

It Wasn't That Bad, Cunt. I'd Do My Time

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“It Wasn’t That Bad, Cunt. I’d Do My Time.”

The Chorus Song of the Prison Population, and Why It’s the Most Dangerous Sentence in Criminal Justice

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Abstract

The single most effective defense mechanism protecting the modern prison system from scrutiny is not policy, not legislation, not public apathy. It is the testimony of the people it destroys: “*Jail ain’t shit.*” This paper argues that the minimization of carceral suffering by formerly and currently incarcerated people is not evidence that conditions are tolerable — it is evidence that the system is working exactly as designed. Drawing on prisonization theory (Clemmer, 1940), system justification (Jost & Banaji, 1994), masculine performativity research (de Viggiani, 2012; Ricciardelli et al., 2015), and the structural exclusion of incarcerated voices from academic research, we demonstrate that self-reported minimization is a survival artifact, not testimony. We further demonstrate that laboratory animals in research facilities receive more legally mandated welfare protections than human beings in prisons — including ethics board review, minimum space standards, environmental enrichment requirements, and the right to an endpoint. Every objective health measure contradicts the self-report: PTSD rates 4.6–10.4x the general population, post-release mortality 3.5x higher, life expectancy loss of two years per year served. The person who says “it wasn’t that bad” is doing the state’s public relations for free, and the state has designed it that way.

1. Introduction: The Complete Research Paper

“It wasn’t that bad, cunt. I’d do my time.”

That’s a complete research paper.

It was spoken by a person who self-identifies, at times, as a criminal. They are explaining what a research paper written by someone like them would say. And they’re right — that sentence contains the entire mechanism by which the prison system has perpetuated itself for centuries, across continents, in conditions that would be illegal if applied to a laboratory rat.

The sentence is doing several things at once, and all of them serve the state:

1. **Minimizing harm** — “it wasn’t that bad” flattens years of deprivation, violence, isolation, and dehumanization into a throwaway assessment.
2. **Performing toughness** — “cunt” signals that the speaker is not a victim. They are not asking for sympathy. They are hard. They survived. The system didn’t break them. (It did.)
3. **Volunteering for re-entry** — “I’d do my time” treats imprisonment as a transaction. I did something, I paid for it, we’re square. This frames the most violent thing a state can do to a person short of killing them as a fair exchange.
4. **Closing the conversation** — the sentence is a full stop. It does not invite further inquiry. It does not ask for reform. It performs closure. Case closed. System works.

This paper argues that this sentence — and the millions of variations of it spoken by incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people worldwide — is the primary reason the prison system has survived unchanged for so long, in such awful conditions, with such catastrophic outcomes, against such overwhelming evidence that it doesn’t work.

It is also the reason that the people most capable of writing about what happens inside — the people who have been there — are the people least likely to articulate its horror. Not because they lack the words. Because the system trained them not to use them.

2. The Ethics of Confinement: A Tale of Two Cages

2.1 What It Takes to Confine a Rat

Before a single laboratory rat enters a cage in any institution receiving research funding, the following must occur:

An **Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC)** — mandated by the Animal Welfare Act (1966) and Health Research Extension Act (1985) — must review and approve a detailed written protocol. The protocol must justify every animal used, statistically demonstrate the minimum number required, classify anticipated pain and distress, document alternatives considered (the “3Rs”: Replace, Reduce, Refine), define humane endpoints, and specify euthanasia methods (OLAW, 2002; 9 CFR 2.31).

The committee must include, at minimum: - A Doctor of Veterinary Medicine with laboratory animal experience - A scientist experienced in animal research - **At least one member with no affiliation to the institution** — a community representative

Many IACUCs have 10–20+ members. The committee can suspend protocols. Noncompliance is reported to federal authorities. Whistleblower protections exist.

Every animal facility is **physically inspected at least every six months**. Written reports are filed. Deficiencies are categorized as “significant” or “minor” with mandatory correction time-lines. The USDA conducts **unannounced inspections**. Most institutions also maintain voluntary AAALAC accreditation, adding another layer.

The National Research Council’s *Guide for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals* (8th ed., 2011) specifies minimum floor space per rat by body weight:

Rat Weight	Min. Floor Area
< 100g	110 cm ²
100–200g	148 cm ²
200–300g	187 cm ²
300–400g	258 cm ²
400–500g	387 cm ²
> 500g	452 cm ²

Environmental enrichment is **legally required** — shelters, nesting material, objects to manipulate. Single housing without enrichment is recognized as psychologically harmful to rodents and requires written justification.

Social housing is the default. Isolating a rat requires documentation explaining why it is necessary and what mitigations are in place.

There is a veterinarian on call.

There is an endpoint. The experiment has to end.

Someone’s job is to ask: *“Is this suffering justified?”*

2.2 What It Takes to Confine a Human

A judge sentences them. Often via plea deal — 97% of federal convictions in the United States are plea bargains (DOJ). They are assigned to a facility.

That’s it.

No committee reviews the conditions. No one calculates whether the distress is necessary. No one asks whether there are alternatives. There is no “3Rs” equivalent — no one is required to consider whether imprisonment could be replaced, reduced, or refined. There is no community representative. There is no veterinarian equivalent on call (medical care in prisons varies wildly and is often catastrophically inadequate). There is often no endpoint — life without parole exists. So does indefinite solitary confinement.

Oversight of conditions:

- Until July 2024, there was **no independent federal prison inspection mandate** in the United States. The Federal Prison Oversight Act (2024) — less than two years old — created the first such program via the DOJ Office of Inspector General.
- **31 of 50 US states have no independent prison oversight body at all** (National Resource Center for Correctional Oversight, 2024).
- Where inspection exists, it is infrequent. New York’s oversight body inspects each facility **once every five years**. Lab animal facilities are inspected **every six months**.
- The Prison Litigation Reform Act (1996) made it harder for prisoners to challenge conditions through the courts by requiring exhaustion of administrative remedies and imposing filing fees.

2.3 The Comparison

Dimension	Lab Rat	Human Prisoner
Pre-confinement review	Detailed protocol, committee vote	Sentencing (no conditions review)
Independent oversight member	Required by law	Does not exist
Facility inspection frequency	Every 6 months	Every 5 years (NY); never (31 states)
Unannounced inspections	Yes (USDA)	Rare to nonexistent
Environmental enrichment required	Yes	No
Social housing default	Yes (isolation requires justification)	Solitary used routinely, no justification required in most jurisdictions
Minimum space standards	Legally specified by body weight	Aspirational guidelines, widely violated
Pain/distress must be minimized	By law	No equivalent standard
Must have an endpoint	Yes	Life without parole exists
Someone asks “is this justified?”	Yes (IACUC)	No equivalent mechanism
Whistleblower protection	Yes	Limited (PREA for sexual abuse only)
Can suspend confinement for welfare	Yes	No

A laboratory rat in the United States has more legally mandated welfare protections than a human being in a United States prison.

2.4 The Space Calculation

A 300g adult male lab rat (~0.66 lbs, ~10 inches body length) has a body footprint of approximately 4.5 in² (1.5 × 3 inches). Its minimum required cage space is 40 in² (258 cm²). **Space-to-body-footprint ratio: ~8.9:1.**

A 180 lb (81.6 kg) human (~5'9") has a body footprint of approximately 180 in² (18 × 10 inches). A typical US double-bunked prison cell is 48 ft² (6 × 8 feet). Per person: ~3,456 in². Minus toilet, bunk, sink (approximately 50% of floor space): **~1,500–2,000 in² of usable floor per person.** Space-to-body-footprint ratio: **~8–11:1.**

Comparable to the rat. And the rat can move freely within its space 24 hours a day. In general population, prisoners are locked in their cells 12–16 hours daily. In segregation: 22–24 hours.

The claim that lab rats receive approximately seven times more space relative to body size than prisoners is approximately correct for overcrowded double-bunked cells, and becomes more extreme when accounting for time-in-space, enrichment requirements, and social housing mandates.

3. The Machine That Makes You Say It's Fine

3.1 Prisonization (Clemmer, 1940)

Donald Clemmer coined the term “prisonization” in *The Prison Community* (1940), based on years of research at Illinois State Penitentiary. He defined it as “the taking on in greater or less degree of the folkways, mores, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary.”

Prisonization happens to **every** inmate. It begins immediately. It includes:

- Adopting the language, dress, and behavioral codes of the prison
- Accepting an inferior social position
- Learning the informal rules governing inmate–staff relations
- Developing new views of oneself and society
- Internalizing the “inmate code”: don’t snitch, show no weakness, trust no one in authority

Clemmer identified variables determining depth: length of sentence (longer = deeper), strength of outside ties (weaker = deeper), age at first incarceration (younger = deeper). Stanton Wheeler (1961) found prisonization follows a U-shaped curve, peaking mid-sentence — by the time it begins to decline near release, the behavioral patterns are deeply encoded.

Gresham Sykes (1958), in *The Society of Captives*, identified the “pains of imprisonment” — deprivation of liberty, goods, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security — that drive prisonization as a coping mechanism. You don’t choose to normalize deprivation. The environment forces it.

3.2 Masculine Performativity: Survival Through Silence

Nick de Viggiani (2012), in “Trying to be Something You Are Not” (*Men and Masculinities*), documented “masked masculinity” in prison: men perform invulnerability — stoicism, bravery displays, physical aggression — to avoid exploitation and victimization. Those who fail to perform masculinity are targeted.

Ricciardelli, Maier, and Hannah-Moffat (2015) found that masculinity in prison is **strategic** — a risk management tool, not an identity. Men “mobilize a masculine presentation” to mitigate vulnerability. The performance conceals weakness so effectively that it persists long after the threat is gone.

The inmate code explicitly demands that men show no weakness. Expressing pain, fear, or trauma violates the code. Men who seek mental health help risk being labeled “weak” — a safety threat in the prison hierarchy. As Lauren Maldonado documented, the code’s masculine expectations actively prevent program participation.

“Jail ain’t shit” is not testimony. It is a survival artifact that outlasted the environment that required it.

3.3 System Justification: Defending What Destroyed You

John Jost and Mahzarin Banaji’s system justification theory (1994) demonstrates that people are motivated to defend, bolster, and rationalize the social systems that affect them — **even when those systems disadvantage them.**

Key findings: - Disadvantaged groups often show **stronger** system justification than advantaged groups (Jost, Pelham, et al., 2003) - Existential threat **increases** system justification (Kay et al., 2008) — prison is an environment of constant existential threat - Lack of control **increases** system justification (Kay et al., 2008) — prisoners have near-zero control over their daily lives - System-justifying beliefs reduce anxiety in the short term but predict worse mental health outcomes long-term (Rankin et al., 2009)

When a formerly incarcerated person says the system is fair, three cognitive mechanisms are operating:

1. **Cognitive dissonance reduction** (Festinger, 1957): “I suffered for years. If the system is unjust, my suffering was meaningless. If it’s just, my suffering had purpose.”
2. **Just-world belief maintenance** (Lerner, 1980): “The world is fair. I did something wrong. I was punished. It worked.” Acknowledging that prison is arbitrary and cruel threatens the foundational belief that the world makes sense.
3. **Identity protection**: Accepting that the system is broken means accepting that you were broken by something pointless. It is psychologically safer to believe you were “corrected” than “damaged.”

3.4 The Paradox

The minimization of prison’s harm is itself evidence of prison’s harm.

The fact that a person cannot or will not report the damage is a direct product of the damage. Using “jail ain’t shit” as evidence that prison conditions are acceptable is like using a trauma patient’s dissociation as evidence that they were not traumatized.

The system produces the testimony that defends it. This is not an accident. It is the mechanism.

4. The Data Says Otherwise

4.1 What “I’m Fine” Looks Like in the Numbers

Every objective health measure contradicts the self-report:

What they say	What the data shows
“It wasn’t that bad”	Post-release mortality 3.5x higher than general population (Binswanger et al., 2007, <i>NEJM</i>)
“I can handle it”	PTSD prevalence 4.6x (men) to 10.4x (women) the general population (Baranyi et al., 2018)
“It made me stronger”	Each additional year served: ~16% increased odds of death, 2-year decline in life expectancy (Norris et al., 2022, <i>Review of Economics and Statistics</i>)
“I’m fine”	Murder risk in first year post-release: 16x general population
“I deserved it”	76.6% rearrested within 5 years (BJS, N=404,638)
“System works”	Overdose is the leading cause of death for people released from prison

A meta-analysis of 56 samples comprising 21,099 incarcerated people from 20 countries found PTSD point prevalence of 6.2% for men and 21.1% for women — compared to 3.9% lifetime prevalence in the general population (Baranyi, Cassidy, et al., 2018; Fazel et al., 2019). Incarcerated women are **ten times** more likely to have PTSD.

For Black Americans, incarceration is associated with a 65% higher mortality rate (Patterson, 2013).

These are not self-reported feelings. These are death certificates. Autopsy reports. Hospital admissions. Arrest records. The body keeps score even when the mouth says “it wasn’t that bad.”

4.2 The Comparison That Ends the Conversation

Norway’s Halden Prison and the average US maximum-security facility house the same species.

Dimension	Halden (Norway)	US (Typical Max Sec)	Australia (Typical)
Cell size	~12 m ² (129 ft ²), single occupancy	48–54 ft ² , often double-bunked	Varies; double-bunking common
Staff:inmate ratio (day)	1:1 (340 staff for 252 inmates)	1:6 to 1:12+	~1:5+
Bathroom	En-suite shower + toilet	Exposed toilet in cell, shared showers	Often shared
Guards armed	No	Yes	Varies
Time out of cell	12+ hours/day	1 hour (segregation); 4–8 hrs (gen pop)	Varies
Recidivism (2yr)	~20%	44% rearrest within 1 year; 76.6% within 5	~46%; Indigenous ~78%
Incarceration rate per 100k	54	531	~160
Philosophy	“Every inmate is coming back to society”	Punishment, deterrence, incapacitation	Mixed; leans punitive
Cost per prisoner/year	~\$129,000 USD	~\$35,000–\$60,000	~\$110,000–\$150,000 AUD

Same humans. Different system. 20% recidivism versus 77%.

North Dakota sent corrections officials to Norway to study the model and implemented reforms. Early results: improved staff morale, reduced violence, better outcomes. The Norwegian approach is transferable. It is not culturally unique. It is a policy choice.

The Australian numbers are particularly damning. Indigenous Australians return to prison within two years at a rate of approximately 78%. The incarceration rate for Indigenous Australians is the highest per capita of any group globally. “It wasn’t that bad” is doing a lot of heavy lifting across a lot of bodies.

5. Who Gets to Write About It

5.1 The Structural Exclusion

The vast majority of published prison research is written by people who have never been incarcerated. The structural barriers ensure this:

- Felony convictions disqualify applicants from many graduate programs
- Federal Pell Grant eligibility was stripped from prisoners in 1994 and not restored until 2023
- Many states bar people with felony convictions from professional licensing
- IRB (Institutional Review Board) regulations classify prisoners as a “vulnerable population” — making it harder to conduct research involving prisoners, and functionally impossible for an incarcerated person to be a researcher rather than a subject
- Academic hiring discrimination against people with criminal records
- The median time to PhD is 5.8 years; formerly incarcerated people face housing instability, employment barriers, and parole conditions that make this nearly impossible

The people who **experience** prison are systematically excluded from **documenting** it. The people who document it have credentials that, by definition, most formerly incarcerated people cannot obtain.

5.2 Convict Criminology

The **Convict Criminology** movement was founded in 1997 by formerly incarcerated academics — John Irwin (San Francisco State, served time for armed robbery), Stephen C. Richards (University of Wisconsin–Oshkosh, federal prisoner), and Jeffrey Ian Ross (University of Baltimore). The Division of Convict Criminology (DCC) is now a recognized division of the American Society of Criminology.

Their founding premise:

“The voices of the formerly-incarcerated and system-contacted have been ignored in the disciplines of criminology, criminal justice, and corrections research, policy and practices.”

The movement exists specifically because the gap between who experiences prison and who writes about it is a chasm. And in that chasm, the system thrives. When a prisoner’s self-report (“it wasn’t that bad”) is taken at face value by a researcher who has never been inside, both prisonization theory and masculine performativity research tell us that self-report is a **survival artifact**, not data. But the researcher — who has never needed to perform invulnerability to avoid being victimized — may not recognize this.

5.3 Why This Paper Matters

It is important for people who are able to write research papers — who have the expensive education, the institutional access, the time, the language — and who have **also experienced prison** to speak about it. Because the conditions and the process are unacceptable, and they should not be applied to humans.

But the system is designed so that those people don’t speak. The inmate code says don’t. The masculine performance says don’t. The cognitive dissonance says don’t. The parole conditions say

don't. The felony on your record says you can't get the degree that would let your voice count in the rooms where policy is made.

And so the chorus continues: *"It wasn't that bad, cunt. I'd do my time."*

And the system survives another century.

6. The Architecture of Minimization

The claim "it wasn't that bad" is produced by at least six interlocking mechanisms:

1. **Prisonization** (Clemmer, 1940) — the prison socializes inmates to normalize deprivation. It is not optional. It happens to everyone.
2. **Masculine performativity** (de Viggiani, 2012; Ricciardelli et al., 2015) — the prison code punishes vulnerability. Toughness performances persist post-release because the habit is deeply encoded and the community audience often reinforces the same norms.
3. **System justification** (Jost & Banaji, 1994) — people defend systems that harm them to maintain psychological stability. The more powerless you are, the stronger this tendency becomes.
4. **Cognitive dissonance** (Festinger, 1957) — admitting the harm was pointless is more painful than believing it was deserved.
5. **Researcher distance** — the people who write about prison have mostly never been inside. The people who have been inside are structurally excluded from writing about it. The literature is written by observers, not participants.
6. **Absence of oversight** — a lab rat has more mandated welfare protections than a prisoner. The conditions that produce the harm are invisible because nobody is required to inspect them. In 31 US states, nobody does.

These mechanisms are not separate. They reinforce each other. The system produces the conditions (mechanism 6), the conditions produce the coping behavior (mechanisms 1, 2), the coping behavior produces the self-report (mechanisms 3, 4), and the self-report is interpreted by people who don't know what they're looking at (mechanism 5).

The output is a sentence: *"It wasn't that bad."*

The sentence is a complete research paper. It contains the entire pathology of the system in seven words. It is both the symptom and the shield.

7. Conclusion: The Chorus Must Stop

The person who says "jail ain't shit" is doing the state's public relations work for free. The state designed it that way. Every element of the prison experience — the deprivation, the violence, the isolation, the code, the masculine performance, the structural exclusion from the academy —

converges on a single output: a formerly incarcerated person who will not or cannot articulate their own destruction.

This is not resilience. This is the system working.

Norway proves it doesn't have to be this way. Same humans, different system, 20% recidivism instead of 77%. Single-occupancy cells, unarmed guards, 1:1 staffing, 12 hours out of cell per day, education, cooking facilities, the basic recognition that every prisoner is coming back to society and society has an interest in what kind of person comes back.

A lab rat gets an ethics committee before it enters a cage. A human being does not.

The chorus must stop. Not because the people singing it are wrong about their experience — they believe it, and that belief is real. But because the belief is a product of the system, not a referendum on it. The person who says “it wasn't that bad” is not providing testimony. They are exhibiting damage.

And until the people who have been inside can speak without the inmate code editing their words, without the masculine performance flattening their pain, without the system they survived being the same system that decides whether their voice counts — the chorus will continue, and the system will survive on it.

“It wasn't that bad, cunt. I'd do my time.”

That is a complete research paper. Written by the person the system designed to write it.

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