

County Jail

A survival guide for inmates,
friends and families



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Introduction

Going to jail isn't fun for anybody – the person going, the family and friends who are left behind, the taxpayers. This guide is meant to share information that will prepare everybody for the realities of life behind bars.

Jail Media been criticized by some for sharing this information – some people think that this means that we condone criminal activity or think that the American penal system is too harsh. In fact, we believe that most people who go to jail deserve to be there (at least for some period of time). We share this information in the hopes that it will take some stress out of the lives of friends and families left behind – the people we commonly refer to as “secondary victims.” In most cases these people haven't done anything wrong and don't deserve the pain that comes with temporarily losing a loved one.

First-time inmates who don't know how to act in jail can get in trouble by doing or saying the wrong thing. This creates problems for the inmate, the other inmates and the guards – everybody loses. Coming into jail with a little bit of context will help you avoid making a few crucial mistakes and pass the time a little bit faster.

Jail is not just about punishment – when the legal system is working properly, it is about rehabilitation and prevention. We have interviewed hundreds of ex-inmates – many have left jail as better people than they entered. At any given time 10% of the US population is either incarcerated or on probation – many people still go on to lead normal, productive, happy lives. Just because you or a loved one may be going to jail does not mean that life will never be the same – in fact, if you take advantage of this opportunity you may grow from it and be a stronger person.

Our estimates show that about 85% of inmates are repeat offenders – that means that 15% of all inmates at any given time have not been incarcerated before and will not be again. Almost all of the 85% repeat offenders suffer from an addiction or mental illness. Inmates without a substance abuse problem or mental illness have a very good chance of not returning to jail.

Background Information

Jail vs. Prison

Most people do not know the difference between going to jail and going to prison. The media is partially to blame – celebrities going off for a stint in the county jail are treated as if they are doing hard time in a state penitentiary.

The truth, though, is that jail is much different from prison. Jail is kind of like a government-imposed timeout. Many people go through the county jail system and get their lives together and move on – unfortunately the same cannot be said about most inmates in the prison system.

You will seldom find inmates who spend more than a year in a county jail. For instance, if somebody is sentenced to 2 counts of disorderly conduct with a maximum penalty of one year each, these sentences are usually served concurrently as opposed to consecutively meaning that they will only serve one year total (like they are serving both sentences at the same time). Prison inmates are usually serving much longer sentences – sometimes even life sentences.

A lot of people who have family members or friends going to jail worry about them being “institutionalized,” or co-dependent on the state – becoming so dependent that they are completely unable to take care of themselves upon release. While this does happen in rare cases, it usually applies to habitual offenders who have been to jail and/or prison many times. Again, this is very rare and should not be a concern with a first time inmate. With a strong support group virtually all first-time inmates can be rehabilitated.

Felony vs. Misdemeanor

In general, felonies are more serious than misdemeanors. Just because you are convicted of a felony, however, does not always mean that you will go to prison. Many judges will choose to send felons to county jail if they feel that a shorter stay is more appropriate.

Laws vary by state but most misdemeanors carry maximum sentences of three, six or twelve months. They are usually also classified by a grading system (Class A, B, C, etc.) depending on the severity. A Class A misdemeanor is more serious and carries a greater penalty than a class B misdemeanor.

In general, most misdemeanors can be expunged from your record eventually – completely removed as if the crime never occurred. There are some exceptions (many states do not allow sex crimes involving minors to ever be expunged). Be sure to discuss the long-term implication of your conviction before agreeing to a plea bargain.

It is important that you find a competent attorney if you have been charged with a crime. Just because you have been charged with several felonies does not mean you will be convicted of felonies – a good attorney may be able to negotiate these down to misdemeanors in a plea bargain or even have the charges dropped. Prosecutors are known to “over-charge” suspects in order to strengthen their arm in negotiations during bargaining.

Hiring an attorney

Whether you have been charged with a crime but not convicted, convicted but not sentenced or even already sentenced, you should consider talking to a good attorney about your case.

Many people assume that if they qualify for a public defender they should just take one because they will save some money. This is one of the worst mistakes you can make – in the long run you will generally pay much more than you would pay a very good attorney up front (in terms of lost wages while you are in jail, job prospects upon your release, etc.).

There is nothing wrong with public defenders per se – in fact, they are the attorneys who will generally end up commanding premium prices for high profile criminal defense cases later in life. The real problem with having a public defender represent you or somebody you care about is their incentive (or lack thereof).

Being a public defender is not a glamorous job – the people you represent don't think you try hard enough, the prosecutors think you try too hard and the judges assume that all of your clients are guilty. If you really try to fight to keep somebody out of jail you create problems with your **coworkers** – the prosecutors. In fact, as a public defender the only people you work with on a regular basis are the prosecutors, so they naturally become your friends.

Also, there is no financial incentive for a public defender to keep you out of jail or minimize your sentence – whether you serve one month or twelve does not make a difference to the public defender. They typically have huge backlogs of cases and the goal is to get through the list as quickly as possible without making too many enemies along the way.

Private defense attorneys are different. They can charge absurd prices for legal work based on their reputation and ability to make sure their clients are aggressively defended. They live and die by their track record – they know that if they have a string of convictions or heavy sentences they will lose credibility, future business and their hourly rates.

A good defense attorney can easily make a few hundred thousand dollars per year with their good reputation. They take this very seriously and when they take you on as a client they know they have to deliver.

Don't assume, however, that all attorneys have the same skills and will be able to represent you adequately. Try to get referrals from friends who have been in similar circumstances, talk to other defense attorneys (they are a tight bunch, you usually won't find them bad mouthing each other but will probably be able to get some indicators from them), negotiate with the attorney – get the best possible representation you can at the best price.

Also, it is important to find out an attorney's specialty. If you have been convicted of a DUI you want an attorney who spends a lot of time fighting DUI's. This is obvious, but often overlooked – just because your cousin happens to be a criminal defense attorney does not mean that he is the best fit for your case. Having a good attorney can mean the difference between a plea in abeyance and a twelve month sentence – choose wisely.

Bail versus Bond

Many people don't understand the difference between bail and bond – it is an important difference because it can determine whether you get your money back later or not.

When you are arrested and incarcerated usually the court will set your bail – the amount of money that you have to temporarily give the court to secure your release until a future trial or sentencing date. So if bail is set at \$30,000, for instance, and you have that much money, you can give it to the court and the court will return it when you show up for your hearing. Bail is a financial pledge to show up for your trial or hearing – if you flee the court keeps the money (and may use some or all of it pursuing you).

Most people who are arrested don't have this much money or even access to it so they work with a private bail bond company (or in some states, like Illinois, they work with a state-run bail bond company because private bail bonds are not legal). The bail bond company will agree to make good on the bail amount if you skip town. In exchange they usually require 10% up front (which will NOT be returned to you – this is how they make money).

If 99% of inmates make good and show up to their appearances with an average bail of \$10,000, the bail bond company would collect \$1,000 X 100, or \$100,000 for every hundred clients. Suppose that one out of those hundred clients skipped town. This would cost the bail bond company \$10,000, so their profit (not including overhead, which is really low anyway) is \$90,000. Not a bad business to be in as long as less than 10% of your clients flee (the flight rate in most areas is less than 1%).

Bounty hunters are usually hired by bail bonds companies to find people who have skipped bail so the bond company can get their money back from the court – in practice money doesn't usually change hands between the courts and the bail bond companies, but the court knows that if something goes wrong they can collect the full bail amount from the bail bond company.

The court does not have to set bail – if you are seen as a high flight risk or a danger to yourself (or others) the court may deny bail, meaning you cannot get out of jail for any amount of money.

The First Time

You should do everything within reason and the law that you can to avoid going to jail– hire a good attorney, keep your nose clean, proactively seek therapy if necessary. The time period between being charged and sentenced can be anywhere from the same day to several months. While it is natural to want to “get it over with,” understand that the more time you can put between your crime and your sentencing date, the better. You establish a track record with the court and show that you can be trusted not to flee. If your attorney files constant motions to delay the hearing, keep in mind that this is probably one of the reasons – it is for your own benefit.

Going to jail for the first time is especially difficult for the inmate and the secondary victims. Not surprisingly, many people even contemplate suicide when they learn that they are going to jail. Again, the media’s portrayal of jail makes it seem worse than it really is – the truth is that **anybody can survive a little time in county jail**. If despite your attempts to avoid jail time you are still sentenced, it is not the end of the world.

It may not always be pleasant, but you just have to take each day at a time. The time will pass and your life will continue. The first week or so is a major adjustment, but you just need to find a routine that works for you. Even inmates who serve a year in county jail report that the “time flew by” after the first month. If you figure out how the jail culture works you will probably even walk out of jail with a few fond memories and friends you met along the way.

Preparing for jail

Being sentenced to report to the jail at a later date (as opposed to being hauled off to jail right away) is a mixed blessing. In a sense you can get your life in order before you head off, but waiting for a future sentence can also be extremely stressful.

The first thing that you can do is get your finances in order – try to get your cell phone plan put on hold and any other recurring expenses. If you have a car try to sell it. While being released from jail is a great experience, the harsh reality of a ruined credit score can add a lot of unnecessary heartache and make the transition to life on the outside even more difficult. Many ex-inmates face bankruptcy upon release – take every precaution available to avoid bankruptcy.

Memorize important phone numbers – your parents, significant other, close friends, etc. Write these down as soon as you are booked into jail so you will remember the numbers later. If you are serving for more than a few months you may have a hard time recalling phone numbers later and you won’t have the convenience of a cell phone with your contacts saved.

Talk to your employer and tell them what is going on. You probably won’t be able to hide the reason for your extended leave of absence. Even if you can come up with a plausible story word will probably get back to your manager that you were in jail. A

manager will be much more understanding if they hear the facts from you rather than through company gossip. They may even hold your job for you.

Spend some time in the gym. You should be able to avoid violence if you are prepared for jail, but it won't hurt to be in good shape if somebody is trying to start something with you. Confidence is always important, but especially in jail – confidence helps avoid confrontation and for most people working out breeds confidence.

If possible, borrow some money from a family member or friend to put on your books (also known as your inmate account – this is like a checking account in jail). Having a little commissary can go a long way toward making your stay more bearable. Don't get into the habit of giving away commissary to other inmates for no reason, but occasionally sharing will help make friends (and help your friends be a little bit more loyal).

If you don't have an attorney you should consider getting one to submit a motion for review. If you are sentenced to twelve months, for instance, you should try to get a review within a couple of months – many judges will let you go on review if you can prove you are genuinely interested in cleaning up your act and moving on. Some attorneys may cut a special deal with you for a motion and single court appearance – a very wise investment.

Classification

Very small jails with less than a hundred inmates may not separate inmates according to their charges. All county jails, however, will classify inmates and separate some inmates from the general population for their safety and the safety of those around them.

Violent offenders are usually put in their own area with higher security. Sex offenders are almost always separated from general population for their own protection. This helps reduce violence, but does not eliminate it completely. For example, an inmate charged with lewdness who may be in a sex offender cell block may bully another inmate in the same block who has been charged with sexual assault of a minor.

Don't spend a lot of time and energy trying to explain why you committed your crime or why it's not as bad as the crimes of those around you. Doing so will probably just make the other inmates mad. Depending on your charges you may be in some type of therapy after release that will help you figure all that out. Your goal in jail is to pass the time as quickly as possible, incident-free, and move on with your life.

General population is where most inmates end up as long as they don't have a violent crime, sex offense or haven't been branded by other inmates as a snitch. Many inmates in general population have been in and out of jail and know what to do and what not to do. Try to make a friend who knows what's going on and just

follow their lead. Every county jail is different and there may be little things that set the other inmates off – make sure you know what these are so you can avoid them.

The other classification is “medical.” Inmates who are chronically ill may spend a lot of time in the medical area. Most jails restrict privileges in the medical area to discourage inmates from faking illnesses, but if you are truly sick this may be a good option. Most inmates who spend a lot of time in medical say that time passes much slower than it does when they are working.

Things to Avoid Doing and Saying

County Jails have their own culture and while each jail is different, some rules apply universally. Here is a list of things you should never talk about or say in a county jail.

Don't talk about your charges – ironically most inmates don't like “criminals.” Most people who are incarcerated believe that they don't deserve to be in jail and their charges are not as bad as those around them.

Sexual Offenses

This is especially true if you are serving time for a sexual offense. Remember, nobody cares about the circumstances around your offense. Even if you were 18 and your girlfriend was 17, you will be branded a “rapist” and treated as such.

If you have any charges for a sexual offense, do anything you have to do to avoid sharing details of your case – make up fake charges, refuse to discuss your case and deflect questions when necessary. Do whatever you have to do to avoid the subject. Remember, your only goal is incident-free survival. Discussing these charges will not benefit you in any way.

Larger county jails will usually separate sex offenders from general population. This is for everybody's protection. Since larger jails tend to be more dangerous this helps avoid a lot of inmate violence.

Violent Offenses

Most inmates also look down on violent offenders, but not nearly as much as they do on sexual offenders. In large county jails, violent offenders are usually separated as well.

If you have been charged with assault for something like a bar fight between two males, you are probably OK talking about your case. If you have been accused of domestic violence or anything involving a female (assuming you are a male), **don't talk about your case**. Again, the circumstances don't matter to other inmates – you will be considered a coward and will be a target for violence.

DUI

If you have a DUI you probably won't be spending too much time in county jail (unless you have multiple DUI's, a particularly aggressive DA or a totally incompetent attorney). Your attorney will probably push the DA for community service or home confinement.

While you are in jail, though, you should avoid discussing your DUI. In most cases other inmates won't care about a DUI, but we have seen at least one circumstance where a violent offender attacked an inmate charged with a DUI while they were both in classification (you will typically spend 1-7 days in a special classification area depending on the size of the jail). Jail officials later found that the attacker's brother had died in an accident involving a drunk driver. Play it safe – don't discuss your case if you don't have to.

Drugs

If you have been charged with a crime involving drugs, only share details of your case reluctantly. If you are too eager to talk about your charges you draw unwanted attention to yourself. This can make you a target for violence.

Some estimates show drug-related crimes account for 95% of all inmate activity at county jails (taking into account that most robberies and burglaries are drug-related). Drug offenders have the highest recidivism rate (meaning they are the most likely to return to jail). For this reason, many inmates with drug charges will know each other from having been in and out of jail.

Be aware that these inmates can often be irritable, especially their first few days as their body adjusts to life without rugs. Some meth addicts come in and sleep for several days straight after having spent days or weeks without any sleep. Their temperament can change on a dime – try not to do or say anything that could possibly set them off.

Words to avoid saying in county jail

Honestly, you could probably get away with calling most people in county jail a punk or bitch and either get a laugh out of them or at least get them to ignore you. Some inmates, though (especially those who have done prison time) will be set off by these words.

They both imply that somebody is not willing to stick up for themselves and are submissive to other inmates. Do yourself a favor and avoid ever using these words. They are so inflammatory to some inmates that they will not think twice about picking up more charges (for violence) to defend themselves from the allegation.

Don't snitch on anybody

A "snitch" is somebody who tells on somebody else. In the real world this is not a powerful word – it is usually used playfully and isn't offensive. On the county jail

food chain, though, you don't get much lower than a snitch (with the exception of a sex offender, also known as a molester or "mo").

One of the hard things for first-time inmates to understand is that sometimes you need to just look the other way. If something doesn't involve you, such as other inmates fighting, gambling, smuggling contraband, etc., don't get involved. You will be exposing yourself to tremendous risk for no reason.

The only time you should consider talking to the guards is if you feel like you are in immediate danger. Even then, you don't need to tell the guards who you are being threatened by – just request a transfer or protective custody.

If you must request a transfer (or protective custody, also known as PC, where you are temporarily separated from the general population), make sure not to make your request obvious to other inmates. Many jails have grievance forms that you can fill out on your own and submit through a drop box – if the threat is not immediate this is the best approach.

Passing the Time

Working out

Most county jails don't have workout equipment these days. Inmate legend has it that the inmates were getting too strong for guards to handle. The real reason is more practical – workout equipment is expensive and inmates aren't known for taking great care of their stuff. Also, taxpayers don't have a whole lot of sympathy for inmates and resent footing the bill for any discretionary expenses.

This doesn't mean that you can't stay in shape while in jail. Most county jails will give you access to a yard where you can walk around outside or jog, especially if you are in a warmer climate. Even if no yard is available, though, you should have enough room in the common area to do pushups, sit-ups, etc.

Most inmates are pretty resourceful – in some jails they fill trash bags with water and use them as free-weights with a broomstick (this usually is not allowed by jail rules but the guards have bigger problems to deal with). Running in place is also popular – the temperature in most jails is very cold (to prevent infections) which also keeps the cells from getting too stuffy when people work out.

Gambling

Most county jails have strict rules against gambling but this does little to prevent the practice. To pass the time many inmates play cards – gambling keeps the game interesting. Popular games include poker, spades, hearts and pinochle, but they will play any game that can be played with face cards. Some of the games require a solid understanding of math and probability – some inmates mastery of complicated algorithms will surprise you.

Inmates usually either gamble commissary or “trays” (meals). This is why the jails try to crack down on it – a string of bad luck can result in an inmate not having any food for several days. If you are going to gamble in jail, gamble commissary since it is something you can live without (unless you have enough commissary to replace a meal).

The bigger problem with gambling is that it tends to lead to violence. When food is on the line (which is the currency in jail), people get more upset when they lose. If somebody thinks you are cheating, sometimes with no better reason than the fact that you are winning, they become confrontational. This creates a no-win situation – either you win and risk upsetting the other inmates or you lose and give up a meal or commissary.

Whether or not you are incarcerated you probably shouldn't gamble anything that you can't afford to lose, but this is especially true in jail. If you are going to gamble in county jail you should **avoid gambling with anybody who has been to prison** – they are probably much better at cards than you and are more prone to violence.

Reading

Most inmates have a lot of free time. If a television is available it is pretty uncommon for the inmates to come to a consensus on what they should watch. For this reason most inmates read – a lot.

Usually (especially in larger jails) your family cannot just bring you books from home. The jails are worried about drugs being smuggled in so they require that all books be shipped directly from the retailer, such as Amazon, Borders or Barnes and Noble. They usually have to be brand new (check with your jail to find out their specific policy on receiving books).

Inmates who don't have the luxury of people on the outside shipping them new books usually have their pick of books that have been left behind by other inmates or donated to the jail. Competition for good books can be fierce – depending on how bad the selection is you may have to trade some commissary for a new John Grisham book, for instance.

Some jails have book carts that come around weekly (or daily) allowing inmates to exchange their books, but most of the trading still takes place directly between inmates.

Working

The single best way to pass time in jail is by working. There are three possible ways that you can work while incarcerated – through a work release program, a formal jail work program or in the jail itself.

Work release – If you are granted work release you actually work outside of the jail at a normal job and check into the jail at night and for the weekends. The judge must approve work release, but if this is an option you should definitely take it.

Usually in a work release program you will check out of the jail in the morning, call the jail when you arrive at work and check back in at night. Not all jails offer work release programs (they are difficult to administer), but this is a great way to keep low risk offenders productive while they serve their time.

Work release allows you to keep your job, but be aware that you will need to tell your employer that you are incarcerated. The jail will sometimes send an officer out to make sure you are at work and they may call your employer to check up on you occasionally.

If the judge offers you work release he or she is basically sending a message to the jail that you are not a flight risk. Violent offenders are rarely offered work release, but it is common for drug crimes. You will be drug tested periodically, however, and frequently strip-searched when you return to jail (in states where it is still legal).

The best thing about work release is that you get to keep your job and make money while you are incarcerated. You usually have to pay a daily rate for this privilege, so work release inmates are less of a burden on taxpayers than regular inmates.

Jail Work Program – This is a new concept that has been gaining momentum over the past few years – in these situations the jail has a formal partnership with a government agency or private corporation where several inmates are either transported to a work site and work under supervision or do the work on-site at the jail.

In Orange County Jail, for instance, you may be transferred to “The Farm” where you actually work on a farm that supplies fruits, vegetables and over 8,000 eggs every day to jail kitchens. This also provides an advantage to taxpayers because it makes the jail a little more self-sufficient.

Life in jail goes a lot faster when you are working in one of these programs because you have a reason to get up every day and something to distract you. Jail work programs, however, are slightly less desirable than work release because you typically make little to no money and are not working in a job that will continue upon your release.

Jail work programs are not subject to minimum wage requirements because your housing is included and working is optional (you can always choose to spend your time in the normal part of the jail if you want), but you can learn new skills and pass the time. Also, usually the judge does not have to approve a jail work program so it is a good alternative to work release if work release isn't offered as an option.

Like work release, the jail itself may not approve you for a work program if you have violent charges or something that would jeopardize the jail's ability to continue the program in the future. Some work programs allow inmates to work with non-inmates, for instance, who would probably not be comfortable working with certain types of inmates.

Also, working in one of these programs will increase the likelihood of a judge releasing you on a review. Judges are more sympathetic to inmates who are trying to learn new skills and be more self-sufficient.

Working in the jail - Depending on the size of the jail you may be able to get a job cleaning, landscaping or in the kitchen. The best job you can get is in the kitchen (and it should be the easiest since they usually require so much labor).

You are not well fed when you are in jail. Most inmates complain that as bad as the food is they are still not given enough. When you work in the kitchen you usually get extra food. Also, just as with any job, it helps you pass the time. When inmates have something to focus on other than just the ticking of the clock, violence between inmates is much more rare.

Some jails require a minimum time commitment to work in the jail so you may not be a candidate on a short sentence (less than a month or so), but other than that you should try everything you can to get a job.

Eating

You will get three meals a day in any county jail in the US with the possible exception of classification when you first arrive (some inmates report spending up to twelve hours in classification in larger jails). Most inmate reviews of jail food range from mediocre to inedible.

If you are a picky eater you should stockpile some commissary to assure that you will have an alternative to the regular meals if necessary. Ramen noodles are popular and available in almost every county jail.

Commissary is usually available only once a week though some larger jails now offer it a few days a week. In order to purchase commissary you need to have some money on your inmate account, most commonly known as your "books." In order to get money on your books you need to have a friend or family member come down to the jail with a cashier's check or cash. Some jails now accept Western Union (a special program specifically for jail accounts) or another form of wire transfer, but hefty fees are taken out. You are better off having somebody deliver a check (or mail it).

You won't be able to get commissary until you have been classified. In a very small jail this may take minutes. Classification in a larger jail, though, can take several days. Even when you are classified and can order commissary you may only have certain commissary options based on your cellblock. Some cellblocks get more commissary privileges than others (for instance, some blocks may be able to order radios while others can't).

Commissary prices are always much higher than what you could get similar food for on the street. Some types of candy and food may cost ten times what you would pay

outside of jail, but commissary is a privilege, not a right, so complaints to the jail will go unanswered.

Most jails offer microwaves to inmates in at least some of the cellblocks (usually the more privileged blocks where the inmates have earned special rights with good behavior). Since microwaves are usually only accessible during certain hours some inmates find other ways to heat water – one of the more popular devices is called a “stinger.” A stinger is an incredibly dangerous contraption that plugs into the wall on one end and is dropped into a cup of water to complete a circuit on the other. They are usually made out of the cord from an alarm clock on one end and two pieces of metal with electrical tape in the middle on the other. Stingers are made out of contraband and are never allowed, but they can boil water within a few seconds and are popular for making late night snacks.

Inmates are very resourceful and come up with creative recipes from commissary items. Probably the most popular inmate dish is a “jail burrito.” Inmates crush up Ramen, Cheetos and sausage, all available on commissary, and pour it in an unused garbage bag. They pour boiling water (heated up in a microwave or with a stinger) and let it cook for fifteen minutes or so. It’s called a burrito because they let it cook in a rolled up white towel that resembles a burrito.

Time off for Good Behavior

Jails that are prone to overcrowding often institute “time off for good behavior.” This is a misnomer – if you are going to a jail that offers time off (also called good time), the jail will assume on day one that you will be released early taking into account your good time. You won’t lose time off unless you do something really bad (like fighting or using drugs) and even in these cases it is not uncommon for them to still give you your time off.

If you want to know whether a jail offers time off you just need to call them. Most county jails that offer time off give one day off for two served, meaning you will only end up serving 2/3 of a sentence. Severely overcrowded jails, however, can offer even more. LA County is known to reduce inmate sentences to 10% of the original sentence. This means that inmates sentenced to a year usually serve just over one month.

On the other side of the coin some county jails don’t have overcrowding problems and don’t offer any time off for good behavior. Don’t make any assumptions – just call up the jail and ask them what the current policy is. Occasionally jails will put inmates on house arrest with ankle bracelets, but this is a very rare practice and is typically reserved for minor crimes (or people with disabilities).

While the jail really wants you to serve your time and get out as quickly as possible the judge may choose to rescind your time off. Any such ruling will often be reviewed and turned over by the sentencing judge later. Usually in these cases you will get credit for time already served as well. It is also not uncommon to be

released on review – this is one of many situations where having a good attorney can really pay off.

Violence

You will probably see some violence in jail but if you are smart and know how to react you will be able to avoid it for yourself.

One of the most popular questions is whether you need to join a gang or align yourself with a group of people to avoid violence in jail. The answer really depends on which jail you are going to.

If you are going to jail in an area with a lot of gang activity, like Cook County or Los Angeles, aligning yourself with people of your own race is important. This is most important if you have a longer sentence – if you will only be in for a couple of weeks you should be able to keep to yourself and be fine.

Joining a gang, however, is not necessary in county jail and will make you a higher risk for violence.

If somebody is threatening you in jail, you need to make some friends. People won't be as likely to fight with you if you have friends because somebody might stick up for you. At the same time, though, acting scared and showing your weakness won't improve things either – you need to be willing to stand up for yourself or at least act like you are willing to if somebody tries to start something. Nobody will respect you if you don't stick up for yourself – confidence is key.

This doesn't mean that you need to throw a punch or fight, just that you need to be willing to protect yourself if anybody attacks you. This is unlikely if you know what you are doing in jail, but be prepared for the possibility of violence.

Rehab/Detox

Most inmates have drug problems. Jail can be a good opportunity for somebody to get clean, but going cold turkey can be dangerous as well. The medical staff should be able to deal with withdrawals but be prepared for the possibility that they will not be.

Preparing for jail with an addiction

If you are scheduled to serve a future sentence and you have a drug addiction it is highly recommended that you seek help detoxing before you check in to jail. A rehab center or private facility will give you a much safer alternative to going cold turkey in county jail (and you will probably find them more sympathetic).

Going to jail with a drug addiction is not good for anybody – you, other inmates, guards or the medical staff. Also, when you are booked into jail you are much more likely to receive prescriptions if you have already have a doctor's order from outside

the jail. Every jail's medical staff deals with a flood of prescription requests every day and not surprisingly most of them are denied.

Disclosure

You should disclose any drug addictions during booking so the jail has documentation of your condition. If you have a friend or loved one on the outside you should have them call the jail and talk to the medical staff to make sure they are aware.

Rehab programs in jail are sometimes sponsored by the jail but are usually sponsored by volunteers who want to help. If you have a drug or alcohol problem you should take advantage of these rehab programs. It will give you a change of scenery (something you don't get a lot in jail) and a change of pace. You might also learn some important coping mechanisms to ensure you don't end up back in jail.

Note that while these programs are good they aren't quite as structured as regular drug rehab programs offered outside of jail (they will probably offer 2-3 classes per week in jail), so it is not a good replacement for a full-blown treatment program. You should still go to rehab after you are released from jail because the transition from not using when you are in jail and when drugs are available is difficult for most people. Sadly, most inmates start using again when they are released.

Drugs in jail

Some county jails have huge drug problems. Drugs can be smuggled in many ways – new inmates bring them in (most often smuggling through a body cavity), work release inmates bring them in when they return at night and sometimes the guards bring them in. Because the supply of drugs is so limited they fetch much higher prices than they do on the streets.

If you are caught smuggling (or with drugs), you will probably pick up additional charges and extend your stay. In fact, you could be sent to prison. Don't smuggle or buy drugs in jail – it is just not worth the risk. The main problem with buying drugs is that a handful of people will know about the transaction. They can try to use this information to secure an early release (by snitching). Don't assume anybody will protect you if their own personal freedom is at stake – it just doesn't happen.

Prescription drugs are also commonly abused in jail. Twice a day a medical cart comes by with all of the prescriptions (you can also request Advil or Tylenol if you have a headache). Usually the nurse will watch you take your medicine and have you open your mouth to prove that the pill went down, but some inmates are really good at "cheeking" their medicines without the nurses noticing.

Inmates may cheek their medicine so they can take them later or to sell them to other inmates. Not all drugs are allowed (it is rare to see opiates distributed in jail) but Xanax and Valium are common and can be traded for quite a bit of commissary.

In order to get the necessary medications you need to have somebody contact the jail with your prescription. They are usually pretty good at finding your doctor and getting prescriptions, but if you are worried about not getting the right medicine you should have a somebody on the outside initiate contact.

Visiting

Most county jails allow visiting in some form or another, but there are some things that you should be aware of before trying to visit an inmate.

Who can visit?

Most jails require that visitors be at least eighteen years old unless they are accompanied by an adult. Even young children are usually allowed to visit as long as they are with somebody over eighteen.

If you have been to jail in the past year (five years in some jails) you may have to do some extra paperwork to visit an inmate. Some jails don't even allow you to visit an inmate if you have recently been incarcerated or if you have a felony on your record – contact the jail to find out their specific visitor policy.

If you have a warrant, don't visit somebody in jail. You won't be allowed to visit the inmate and will probably be detained. The jail will check your identification and do a warrant check before allowing you to visit an inmate.

Most jails will not allow visitors who are “dressed inappropriately.” This is completely at the discretion of the guards, so just dress conservatively. We have seen many reports of visitors turned away for wearing short skirts, tank tops, short dresses, etc.

Pretty much everybody who visits an inmate in jail has a story about how mean the guards are – don't take it personally.

When can people visit?

You will need to contact the local jail to find out visiting times – in larger jails this will vary for different cellblocks so you need to find out exactly where the inmate you are visiting is housed.

Most jails allow the inmates two visits per week, but some only allow one and others offer three (and a few allow a visit every day of the week). You should talk to the inmate and find out when they want you to visit – if they have a girlfriend, for instance, who visits twice a week they may not want you to visit at all (or they might want you to come along with their girlfriend – usually you can have up to three people per visit).

If an inmate gets a half hour visit you will need to budget at least a couple of hours to get through the paperwork. Some jails are so inefficient that it can take up to three hours of waiting just to get to the visiting area. Subsequent visits should not

take as long as the first, but you might still have to wait a couple of hours during busy hours.

Receiving visitors is a privilege and not a right – when a cellblock is put on “lock down” (usually following a fight or drug bust), the jail sometimes takes away visiting rights for all of the inmates, sometimes for several days. If you are traveling from out of state to visit an inmate you should call the jail – they may make a special exception for you depending on the circumstances.

What is the visiting area like?

First of all, no county jail in the United States allows conjugal visits. Some prisons offer conjugal visits, but even these are rare.

Most county jails don’t allow contact visits at all (a contact visit means there is no window between you and your visitors) because of the fear that visitors will smuggle things into the jail. At most county jails you will be speaking to your visitors through a telephone on each side of the glass or slots in the glass.

If the county jail you are visiting does offer contact visits you may be searched prior to the visit.

Education in Jail

If you are going to be in jail for more than a couple of months you should take advantage of any educational programs that the jail offers. These are usually free and give inmates the opportunity to develop skills that allow them to be successful upon release.

Most large jails offer GED programs for those who didn’t graduate from high school. Some jails work with local county colleges and offer college credits. You probably won’t be approved for one of these programs unless you have a pretty long sentence (at least a few months), but they are also a great way to pass the time and stay busy while incarcerated.

Becoming a trustee

Each cellblock has at least a couple of trustees, sometimes more (depending on the size of the block). The trustees do random jobs around the blocks – passing out meals, cleaning up, doling out clothing, taking out the trash, etc. The benefit of being a trustee varies from jail to jail, but usually trustees are given a few special privileges such as extra meals and their choice of a bed. Some jails even allow trustees to go outside and smoke occasionally (most county jails are smoke-free these days).

In some jails the trustees run the show – they will tell new inmates where to sleep and really act as the leaders of the block. In other jails they are simply seen as helpers and not given much respect from other inmates.

Trustees usually have non-violent charges and longer sentences (more than a couple of months). If you want to become a trustee you will have a good chance by becoming friends with the existing trustees and staying out of trouble – when they are leaving just have them mention to the guards that you would be a good replacement and this is usually enough to guarantee you the job.

Hygiene

Showering

One of the most common concerns that first-time inmates have is what the showering situation will be like. Will they be forced to shower with a bunch of other guys? Do inmates really get raped in the shower?

Actually, many county jails these days have individual showers that allow inmates to shower in privacy. Always wear sandals in the shower – these will be provided by the jail. Infections are very common (staph, athlete's foot, etc.) so be careful with what you expose yourself to.

Even in jails with communal showers most county jail inmates do not like showering at the same time and have a system that allows inmates to shower by themselves. Some jails, though, only allow inmates access to the showers during certain times and inmates are forced to shower together. If you must shower with other inmates rest assured that sexual violence in jail is very, very rare (prison is a different story). The other inmates won't put up with it and anybody attempting sexual violence in county jail is quickly taken care of.

Usually the jail will issue soap and shampoo for free to each inmate but it is usually really low quality – most commissary lists include name brands that will be more familiar and help you get a little cleaner.

Going to the bathroom

In larger county jails (which tend to be a little more violent and rougher), you should ask another inmate which bathroom you should when you first get booked. Some toilets are reserved for certain races or groups of people. Cook County is known for having bathroom assignments (all controlled by the inmates, the guards don't care).

Don't go out of your way to use another race's toilet to make a point – it's not worth it and could easily turn a whole crowd of people against you.

Telephone Calls

Telephone rules and rates vary wildly in US jails but they have one thing in common – they are expensive. Usually when an inmate makes an outgoing phone call the county jail phone system starts by announcing to the caller that they are receiving a

call from the jail and asking if they want to accept the charge. These charges range from a couple of dollars to eight dollars for a ten to fifteen minute call.

If you want to get the most out of your phone call you should talk until the phone actually cuts out. This may cut off a conversation, but you will know how much you can really get out of each call. Some jail phones say that the phone call is limited to ten minutes, for instance, but the call doesn't actually cut off until you have been talking for fifteen minutes. Since you aren't charged per minute (usually) you should make the most of your call.

Some jails offer phone cards on commissary. This allows inmates to make outgoing phone calls without having to call collect. While this is convenient, many of these systems have problems calling cell phones. Anybody who wants to accept incoming phone calls from inmates should either make sure they have a landline available or call their cell phone carrier – occasionally the cell phone carrier can simply remove a block from the phone and allow incoming calls from inmates.

All county jail phone calls are subject to surveillance though they rarely are because of the volume of calls the jail handles. Calls may be recorded and played back later if jail officials suspect you are planning a crime from behind bars. Also, the prosecutor may request recordings of your calls for evidence against you. Be careful what you talk about – anything you say over the phone can be used against you in court.

For the most part inmates cannot receive inbound phone calls from anybody but their attorney. If you want to talk to an inmate on the phone you should put money on the inmate's books and send them a letter requesting a call. Make sure to send your number – most people just store phone numbers in their cell phone so sometimes remembering phone numbers while they are in jail is difficult.

Most jails will provide free access to a special phone for calls to your attorney but a lot of inmates don't know about this. Ask the guards if you need to place a call to your attorney. These phone calls should not be recorded to protect your attorney-client privileges.

Money in Jail

Indigent inmates

Inmates who don't have the luxury of somebody on the outside putting money on their books are typically considered "indigent." In some jails indigent inmates will be provided some basic commissary supplies, such as pencils and paper, free of charge. Some jails even provide stamps for indigent employees to send letters.

Most county jails have a lot of indigent inmates – all this means is that nobody is putting money on their books, not that they are poor. A very wealthy person who did not want to tell anybody they were incarcerated, for instance, could be considered indigent.

Wealthy inmates

If you have a lot of money on the outside you should not advertise this in jail. You make yourself a target by bragging about how wealthy you are on the outside. This also makes it hard for most inmates to relate to you, which can keep you from making friends.

Remember that just because you have a good relationship with an inmate in jail doesn't mean they will be the same on the outside. If an inmate knows that you are wealthy it puts you and your family in danger after your release.

Cash

In some jails the money you have in your wallet will immediately be put on your books. Other jails will put the money in a deposit box to be collected upon your release. Either way, the jail should not steal your money – if you suspect the guards of mishandling cash you should file a formal complaint.

It is very rare for a county jail to allow inmates to carry cash. Most likely your money will be kept on your inmate account, more commonly known as your "books." You use the money on your books to purchase commissary, which then becomes the currency between inmates.

Random Inspections

The guards have the right to come in and inspect all inmate property whenever they want. Occasionally they will send all of the inmates into the common areas (or sometimes even out to the yard) while they search all property looking for contraband. They will go through all of your stuff and if they find contraband, you will likely lose some privileges and possibly everybody in the cellblock will have privileges revoked. These can include telephone access, visits, commissary, mail, recreational time and anything else the guards can think of (though they won't actually take away your meals since that would violate state laws). Being the one responsible for everybody losing privileges can make you a very unpopular inmate.

When you first arrive you should receive a handbook. Read the section about contraband careful so you know what is and isn't considered contraband. For instance, many jails allow you to have pictures sent by family members, but some limit how many you can have. If the limit is ten per inmate and you have eleven, that may be considered contraband. Also, anything smuggled in is obviously contraband and anything that may be concocted from commissary items for a purpose other than what it is designed for is also contraband (occasionally inmates will put together tattoo guns from commissary items but this is more popular in prison).

Clothing in jail

Most people assume that inmates wear orange jumpsuits in jail like they do on television. Most county jails these days, however, opt for scrubs like doctors wear with separate top and bottoms. They will usually have the name of the jail on the

back. You should also be issued a pair of sandals – always wear these, even in the shower, to prevent athlete’s foot. MRSA, a strain of staph infection that is immune to traditional treatments, has become more common in county jails in the last few years so be careful about germs.

If you are an average-sized inmate you may find a shortage of clothes that actually fit. When you have some seniority in the cellblock you will be able to get clothes that fit a little better. The trustees usually dole out the laundry every week so if you get in good with a trustee you can increase your chances of receiving clothes that actually fit.

Receiving Mail

All mail sent to inmates is searched by the jail before delivery. This means that mail delivery can take a few extra days than it normally would, especially around holidays when the mail stacks up. Some county jails manage to get mail distributed the same day it is received while the busiest jails can take up to a week or more.

Inspecting mail prevents smuggling of contraband. Every jail has different rules about what can and can’t be delivered – a quick phone call to the jail should be enough to figure out what is acceptable.

Most jails don’t allow stickers because drugs can be smuggled under them (or acid can even be in the sticker itself). Photographs may be allowed, but most jails have strict content guidelines. Provocative pictures or nudity may be confiscated. They may either be destroyed or put in your inmate deposit box for collection upon release.

Inmates can usually receive books as long as they are brand new and sent directly from the retailer, such as Amazon or Borders. Check the jail’s policy on sending books – some jails make the book property of the jail when it is received so the inmates have to leave them behind for other inmates when they are released.

Church

Most jails in the US offer some type of church services. Larger jails typically cater to many different religious beliefs while smaller jails may only offer interdenominational services.

Church is a great opportunity for inmates to escape the daily grind of jail. Surprisingly most inmates probably won’t hassle you about attending religious services – they are very popular even among the most hardened criminals.

Going to church is considered a privilege, not a right – if you or your cellblock get in trouble, church services may be temporarily suspended.

Release day

Many inmates are superstitious – one of the most popular jail myths is that if you take any commissary with you when you leave jail you will be incarcerated again as a punishment. Obviously this is a self-serving myth – the other inmates want to collect commissary from outgoing inmates.

Prior to your release date you should ask the guards what time you will be released – some jails release inmates early in the morning while others wait until the afternoon. Most will not wait until the evening, but ask to be sure.

Most jails consider any portion of the day served as a full day – that is to say that if you are booked in at 11:59 at night you will still get credit for serving a full day. For this reason you may be released a day earlier than you would think your getting out. If you are uncertain what your release date is make sure to ask the jail.

Make sure that whoever is picking you up does not have a tight schedule – it can sometimes take hours to process outgoing inmates. Nothing is truly efficient in this legal system.

Life after jail

Moving on

Most inmates worry a lot more about going to jail than about being released. In many ways, though, the transition from incarceration to freedom can be as difficult as the transition to life in jail.

In jail you learn to keep an emotional distance between you and other inmates – this is natural and it is for your own protection. This can make relationships on the outside difficult, though. If you have spent at least a few months in jail you should make an effort to talk about what your jail experience was like with somebody close to you.

Finding a job

If you have been charged with a felony, finding a job can be difficult. Most background checks will show felony charges so you should always be sure to disclose them in your initial interview. Consult with your attorney on whether or not your misdemeanor charges will show up – under some situations you may not even need to disclose your record.

Also, many states will actually let you convert felonies to misdemeanors after you have complied with all of the terms of your sentence – be sure to ask your attorney about whether this is a possibility in your situation.

You should contact your jail for a list of companies that hire felons. If they don't have a list available you may want to call some local attorneys. In some cases the

employers may require that you be bonded, which costs a little money, but it is a small price to pay for gainful employment.

Probation

Upon your release you may still be on probation for a little while – this is similar to parole which most former prison inmates are required to serve, but not quite as restrictive.

Usually when you are sentenced to serve jail time you have other conditions on your sentence as well – fines, restitution, therapy, probation, etc. The purpose of probation is basically to ensure that you keep your nose clean and comply with all of the terms of your sentence.

Your probation officer may give you limitations on where you can travel. In some cases you will be required to check in at a police station when you reach your destination, for instance. Make sure you comply with all of these rules – usually when you have complied with all of the other terms of probation (restitution, fines, therapy, etc.) and established a good track record (at least a few months without any problems) your probation will be terminated early.

While you are on probation your probation officer has the right to random inspections – they can come over whenever they want and search your home without a warrant. They can also visit you at work but most probation officers don't do this because they don't want to risk you losing your job – people without jobs tend to get in more trouble, which makes life harder for them.

In addition to random inspections, most probation officers require that you visit them monthly (or sometimes even more frequently). Whether or not you have drug charges they randomly administer UA's (urine analysis) to make sure you are not doing drugs. If you test dirty (meaning they detect drugs in your system) you can be hauled off to jail with more charges. If the terms of your probation prohibit you from drinking alcohol they may also test you for the presence of alcohol as well.

Sometimes you will not be given a probation officer but put on "written probation," or "court probation." This means that you need to go to the court or administrative building every month and just sign in and let them know your current address. You are still subject to urine analysis.

Community Service

Community service may be assigned by the jail in lieu of or in addition to jail time. Sometimes community service can be applied toward court fines as well. Most people imagine inmates picking up trash on the road – while this is popular in some counties there are a variety of different community service activities to choose from. Check with your probation officer to find out what opportunities are available to you.

Voluntary community service is a great way to reduce the length of your probation. Most people commit crimes because they are selfish – doing service is a great way to show the judge and your probation officer that you have changed and are putting the needs of others above your own.

Conclusion

If you are facing jail time for the first time, you probably feel like you don't belong in jail. You probably have a preconceived notion of what an inmate is like and don't feel like you fit the profile.

The truth is that there is no stereotypical inmate – you are going to jail because you made a bad decision (or series of bad decisions) that put you in that situation. The sooner you can learn to see other inmates as regular people, like yourself, who have made some bad decisions, the easier your stay will be and the faster the time will go.

In a strange way jail gives you an opportunity to learn things about yourself that you wouldn't learn otherwise – you may find confidence that you didn't realize you had before or learn how to relate to other people better. If you can use this period of time as an opportunity to improve yourself, the time will not just be wasted.

Then again, maybe it won't be a great experience for you – maybe it's just something you need to endure so you can open the next chapter of your life. Either way, rest assured that the time will pass.

Help somebody else out

We hope you found this guide helpful – we provide this information free of charge because we know how difficult the jail experience can be for the family of the incarcerated.

Help somebody else out – if you've been to jail go share your experience at <http://jailmedia.com/inmate-interview> – you can post your experience anonymously and we will publish the story to one of our jail websites. If we don't already have a site for your jail we'll start one!

If you have been to rehab consider reviewing the facility you were in – this is helpful for people considering rehab options. Just go to <http://rehabio.com/interview>

Also, if you have ever hired an attorney (or worked with a public defender), you can write a review as well. Our visitors are always looking for the best representation – just go to <http://attornio.com/interview> - it should only take a few minutes.

More information

To find more information about a particular county jail you can read interviews from inmates across the country. Just go to jailmedia.com/Properties.php and find the jail nearest you.

If you don't see your jail listed drop us a line at content@jailmedia.com and we will try to find some ex-inmates to provide this information.