

# OPINION



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## Federal Prison Guards are Brutalizing Inmates

### My witness to the assault on justice

BY JOHN KIRIAKOU



Two federal prison guards in Florida recently agreed to plead guilty for beating a prisoner and then covering it up. One officer faces up to three years in a federal prison, while the other is looking at a year.

The Justice Department issued a press release that cast the news as a great victory over official malfeasance. "The Justice Department is committed to holding officers who engage in such criminal acts accountable," insisted Vanita Gupta, who heads the department's civil rights division.

Good for the Justice Department, right? Well, there's a lot more to this issue.

The federal prison system certainly hasn't seen the levels of inmate abuse that state and local prisons have become infamous for. New York's Ryker's Island, for example, is notorious for vio-

lent crimes committed by guards against prisoners — including juveniles — who are sometimes chained or handcuffed while they're assaulted.

But the federal system's record isn't anything to be proud of, either. The two Florida officers are no anomaly.

About a year ago, I finished a 23-month stay in a federal prison for blowing the whistle on the CIA's torture program. I couldn't believe some of the things I saw there.

A few months after I checked in at the Federal Correctional Institution at Loretto, Pennsylvania, a new prisoner arrived. He was a former prison guard who'd used his steel-toed boots to stomp another prisoner unconscious. The Loretto guards were clear about the rules: "This is his house," they told us. "If anybody even looks at him cross-eyed, they're going to solitary."

It didn't really matter. After only a couple of months, the former guard was transferred to the minimum-security work camp across the street, despite the fact that he'd committed a violent crime. The fix was in.

I wish I could say that was the worst of it.

One of my cellmates at Loretto, whom I'll call "James," was a mentally ill homeless man from Pittsburgh. He'd purposefully violated the terms of his federal probation so he could spend the winter months indoors.

James was clear with both the medical staff and his cellmates that he was mentally ill and needed to be medicated. We appreciated his candor.

But the medical staff's primary mission is to keep costs low, and drugs for serious mental illness are expensive. Since James was supposed to go home in a few months anyway, they didn't give him his meds. You can guess what happened: James began to spiral into insanity, and he was sent to solitary confinement.

James's struggles angered the staff. After one incident in solitary, he was stripped naked, beaten, and thrown outside. It was January, and the temperature in the central Pennsylvania mountains was 10 degrees. An eyewitness told me that James apologized and asked to be let back in. He started crying after a couple

of hours in the cold. Then he curled up into a ball and fainted.

No guards were punished for what they did to James. Even if he'd reported it to the federal Bureau of Prisons headquarters, who would have listened to him? Would you believe a uniformed law enforcement officer or a mentally ill homeless man?

The guards got away with it. Across the country, prison guards get away with things like this every day.

The solution isn't to prosecute two isolated abusers and then issue a press release crowing about it. The solution is to put cameras absolutely everywhere in prisons, and to vet and train guards much more thoroughly. Moreover, inspector general offices should investigate more official crimes, and the Justice Department should be willing to prosecute more guards who abuse inmates.

No one should celebrate the outcome of the Florida case until the abuse of prisoners by their guards becomes a thing of the past.

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