

24 hours in a children's 'jail'

In a special unit at a youth detention center in California, around 40 boys are housed in one-man cells. Security is at a maximum, with bullet-proof glass, heavy gates and sensor fences with barbed wire. A few of the boys await trial, others have already been given long sentences.



06.15. Wake up

Peter, 16, rushes to the bathroom.

"Our cells are always locked. If we need to go to the bathroom we have to get the staff's attention. It makes you feel like a dog. Sometimes I just don't want to ask for help, so I pee on my towel."

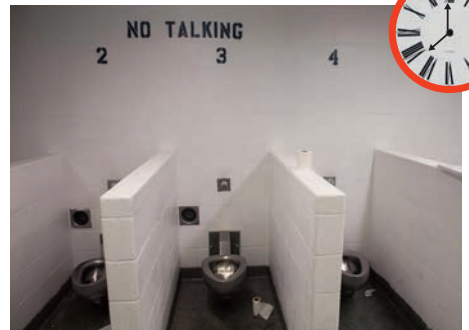


10.00 Surveillance

The staff in the control room keep an eye on everyone and everything.

04.00. Transportation

Marcus, 15, is going to court. He wears a special transportation jumpsuit and his hands and feet are shackled. Soon he will be placed in a small cage inside the bus that will take him to the court-house.



07.30 Grooming

The bathroom has clear glass windows and low walls between the toilets. The prisoners get three minutes each in the shower.

"Once a week they give us a package with clean clothes and a towel. The worst thing is not having your own underwear," says Tomas, 16. He puts his trousers under his mattress to keep them creased.



08.00 Perfect order

Eric, 17, makes his bed.

"It has to be perfect or we have to do it over."





08.30. School or Service

When they go to school or a church service, the young people keep their hands behind their backs, to reduce the risk of contact or fights. Girls and boys are kept in different sections of the detention center.

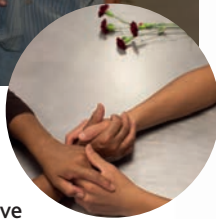
12.00 Lunch

There is a large room that gets used as a dining hall and a room for other activities. The chairs and tables are fixed to the floor. Sometimes people break down, for example people who have just been given life sentences, and try to throw furniture around. That isn't possible here.



13.00 Class or visiting

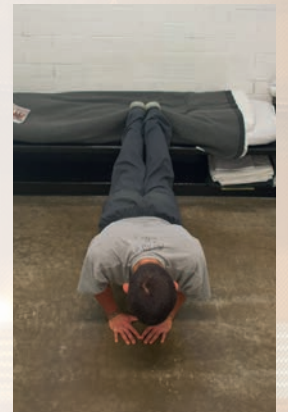
There are visiting times at the weekend. It used to be that only the parents were allowed to visit their kids, one day a week. Javier and his team have managed to get grandparents in too, and increase the visiting times to two days a week.



15.30 Recreation

"We have one hour of 'rec' per day. It's nice to get out in the sun," says James, 15.

Many of the kids train hard in their cells. "We better build our strength before we are moved to state prison (with adults). Anything can happen in there, I need to be able to protect myself," says one boy. The cells are 3.5 x 3 metres. Prisoners are only allowed a handful of personal belongings, like books and letters, and a maximum of five photos.



Some of the kids hardly ever get visitors.

"My son is too little to visit", says Daniel, 17, who is sentenced to life in prison, plus 30 years. "When he gets older I will tell him not to follow in my footsteps. To be on his own and think before he does something stupid. I did everything to fit in: I only cared about showing 'chismo' for the neighborhood. The drugs, crystal meth, turned me into a disgusting, pathetic person. Looking back at how I was, I'm so disappointed in myself. I finally got the strength to take off my mask, but it is too late now."



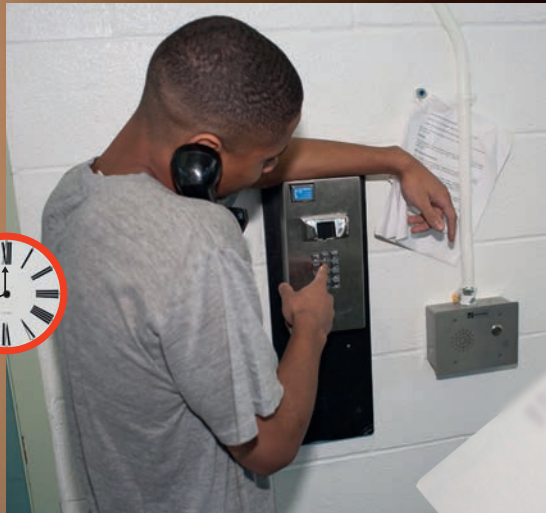
18.00 Javier visits

After dinner, Javier and Father Mike, the prison chaplain, come to support the boys and talk with them about life and the future. Eric, 17, is going to court tomorrow and is scared. His friends try to comfort him.



20.00 Calling home

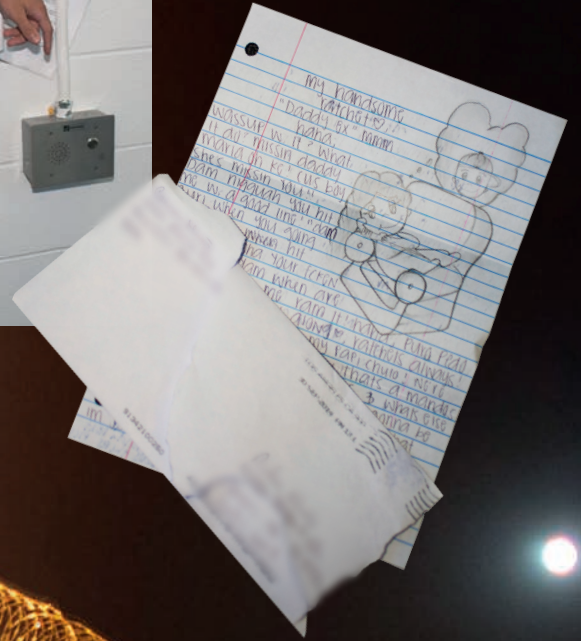
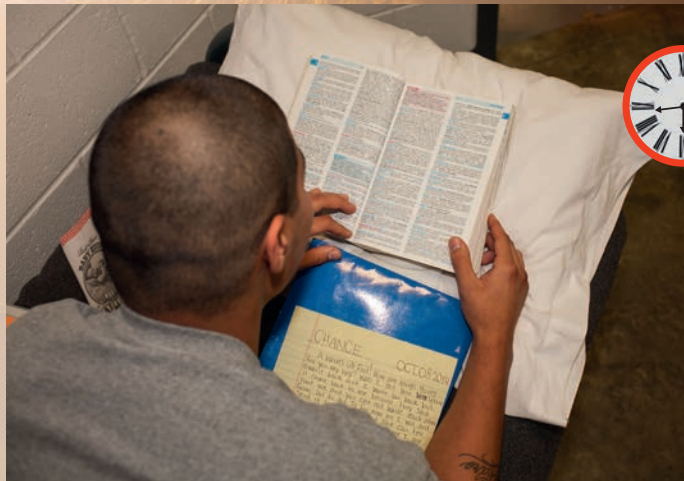
The boys cannot receive calls. They have to use a payphone and call collect. This can be expensive for their families. A lot of kids want to use the phone, so everyone's time to talk is limited. There is no access to computers or email. Letters to and from family and friends are opened and checked by the staff.



20.30 Locked up

Michael is one of the few who have been given a second chance. Instead of life in prison, he will soon be released and go to boarding school, far from the gangs and drugs.

"It gives the other guys hope," he says.



Joseph, 17 has received flowers from his parents, and he uses his last half hour of light creating a work of art in his cell.



21.00 Lights out

Now the doors are locked until tomorrow. Eric is afraid. He prays about tomorrow's trial, that he won't receive a life sentence. Then he lies awake in the dark for a long time.

