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edited by alexander cockburn and jeffrey st.clair

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Torture in Cook County Jail

A Prisoner's Tale of Abuse

By STANLEY HOWARD

After a 17-month investigation concerning the conditions in the Cook County Jail, U.S. Attorney Patrick Fitzgerald issued a scathing report calling for change and reforms.

The 98-page report on the nation's largest county jail was released July 17 and sent to County Board President Todd Stroger and Sheriff Thomas Dart with its findings and recommendations. It

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cited many cases of gross "medical negligence, mismanagement and abusive behavior by guards," which led to "unnecessary deaths, amputation and routine inmate beatings."

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The outside world would be shocked to hear stories such as that of an inmate left untreated for a gunshot wound, who developed sepsis and died; a female inmate who suffered from HIV and died after a preventable infection went untreated; and an inmate beaten so bad by guards that his dentures were kicked out and he was sent to the hospital on a respirator.

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The report pointed out that there is just one dentist for the entire 9,800-inmate population--and he only deals in extractions, with 25 percent of those resulting in infection.

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Country to Do?](#)

* * *

I SPENT time in the jail's maximum security unit between 1984 and 1987, and personally witnessed and experienced the kind of atrocities cited in the report. I cannot count the number of times I've seen a guard or guards punch, kick, slap or beat down an inmate without provocation.

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And when I was sent to the jail from death row in 2001 for a court hearing--in which I was trying to prove that I was tortured by Chicago police into signing a coerced confession to a murder I did not commit--I soon discovered that nothing had changed.

[Paul Cantor
Who Killed Victor Jara?](#)

On the second day after my arrival, about 20 members of the jail's Special Operations Response Team (SORT) stormed the housing unit where I was held. They had all 50 of us get completely undressed, on our knees and facing the wall in the dayroom. It turned out to be a surprise high-level shakedown--one that quickly turned into a routine high-level violation of human, civil and constitutional rights.

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Two cellmates were beaten unmercifully by six guards because homemade wine was found in their cell. And the guy next to me had his head pushed against the wall so hard that it took 12 stitches to close the wound on his forehead.

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I was scared to death when one of the guards screamed at me: "Keep your damn eyes looking forward and facing the wall." I thought he was going to let his dog bite me. The dog was foaming at the mouth and so close to me that I felt its breath with every bark. I later discovered that SORT was the source of many lawsuits and much criticism for abusing prisoners, and played a major role in the last sheriff election.

[Niranjan Ramakrishnan
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It was easy for such abuse to occur because top brass either condoned, participated in and/or turned a blind eye to it. Even internal affairs, the office responsible for investigating such abuse, ignored the guards' brutality or worked with top brass to insure

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that complaints were ruled favorably for the officers.

And knowing that top brass and internal affairs were working with the guards caused inmates to lose faith and confidence in them, which on the other hand, allowed the abuse stay under wraps and operate with impunity.

Sheriff Dart rejected the report's criticism. "They have completely ignored all the positive things we've done and painted a picture that is no way accurate and is horribly disappointing," he said.

County officials tried to place blame for most of the medical problems on a "shrinking budget and significant cuts in staff." But Fitzgerald quickly countered with the fact that Cook County pays more taxes than anywhere in the country, so lack of money isn't an excuse. "It can't be the only county in the country that can't afford to have a jail that satisfies constitutional standards," he said.

County jails are a major part of the prison-industrial complex. It's where people are packed in like cattle to wait their turn to be "judged" by this broken, racist and corrupted criminal justice system.

"When you consider the problems with medical care, widespread violent abuse by guards and the fact that it's extremely overcrowded, with hundreds sleeping on the floor each night, it's one of the most dangerous places on earth, and I don't expect anything to change," said 38-year-old Charles G., who spent 14 months in the jail.

I respect Fitzgerald's call for change. Prisoners should be housed in a safe and clean environment with adequate medical care.

But I want to know: Where are the indictments? If such conditions and abuse were discovered in a nursing home or day care center, it would be closed down immediately, or there would be mass firings and indictments issued. But since the abuse was inflicted on prisoners, Fitzgerald decided to issue a report with unenforceable recommendations.

Until Fitzgerald convenes a grand jury and starts issuing indictments--beginning with top county officials--nothing is going to change at the jail. Fitzgerald's call for change is a bold step forward, but indictments would prove that justice is not "just-us"--it's a right.

Stanley Howard, he's one of the pardoned Illinois death row prisoners, and still behind bars on another bogus charge. He wrote this about the nightmare at Cook County Jail, where they just had a federal expose.

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