight. Some describe this method as maintaining “absolute terror in prisons”, while others view chemical sprays as a necessary means to deter violence behind bars.

As some (former and anonymous) staff claim, brutality may be covered up by falsifying documents. For example, allegations of brutality against an inmate may be attached to another inmate as opposed to the alleged staff person committing the violation. Staff retaliation is also discussed. The murder of Frank Valdez by prison guards was one example provided, including the false staff testimony that was given in this case.

Beyond Florida and Texas, Joe Arpaio, also known as “America’s Toughest Sheriff”, is depicted as tough on crime and tougher on inmates. In Phoenix, Arizona, the County Jail is run by the Sheriff’s Department. In the film, the Maricopa County Jail is portrayed with images of prisoners on the floor sleeping, fights breaking out, and inmates being buried by officers who are trying to manage them. Over twelve officers set out to pull a man from his cell and sling him to the floor. The question here is whether or not excessive force is used and why this method needed to be employed.

Arpaio’s goal, particularly with “Tent City”, is to make prison as grim as possible while catering to rising numbers as the inmate population has doubled over his 12 years in office. And while Arpaio enjoys complaints about institutional conditions, he is not pleased with allegations of brutality. Similar to the other institutions described in this film, Arpaio is also under investigation for the death of Brian Crenshaw. Crenshaw was registered blind and serving six months for shoplifting when he was found with perforated intestines and a broken neck, after being involved in a physical altercation with officers at Tent City. Crenshaw was found unconscious in his cell six days later and was taken to the hospital yet Arpaio asserted that Crenshaw suffered from a self-inflicted accident due to falling off of the top bunk bed in his cell. Mothers against Arpaio have become united by their horror stories, all having experienced the deaths of their sons behind bars.

To further illustrate brutality behind bars, an inmate is videotaped sitting in a chair used to restrain those who may be drunk. This chair is meant to keep the inmate from hurting herself or anyone else. Additionally, the inmate wears a hood to prevent her from spitting. Yet, this same chair is later described as contributing to the deaths of other inmates. In the past few years, over twenty inmates have died from such restraints, including a man with severe schizophrenia who was placed in the chair, released, and died soon after from a blood clot.

As a result of such incidents, some states have banned the restraint chair. Other harsh realities are also noted. Mentally handicapped drug user Charles Agster found himself unconscious after fifteen minutes, while Scott Norberg found himself suffocating with a towel over his mouth as a result of such overzealous punishment methods behind bars. Like the restraint chair, the taser is also portrayed as a lethal weapon that is overused among inmates. According to this film, Amnesty International links tasers to 70 deaths in North America in the past four years. Yet, the official causes of death have been noted as alcohol, drugs, or heart attacks.

Additionally, the California Youth Authority in Sacramento is illustrated as harboring violence and poorly protecting the young inmates there. A scene of a vigil on the steps of the Senate Building captures the sorrow felt for those who suffered under the supervision of the California Youth Authority. In one tragedy, a young boy and his cellmate were found hanging in their cell. In another case, staff members were caught on camera attacking young inmates as other staff members watched.

Despite staff dismissals and the promise of reform, this film focuses on the need to rehabilitate rather than punish and trade “cages for classrooms.” In a facility where racism and gang loyalty thrive among inmates, and officers live by their own (sometimes unethical) code of conduct, this type of system may need to be rebuilt. As officers protect other officers under their code, also known as the “green wall of silence,” corrupt officers may be protected while “whistle blowers” are victimized. After breaking their code of silence, some officers have found themselves in hiding, or on the verge of committing suicide after losing family, friends, and their career as a result.

This film shows the extreme brutalities that may be witnessed behind bars noting how this issue may affect inmates and staff in correctional institutions throughout the United States.