Life on the Outside: Prison Can Be the Most Intimidating Place in the World but Sometimes Getting Out Can Be Just as Frightening

Zach Howe

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By Zach Howe

Photo, titled Barring Freedom, by meeshypants (2012)

TWO STEPS out the front gate and C.C. knew this was real life again. It had been four years in the making, through countless missed birthdays, family events and holidays. The warm summer air felt like the best he'd ever breathed. Not air conditioned. Not smelling of sweat and other body odours.

He walked down the steps of the Saskatchewan Federal Penitentiary and got into a green Chevrolet 1500 truck with a dent in the door. He went to have his first pint of beer since 1998.

C.C. doesn't want his name used because he isn't proud of his eight-year sentence for manslaughter. However, he *is* proud of how he transformed his life for the better. Although he only had to serve half of his sentence, he says four years was more than enough.

It wasn't the prison system that rehabilitated him, he adds. It was the thought of dying inside. There weren't many programs that were skill-building or educational. He could farm for the prison, but he didn't get paid and he had to work hard. Still, getting outside the walls gave him hope – and the strength to get through his sentence.

He spent some days with the threat of a physical confrontation constantly hanging over his head, C.C. says. Issues among inmates were barbarically resolved, and getting caught by a correctional officer could add time to a sentence.

"Yeah of course there were fights and battles inside. But, if you tussled in your cell and weren't caught by a CO, then the issue was resolved and no extra time was added."

Prison cells are small, cramped and macabre, C.C. says. His prized possessions were books, family pictures and a few keepsakes that weren't considered dangerous. The cell was 6.5 metres square, hardly big enough to hold him and his cellmate. The bathroom? A sleek, cold, metal toilet, and no privacy. The walls were solid concrete and the only bars were on the doors. If you wanted to look at anything beside your cellmate or the posters and pictures on the wall, you stared straight ahead through those bars.

The lack of peripheral view was very distressing at night, C.C. says. You hear things – bad things – and have no idea what's going on. You're left to wonder if and when *you* will end up making those noises: screams of distress, terrified crying, people screaming about their innocence and how they didn't belong there.

The worst part was listening to sexual assaults, he says. That will stick with him forever.

"These are bad dudes," he says. "Yeah, I made a mistake and paid for it, but a lot of the guys in this prison were full-on murderers and rapists. Those crimes gave them status in prison. It's a backwards and barbaric world. You knew who to talk to and who to stay the hell away from if you wanted to get out on time and get out in one piece."

Canada's recidivism rate is roughly 35 per cent, a statistic of which C.C. says he has no intention of becoming a part. His first steps out of prison may have led to constant fear

and perpetual shame, he says, but they also led to a world he desperately wanted to rejoin.

In his eyes, he has succeeded in staying in the 65 per cent. He has a full-time job and is taking care of his terminally ill mother. He credits the 180-degree turn he took in life to things he saw, heard and witnessed in prison – like mass beatings for racial comments, brawls in the shower over hygiene products, and tear gas-filled lockdowns sparked by a couple of fighters in the yard.

Prison strips away a person's humanity. What is left is lost and dangerous, and acts on primal human urges. C.C. says it's the scariest environment he can imagine, something he didn't understand when he was convicted and sentenced at 18.

"I will die before I go back," he says. "I don't see myself getting into any more scrapes with the law, but if it came down to it, I'd kill myself before going back. That's how bad it is."

Steve McNall knows all about it. He spent three years at Millhaven penitentiary, a maximum security prison in eastern Ontario that holds 500 dangerous inmates.

He was in for a string of armed robberies that targeted jewelry stores. Twelve to be exact. Back then, he says, he only had to serve one-sixth of his sentence (provided he kept his nose clean and played by the rules set out by the COs). He was paroled after three years and hasn't looked back.

He remembers the temperature inside the prison being constant and rarely getting outside. There was yard time, once a day, for an hour, but McNall missed it most days because he was sick. At first, the medical officers didn't know why. Then he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, and he knew he had to get out and get proper treatment.

McNall says the first thing he noticed, when he stepped out of prison and back into the real world, was the cold. But the crisp air felt good on his skin. He had no jacket, but he

didn't care. He was out and that's all that mattered. He could have got frostbite for all he cared.

IT BEAT LIVING in a confined space. That could eat away at your mind and propel you into thinking some crazy thoughts.

Like C.C, McNall says he'll never go back to a place that mentally tortured him every day. His two children were young when he went in, and he refused to let them visit and see him in prison. He says the promise of seeing them again was what got him through his three years in maximum security. But being inside, while his family members were moving on with their lives, was the hardest thing he ever had to do. Not the fights or the constant looking over his shoulder, but the fact that life goes on outside, while inside it stands still.

When C.C. walked into his cell for the first time – after being stripped down, searched and washed naked in front of at least three COs – he was overcome with emotion. He recalls wanting to cry but knowing he'd regret any show of weakness in front of these men. How did he get here? This wasn't the place for him. He wondered how many heads had been bashed against the thick concrete walls, and how many people had fought, slept and cried in that cell before him.

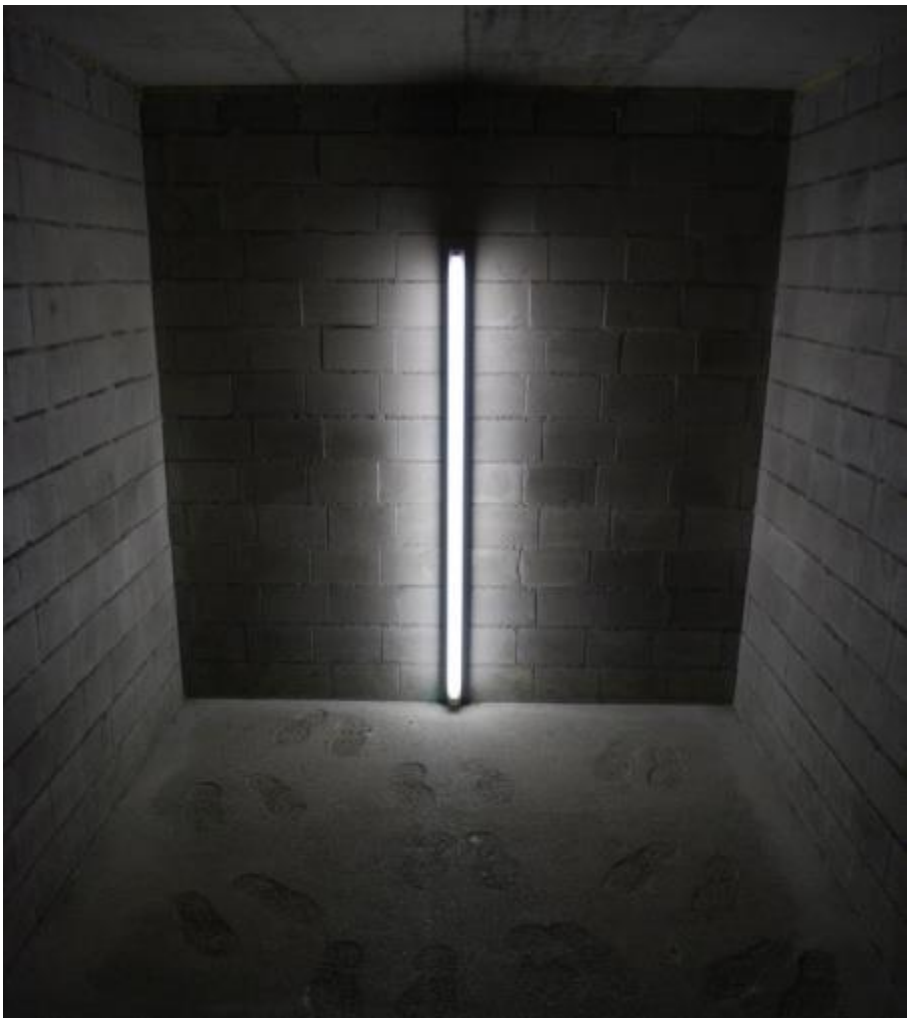
How was he going to survive this savage and unforgiving environment?

"Keep your head down," he says. "But don't let anyone take advantage of you in any way. Ever. If you do, you'll be branded and have to deal with people trying to bully you until you break. Luckily I could handle myself and knew a few people that went in at the same time as I did."

Trying to handle yourself can sometimes bring worse repercussions – from the COs.

McNall once spent 90 days in solitary, in "the hole." Technically, you aren't supposed to spend more than 48 hours in the hole, he says. But it's not like you could complain.

Your complaint would never reach the ears that had any power or inclination to help. It's better not to complain. That would just put you on the COs' radar.



Prison cell by Kevin Gessner (2009)

There was no bed, just a concrete floor. It was torture, McNall says. But his strongest memory of the hole was a 50-watt light bulb that was on all day – every day. It was so bright that he could barely ever sleep, and it nearly drove him crazy. He got so desperate to get out of the hole that he stuffed his clothes down the toilet and flushed, and flushed, and flushed – until the cell flooded.

“Yeah, the hole was the worst thing you can imagine,” he says. “The cells were all aligned in a row so, when someone did break, that horrible screaming would echo and just play tricks on your mind.

“It was like being locked in a closet with the light switch on the outside. People aren’t meant to live like that. How does that add to rehabilitating someone? It’s almost as if the prison system doesn’t want inmates to get better.”

McNall believes that prisons don’t want prisoners being rehabilitated to the point they can leave prison and rejoin society.

“They make money and get funding by having people fill these cells. Why would they ever want you to leave?”

Still, McNall says, he was indirectly rehabilitated by prison – at least by his desire to get out and never go back.

When he finally was released, the first stop was to see his kids and his father. It was an emotional reunion. When McNall was transferred to his second prison after the first year of his sentence, he wasn’t allowed to call his dad. He says the day before a transfer you can’t speak to anyone. That way no one will know where you are going and won’t use the opportunity to help you escape – or get at you one last time before you leave. One day you’re there and one day you’re gone. You have to start all over in a new prison with unknown people, who always want a shot at the new guy.

Starting all over is something a lot of inmates are afraid of, C.C. says.

“These people don’t know how to go back into a world they have been removed from for long periods of time. It’s a strange world for someone with a criminal record. Jobs are few and far between.”

MANY EMPLOYERS don't want to hire an ex-convict, and a primary condition of early parole is maintaining a job. And there are also constant check-ins with parole officers, a condition that can be a challenge to fulfil.

So, sometimes, inmates will act out in the days before their release and sabotage themselves, so they don't have to leave the only place they feel they belong.

C.C. says going back into society can be more daunting than going into prison. Inside, you have a specific place and role. But, outside those walls as a convicted felon, that place and role can become very hard to define.

There is a difference between probation and parole, in that one is almost infinitely harder than the other, Edmonton parole officer Jordan Achtymichuk says.

"There are many different factors that come into play when we are dealing with parolees or people sentenced to probation. The difference between the two is that probation means no jail time. Parole means a person has served part of a sentence, but has displayed good behaviour and taken steps towards rehabilitation. Both have specific conditions that must be followed."

C.C. and McNall both had to find jobs and provide a fixed address and check in at least once a week.

McNall had 18 months of parole. One infraction – even at 17 months – could have sent him back to prison. If he travelled he had to check in with a parole officer in a different county or region, or risk more time behind the bars he desperately wanted to put behind him.

McNall and C.C. agree that the most beneficial part of the experience was having a parole officer to talk to and get advice from while they re-integrated back into society – or tried to.

C.C. says the system could be improved by allowing the inmates to have more conjugal visits and vent some primal frustrations. Sexual assault is rampant in prisons, and a consensual outlet could be a viable solution. He says he was never raped, but witnessed it, and couldn't do anything to stop it.

According to the *Winnipeg Free Press*, rape in prison is a well documented and tolerated form of terrorism in prisons in the U.S., but it isn't so well documented in Canada. The prisons simply don't record these instances, and the public doesn't know. C.C. and McNall did their time and feel rehabilitated. But for many others life after prison can be a nightmare worse than life inside the walls.

As he walked out of Millhaven, McNall recalls, he exhaled a breath he had been holding in since he had walked into that prison years before. He was welcomed by his family and a few friends, with a couple of cars to take them away.

It was the best feeling he could remember.

Photos from creativecommons.org