

Down at the Farm

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By far the most people in jail are our youth. Of 200 people at The Farm, at least 150 were age 25 or younger. Santa Cruz County incarcerates roughly a thousand people at The Farm (medium security). There are over 400 inmates at the Main Jail, in a facility made for less than 350. F Dorm is a cellblock that had 14 cells crowded with 21 individuals. While I was there, it went up to roughly 35 folk. Eighteen bunks are bolted to the floor outside the cells intended for sleeping. By jail regulations illegal, but it's done all the time: headcounts climb up to 56 at times.

From what I see, a majority, maybe two-thirds, of the prisoners are Spanish-speaking, in a county where Latinos comprise a quarter to a third of the population. As with the youth incarcerated, this makes obvious the patterns of discrimination. County Jail is clearly an institution of population management and control, with incarcerations targeting the young, minority nationalities and society's disenfranchised, including homeless people.

I talked to a young Native American fella about why he was locked up. He went into a store and took some items. He had his bike parked at the door so he could make his getaway. A clerk hollered, "Hey, you gotta pay for that stuff!" But the clerk couldn't stop him as he ran out the door and hopped on his bike. He went riding down Pacific Avenue, slammed into a police car, flew up over the trunk, and landed on the engine hood.

He'll have a hard time raising bail. He's got eight "failures to appear," several for being drunk in public. He was standing outside a restaurant on Pacific Garden Mall drinking. He went inside to use the toilet. The restaurant manager, of course, refused because their facilities were "reserved for customers." He left, went outside, and pissed on a tree. A cop tapped him on the shoulder and wrote him a ticket for pissing on a tree and having an open container. With all his "failures to appear," this fella will be locked up a long time, all for "having to go..."

When he was in court, the judge asked, "You're a veteran, now look at you! What do you have to say for yourself?" He answered, "Judge, I like my whisky."

I asked him why he enlisted, saying: "You obviously know we stand on stolen land. They stole this whole fucking continent. Wounded Knee. Why did you join and fight for this country, this army that

did this to the Lakota?"

"I went from Pine Ridge to Sioux City to enlist because I was bored," he answered. "No job, no nothin'. I saw an ad on TV. I went and I passed the test. I wanted to give my little girl something."

Her mom died birthing her. "The GI Bill, for my daughter."

The deputy came to the door and yelled, "Roll 'em up." I was sent to The Farm. In the morning, the guard informs us over the P.A. System that this is the WORK farm and we are here to work. Two hundred prisoners line up at "Tool Time" to get tools. Jailers start giving out weed whackers, rakes, hoes, shovels. They run out of shovels; they don't have enough for 200 prisoners.

Tool Time prisoners start signing out shovel handles with no shovel, five-gallon buckets with no bottoms, then sticks to use as shovels, with a 10-foot-long handle. The prisoners in front of me got a machete; three prisoners got axes. The Deputy Officers, or "DOs," then order us to go pick clovers. Again, WE ARE ORDERED to pick the clovers from this grass field — with axes and hoes and machetes and sticks. Funny this might be, but it's not a joke. This is what they expect us to do. Prisoners wander out to the field, play cards, walk the track, converse in the morning sunshine.

Alternately, we are sent out on work crews. We go out and work for the County at the Brommer Street Public Works Yard or out on the roadways. At Brommer Street, we are ordered to trim some bushes. Broke the hedge trimmer; the handle broke. We're ordered to pull the weeds; the shovel broke. We're ordered to drill 4x4s for sign posts; the drill motor burnt up.

One young fella is told by the County workers to stay at the yard to get work experience. And the crew started bursting out with laughter. "Yeah, you put that on your resume! You'll get all kinds of jobs with that recommendation."

On the road crew we walk and walk, picking up garbage. One day when I was out on the road crew near Watsonville, a young dude walks up to me and asks, "How do I get a job like this?" I answered, "All you gotta do is get convicted."

Life is so good out here that 19-year-olds come up to prisoners on the road crew to ask us for jobs. That is what The Farm is rehabilitating us for. When I was in, a "DO" tells me, "You're in jail now; lose the attitude." Right!

Lighthouse Linda Lemaster contributed to this article