

Welcome to a cell on Arkansas's death row

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By Mara Leveritt

Pictured here are exterior and interior views of a cell on Arkansas's Death Row. The photos are of a model that was made legally by a Death Row inmate, using materials that were allowed at the time. The model was then given to a free-world visitor, as prison policy allowed. I have been asked not to identify either the artist or the owner.

The actual cell, though irregular inside, is 11' 7" by 7' 6". The blue protrusion in the lower-right corner was for a television. New televisions have recently been installed however, nearer the commode.

I believe the device shown to the right of the bed is a remote for the television, but I do not know if that was changed or eliminated with the change of TVs. Stations available to inmates are limited and the warden decides what DVDs get shown. And, yes, that is a cell phone on that ledge in the door. Guards take the phone from cell to cell. It is programmed only to call people who have been approved for a particular inmate. The person being called must accept the charges.

A spout for the shower head can be dimly seen to the right of the combined commode-and-sink, beneath the jerry-rigged clothesline. The grated rectangle above the sink is a bright recessed light that remains on much of the time. The floors, walls and ceiling are concrete. The bed is concrete too, topped with a thin pad. Some prisoners have chosen to string a curtain over part of their narrow, horizontal windows, as illustrated here.

Two doors are shown on the exterior. Guards and the inmate enter and leave through the door on the right. The trapdoor above the number drops down, exposing a horizontal slot. This is where food trays are passed, and through which inmates are handcuffed before guards enter the cell or before the inmate is taken out.

The door on the left hides a utility chase. Plumbing pipes and electric wiring are behind it.

This model was made primarily of thin pieces of wood, about the size of Popsicle sticks, held together with glue. Inmates must buy their own art supplies from a list approved by the prison. Until a recent crackdown, they were allowed to have up to two 500-piece boxes of the sticks.

In the past, well-behaved Death Row inmates were also allowed access to up to 10 two-ounce bottles of paint, 10 brushes, two 11x12-inch drawing pads, two four-ounce bottles of glue, and a set of colored pencils. The permission was part of the prison system's policy is "to afford inmates the opportunity to make constructive use of leisure time by participating in approved work craft program carried out under staff supervision, where available within institutions."

Within the past 10 weeks, however, guards on Death Row have confiscated almost all craft materials that inmates had previously—and legally—obtained. Supplies that they had purchased

or that families and friends had purchased for them were taken away without explanation and most reportedly have not been returned.

When I asked about the confiscations, prison spokesman Dina Tyler replied that the crackdown has been system-wide. "We want to make sure that inmates are getting their own supplies and not ordering for other inmates," she wrote. "We have had some problems with this in the past. We also are making sure that they are getting only what is allowed and not extra items."





