

Apparently We Beat Up Old Men Now

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(new picture! 😊)

When I first came to prison, there seemed to be a modicum of respect for older inmates. Maybe I just saw what I'd expected to see, but at least there weren't enough counter-examples to convince me that elderly prisoners had it especially rough. What I see now may be more related to the particular prison I'm currently caged in than to any new system-wide mentality, but there sure seems to be an awful lot of abuse directed at old folks lately. At first I was just overhearing the comments and threats, but recently I've seen a lot more physical assaults on the imprisoned ancients, and I don't get it. In the past 5 or 6 months, I'm aware of at least 4 beatings of older (over 60) inmates by significantly younger, much more physically fit guys.

In short, I'm seeing a lot of bullying of easy targets. The question is: Why?

This prison I'm in now is generally considered a "soft" prison, and for the most part it is. The stereotypically spectacular prison violence is mostly absent, though there are still quite a few fights and they usually go unseen and unreported. Also, the population here certainly skews older, so there is a very real phenomenon of tremendously obnoxious old guys doing and saying things they really shouldn't, just because they feel protected by their advanced age. I even have personal experience of elders antagonizing and pushing ME to the brink, twice forcing me to really restrain myself from smacking them. But I haven't (so far), and mostly that's because I tend to step back and consider these old men, as nasty and offensive as some may be at times, as if they were my own father or grandfather. Surely they are someone's. Then I ask myself, would I want someone younger and stronger getting violent with them if they were my relatives? No matter what the old goat said, I'd expect physically superior inmates to stand down, to laugh it off... maybe even to apologize though they were not in the wrong. So that's what I've done (so far; I'm getting older myself, so I don't know how much longer I can afford to be gracious, myself). Anything else, I think, would be dishonorable.

Others, apparently, see things differently. Just this week one of these prison work-out

maniacs who is always running or pushing or lifting something bragged to me, "Hey man, I got a free one in this morning." A free what, I asked. "I socked that dude," he said, "and it looks like we're getting away with it." He went on to indulgently describe to me how he'd punched a guy in the jaw after their long history of friction had culminated in something he chose to interpret (unreasonably and self-servingly, in my opinion) as a threat. Well, I'd just assumed the punchee was a guy I'd known was a thorn in the puncher's side for a while now, someone similar in age and stature and temperament, so from where I stood it all sounded basically fair and probably well-earned. Later, though, I found out it had actually been the soft little man in the bunk next to him, an old dude with a mouth to be sure, but still. I lost all respect for this acquaintance, someone I'd long known to be a hot-head but who now turns out also to be a coward who'll satisfy his need to lash out — an understandable need stemming from a thousand genuine grievances and frustrations, no doubt — by hitting a weak and basically defenceless older man who wasn't a real threat even if he would've hit back, which he obviously wouldn't have done. This kind of bullying disgusts me, yet I see it more and more. One ex-cellmate of mine was literally known (and celebrated by some) for pummelling old guys... and I grant that they almost always asked for it when he did, but I still can't stomach it. Is there NO sense of honor or pride in here at all? Is everyone so utterly devoid of self-esteem that they must bolster their fragile egos by aggressing exclusively against ~~soft~~ ^{soft}, harmless targets?

I'm a pretty non-violent person myself, but I can respect and even enjoy some good, honest fisticuffs. Just, for god's sake, if you want to prove to yourself or to whomever that you're tough (and in prison, there's real value in the occasional demonstration that you DO hit back), do it with someone who could actually hurt you as well. There's no glory in drop-kicking a yapping Chihuahua.