

Reader Question: "What kind of jobs do they offer in there?"

(Asked in a letter from Linden, VA.)

What goes on inside a prison (especially a minimum security prison camp like I'm at) is very much a microcosm of what goes on in the "free" world. Pretty much all the jobs needed to maintain life out there are also needed to maintain life in here.

We have cooks to prepare and serve food. We have plumbers to deal with pipes and toilets and sinks. We have landscapers to maintain the grounds (cutting grass and spraying chemicals). We have electrical workers to help keep the lights on and pipe-fitting guys to assist the plumber's needs. We have welders who are currently busy making new doors for prison cells. We have orderlies who clean floors and bathrooms, and the gym.

One major difference from work on the outside is our pay. We make \$1.15/month on the low end, and a lucky few can make \$150/month or more if they get the right job.

All jobs in prison come with their benefits and downfalls. My first job was a bathroom orderly, and I asked to have that position. I didn't want to clean prison toilets and showers, but I wanted the benefits that came with the position. The pay sucked—\$5.40 per month—but the major benefit is that, as an orderly, you don't get assigned a bunkie (bunk mate/cell mate). To me, this was important. Having some sense of privacy in prison is hard to achieve. So getting my own cube (imagine a cell without a door) was worth cleaning a prison bathroom that was used by a bunch of inmates.

Some guys want a job where they can get access to hard-to-come-by commodities. Kitchen workers can access a ton of extra food. Lots of guys gain a lot of weight working in the kitchen. Another benefit of kitchen work is the side hustle it offers. Kitchen workers get something known as "the breakdown." This is food that they sneak out of the kitchen and then sell on the black market to other prisoners.

One problem with this (for those of us that don't work in the kitchen) is that food served in the chow hall is often pretty fucked up. Kitchen workers often steal eggs to make egg and cheese sandwiches to sell on the blackmarket and as a result the cornbread and cakes and other foods served at chow are dry as hell, because they never put the right amount of eggs the recipe calls for. On days we have chicken fried rice, there is almost no chicken in it, because the kitchen guys stole all the chicken to sell in the underground prison economy.

Laundry is another job with a good side hustle. Many people don't want their clothes cleaned with hundreds of other guys' dirty clothes, and they are willing to pay the laundry guy to wash and fold their clothes separately. People pay to have pockets sewn into pants

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and to have clothes specially fitted to their size.

Landscaping might be one of the harder jobs in prison. You are outside in the hot sun all day, cutting grass and pulling weeds. You only get \$5.40/month, but for them, the benefit is to be out of the prison all day. But they are also watched more closely. It is unspoken knowledge that landscaping has easy access to contraband that can be dropped off in a field or at the edge of the woods.

One time things got so out of hand with the contraband that staff called all the landscaping guys to a meeting and fired every single one of them on the spot.

My current job is really great, considering I am in prison. I no longer live in the units where you get a cube (to yourself, if you're an orderly). I live in the "bays" now. It's basically a big open room full of bunk beds with about 100 guys. Privacy is not an option any longer. So I sought out a job that offered a different benefit.

I became one of the two training center orderlies. I get car keys and a cell phone (programmed for emergency calls only) and I drive myself (and sometimes the other orderly) in a Ford Escape to the training center.

The training center is a building a few minutes drive away from the prison. The building has a gym, a meeting room, and a banquet hall area. It's used by staff and their family members. I clean the gym and the rest of the building. But driving in a car with the radio playing, the window rolled down, and my hand out the window can make you feel normal again. Like you're not in prison.

I drive along a large stream that eagles fly over. Where I park is across from a farm with cows and a horse wandering around. Every week I run into Rusty, a large collie out for a walk with his owner, an older woman who is always friendly and polite (despite the fact she knows I'm an inmate from the prison around the corner). Sometimes I clean up after events at the training center and there's a box of leftover pizza or an Asian gift box that was given to attendees, with dried seaweed and squid and other Asian snacks, desserts and herbal teas! Sometimes there's leftover homemade cookies from the outside world!

Of course, I would never eat any of this. That would be against the rules, and I always follow the rules. Really, I just throw it all out. I would never enjoy a bite of food I wouldn't otherwise try for a few years.

There's all kinds of jobs in here, just like out there. I even worked for a while in the Power

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House. It supplies all the water and energy to the entire prison. I just wrote down a few numbers I read on the giant industrial machines. It was easy, but it was so loud you had to yell over the sound of the machines and it was always at least 100 degrees in there from all the steam and hot water tanks.

For now, I am planning to keep my job driving past the horse and cows, and petting Rusty, and sitting on the training center porch watching birds dive into the big stream. And I've become the number 1 guy on the job (there's only two of us) and earned a rise. I now make \$40.21/month, a big jump from my \$5.40 I was paid for scrubbing toilets when I first arrived. It's not bad for a prison job.