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The Miniseries Depicting a New York Prison Break Fails to Show What Happened to the Men Left Behind

by [Katie Rose Quandt](#) | January 10, 2019

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The true story of a 2015 prison break from a New York maximum-security facility has electrified viewers of Showtimes acclaimed miniseries *Escape at Dannemora*, which wrapped up on December 30. The tale focuses on two men serving life sentences, David Sweat and Richard Matt, and their relationship with prison employee Tillie Mitchell, who aids their escape from Clinton Correctional Facility in upstate New York.

The series, which has earned praise for its evenhandedness and [authenticity](#), takes viewers through a dramatic retelling of the two mens elaborate plot, the escape, and the ensuing manhunt. But it ignores one of the most serious consequences of the break: the widespread retaliation carried out against the people left behind in Clinton and other New York prisons.

In August 2015, two months after the escape, a *New York Times* investigation [outlined horrific abuse at Clinton](#), where men who had lived near Sweat and Matt on the honor block (a cellblock for those who have earned additional privileges) were tortured for information. This abuse served no useful purpose: The New York [inspector generals 150-page report](#) on the escape did not implicate a single other incarcerated person, and instead blamed extreme negligence by prison staff and higher-ups in the Corrections Department, as well as direct assistance from Mitchell. Yet according to the *Times*, during an extended lockdown following the breakout, men in Clinton were repeatedly beaten while handcuffed, choked and slammed against cell bars and walls.

*Escape at Dannemora* never shows or references the torture going on inside the prison walls. Instead, the final episode depicts the 23-day manhunt through the wilderness that leaves Matt dead and Sweat wounded and recaptured, the inspector general conducting interviews, and even Governor Andrew Cuomo touring the facility. When asked why they chose to omit this chapter of the story, representatives from the show said no one was available to comment on the decision.

*Escape at Dannemora* [is based closely](#) on Inspector General Catherine Leahy Scotts 2016 report outlining the extensive state failures that made Sweat and Matts escape possible. As the miniseries depicts, their escape was enabled by employees disregard for rules, lack of oversight, and lax security. Viewers see Mitchell nervouslybut easilysmuggle hacksaw blades into the prison, hidden in frozen ground beef.

Once the escape took place, prison staff quickly tried to pass on the blame. Within hours of discovering Matt and Sweats absence on June 6, 2015, according to the *Times*, correctional officers took Patrick Alexander, who lived in the cell next to Matt, into a broom closet, punched him, and slammed him against the wall while insisting he must know something about the escape. According to Alexanders account, an officer grabbed the handcuffed man by the throat, lifted him out of his chair, and slammed his head into a pipe while other officers threw punches. Multiple times that day, correctional officers put a plastic bag over his head and threatened to waterboard him. In March 2017, Alexander [filed a lawsuit](#) against the Superintendent of Clinton and a list of other Department of Corrections and Community Supervision (DOCCS) officials and correctional officers.

A DOCCS spokesperson said the department could not comment on ongoing or pending litigation, but added, DOCCS has zero tolerance for violence within the facilities. Anyone engaged in misconduct will be disciplined within the facility and if warranted the incident will be referred for outside prosecution.

Another man on the honor block, Victor Aponte, told the *Times* that an officer tied a plastic bag around his neck and tightened it until he passed out. A third, Reggie Edwards, said he was put in solitary for three weeks, and his belongings and wedding ring were thrown away. Some men said officers forbade them from telling medical staff how they got their injuries. By August, Prisoners Legal Services of New York had received [71 complaints of abuse](#) from Clinton.

The abuse was covered up through false disciplinary tickets and worsened by the denial and delay of medical treatment, according to a [2016 report](#) by the nonprofit Correctional Association of New York. One man described being awakened in the middle of the night,

choked, thrown to the ground, beaten, strip searched, and tightly shackled. When he asked what was going on, he said the officer replied, Shut the fuck up. This is what happens when people escape. Despite later reporting significant pain and blood in his urine, he did not see a doctor or receive medical treatment. When he filed a grievance, he was given a ticket and locked down in his cell for 20 days.

Dozens of men incarcerated at Clinton were transferred to other facilities and placed in solitary confinement. In the highly charged atmosphere following the escape, the number of people in solitary confinement spiked at prisons throughout the state, increasing 14.4 percent between June and September 2015, at a time when New York had pledged to reduce its use of solitary.

None of this abuse was depicted in *Escape at Dannemora*. Executive producer and director Ben Stiller [told the host](#) of the *Slate* podcast The Gist that the series plot came largely from the inspector generals report. That report, in turn, mentioned the abuse only in passing: The need for oversight is particularly apparent in view of subsequent allegations of abuse by DOCCS personnel at Clinton and other state prisons that have emerged in the wake of the escape.

Though the abuse escalated after Matt and Sweat escaped, mistreatment had long been the norm at Clinton, according to the Correctional Associations report. Thirty-one people died at the facility between 2007 and 2013. Sweat [said at his sentencing hearing](#) that the harsh conditions were the impetus for his escape attempt. And the Correctional Association found that in many incident reports, COs are writing up a confrontation as assault on *staff* when in fact staff have beaten people up and/or staff responded to minor conduct with excessive force. Although both of the escapees were white, staff harassment, brutality, and abuse are often most directed at Black and Latino people, demographics that the report notes are overrepresented in the New York prison population, while most correctional officers are white.

In fact, the [Correctional Association noted](#) that the June 2015 escape and its aftermath only exacerbated the abusive conditions and provided opportunities for staff to utilize longstanding tactics of dehumanization, racism, and brutality.

Several staff members resigned or were suspended because of their roles in the escape. Mitchell pleaded guilty to a felony and a misdemeanor, and was sentenced to two and a third to seven years in prison and ordered to pay almost \$80,000 in restitution for repairs to the prison. She has been [denied parole twice](#). A correctional officer, Gene Palmer, was sentenced to six months in jail, of which he [served four](#).

After Sweat was captured, he pleaded guilty to three felony counts, each adding three and a half to seven years to his life sentence, as well as nearly \$80,000 in restitution. But his real punishment happens inside the prison walls. At an internal disciplinary hearing, Sweat was sentenced to six years of solitary confinement, where he spends 23 hours a day in his cell without package, commissary, or telephone privileges and where, he told Solitary Watch in a letter, he has suffered abuse and retaliation.

Sweat is unlikely to find relief after six years: People who escape or attempt to escape are often labeled security risks and kept in administrative segregation for decades or even the rest of their lives. Amy Fetting of the ACLU National Prison Project [said](#) prison escapes are all too often linked to staff misconduct, incompetence or both, but that staffers frequently react with humiliation and extreme vengeance. Sweats escape drew international media coverage, led to staff suspensions and scrutiny, and the manhunt cost the state \$23 million in overtime alone.

Sweat went on a hunger strike while incarcerated in Attica Correctional Facility, writing in a 2018 letter that he did not trust food delivered on unsealed trays by officers. Its now been over 4 months without eating the food they serve and surviving on liquid nutrients given to me by medical personnel and visit food from my fiance twice a week, he wrote, adding that he took bird baths at his sink instead of trusting officers to safely escort him to the shower.

He has been transferred several times over the past two years, and is currently incarcerated in Auburn Correctional Facility.

Meanwhile, allegations of brutality have continued to trickle out of Clinton years after Sweats capture. In a [federal lawsuit](#) filed just weeks ago, Andrew Champion alleges that a fellow prisoner beat him into a coma in his cell in January 2018. According to Champions complaint, a correctional officer stood by inside the cell and watched.

*Banner Image: New York Governor Andrew Cuomo toured the escape route at Clinton Correctional later on the day of the escape. Photo: Office of the Governor of New York.*

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