

# How the Newest Federal Prison



# Became One of the Deadliest

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On the cover:

A guard tower and prison yard remains empty at the Thomson Correctional Center on November 15, 2009 in Thomson, Illinois. The closed prison facility is being considered by the Department of Defense to house suspects from the closing U.S. Guantanamo Bay prison.

Photo by CHARLES REX ARBOGAST/  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Sex, violence and drugs top the list of acts and substances you've been told to stay away from behind bars. Well, you'll find pieces about all three of them in Issue 11 of News Inside. We're not presenting them in a way that will get you into trouble. These essays and articles invite you to reflect on your inner person. Let's start with sex. Like, yes, people in the pen want physical intimacy. "Tackling a Huge Taboo: Sexual Desire Behind Bars" makes that clear as it puts the popular belief that prisoners should be deprived of touch against the universal human response to that deprivation.

Violence is at the center of "How the Newest Federal Prison Became One of the Deadliest." The description of USP Thomson in Illinois reminds me of what we used to say when we entered a house in New York's Rikers Island jail: "Can I live?" We would use this expression when residents — the new cats — glared at us as we ventured into "their" space for the first time.

"Can I live" wasn't a question born out of fear. It came from exhaustion. For the people locked in Thomson, scar-inducing shackles, cellmate violence and claustrophobic conditions make for a nightmare.

To complete the "stay away from" list, we present a drug-related comeback story. You've read reported pieces penned by my colleague Keri Blakinger in News Inside before. Now, read a bit about her life story in "A Tupperware of Heroin, or How I Ended Up in Prison." It's an excerpt from "Corrections in Ink," her bold, honest debut memoir published this year.

If you're an avid News Inside reader, you already know there are more pieces within that cover a variety of topics, from "I Joined the Parole Board to Make a Difference. Now I Call It 'Conveyor Belt Justice.'" to "Rethinking Prison Tourism." I won't list them all here; that's what the table of contents is for. No more leading the witness. If you're new, please join our loyal readers in discovering what's inside. Afterward, write to me to share your thoughts about what you've read. The more detail the better.

Enjoy, friends. I'll be back at ya in December.

**Lawrence Bartley**

*Lawrence Bartley is the director of News Inside. He served a 27 years-to-life sentence and was released on parole in May 2018.*

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## Letters to the Director

I want to shout out Mr. Bartley for his story, success, and for what he is doing for the prison system. They need to show more stories like yours instead of all the bad stories. Thanks for being the walking example and for giving us hope to know life can get better. You, Mr. Bartley, and Van Jones are my role models right now.

My first and only issue I read was the December 2021 Issue 9. I was put on about "News Inside" by another inmate. All I read are helpful books/magazines and y'all magazine is really helpful with the beneficial info. My favorite story was "Everyone on Death Row Gets a Lawyer. Not Everyone Gets a Kim Kardashian." I don't have life but I felt every word of that story.

**Brandon L., California**

I really enjoyed your last edition of News Inside [Issue 10], and I do believe that my freedom, family, and faith are key elements in my life I now hold dear to my heart...There's no doubt in my mind that the Sulzberger Executive Leadership Program made an enormous impact on your ability to identify who you readers are, and what topics of interest captures their attention. Your April edition of News Inside was by far your best composed release. People should be aware of the judges they are voting for, and have easy access to a judges' verdict on specific cases. Another great article, [This Scientist Helped Free the Innocent Using DNA. He Also Served in Biden's Cabinet], covered the practices of utilizing DNA evidence in criminal cases, and the founding of The Innocence Project. I hope Mr. Lander can use the power of the federal government to help organize and fund rigorous studies of newer types of science being pushed into the criminal justice system, such as risk-assessment algorithms that claim to objectively calculate a defendant's threat to society. The division of parole desperately needs to look into this kind of science where they fail miserably... And sadly, "The Only Way We Get Out of There Is in a Pine Box". I've felt that way sometimes...

**Carl S., New York**

I found your articles from the December 2021 News Inside very inspirational, as well as educational. I found this magazine sitting out within my dormitory...I came to my bunk and began reading...The title: News Inside, A compilation of criminal justice news from The Marshall Project, and the two African females captivated my attention and inquisitiveness...Most importantly, it was the most profound opportunity learning and enjoying the subject matter in the issue...As an incarcerated father of seven children, the Reader to Reader section on "Parenting from Prison" gave a sense of unity by advising other incarcerated parents and their families.

**Kelvin S., Louisiana**

I just finished reading a copy of "News Inside" Issue 10 titled "Today Was a Good Day". Right off the bat, I would like to thank you and your entire team for putting together such an informative illustration. Your work is definitely appreciated and utilized to help those of us who are seeking to make better decisions...Thank you and continue shedding that LIGHT.

**Darrian L., Maryland**

...I want to say thank you! I truly appreciate your magazine! I read my first one, which was the one from December 2021, Issue 9. As soon as I read, "Everyone on Death Row Gets a Lawyer. Not Everyone Gets a Kim Kardashian", it really hit home, which inspired me to send in a submission. Again, thank you for allowing me to read The Marshall Project's News Inside. I truly enjoy every article, especially Corey Arthur's "Stopping Violence Over Prison Phone Time? There's an App for That." I see that everyday here. We have tablets, but not the phone app.

**Thomas W., Illinois**





The U.S. penitentiary in Thomson, Illinois. DAVID GREEDY/GETTY IMAGES

# How the Newest Federal Prison Became One of the Deadliest

Fatal beatings. A “torture room.” Pairs of men held around the clock in tiny cells, tempers rising. “They’re literally afraid for their lives,” one lawyer said.

By CHRISTIE THOMPSON, The Marshall Project and JOSEPH SHAPIRO, NPR

Bobby Everson was nearing the end of his decade-long federal prison sentence, but he feared he wouldn’t make it home alive.

In July 2021, he was sent to the Special Management Unit at the new U.S. penitentiary in Thomson, Illinois — a program meant for some of the most violent and disruptive prisoners, though many have ended up there who don’t fit that description. Everson, who was serving time for drug and weapon charges, had recently been written up for “threatening bodily harm” and “assault without serious injury,” but prison records don’t provide details. After his transfer, his letters home to his family in New York state grew more desperate with each passing week.

Everson, whom the family called AJ, told them he was locked down nearly 24 hours a day with a cellmate, in cells so small that the toilet was crammed next to the bottom bunk. He was let out only for occasional medical appointments, showers or an hour of exercise in an outdoor cage. He could hear guards in riot gear blasting men on his tier with pepper spray and locking them in hard restraints. His own wrists, ankles and abdomen were scarred from these shackles — prisoners called it the “Thomson

tattoo,” according to attorneys.

But the most pressing threat came from the men officers chose to put in his cell. “I feel the staff here is purposefully trying to put me in situations of conflict,” he wrote to his cousin Roosevelt in late October. “Pray for your lil cousin, man, that I get through this unscathed.”

In late November, Everson got in a fight with his new cellmate. “I’m doing my best to bob and weave these incidents,” he wrote. “Keep calling up here, inquiring on me any lil free time you get.”

Seventeen days later, Everson, 36, was found dead in his cell. It was a homicide caused by “blunt trauma” with an object, according to prison records. Federal prosecutors have yet to file charges against anyone in connection to his death, which is still under investigation.

“I was scared for him, because we don’t know what happens in that prison,” said Everson’s father, Bobby. “When you get up in the morning and know he’s not going to be here ... I just miss AJ.”

Officials claimed that opening Thomson would make federal prisons safer by relieving dangerous overcrowding. But an investigation by The

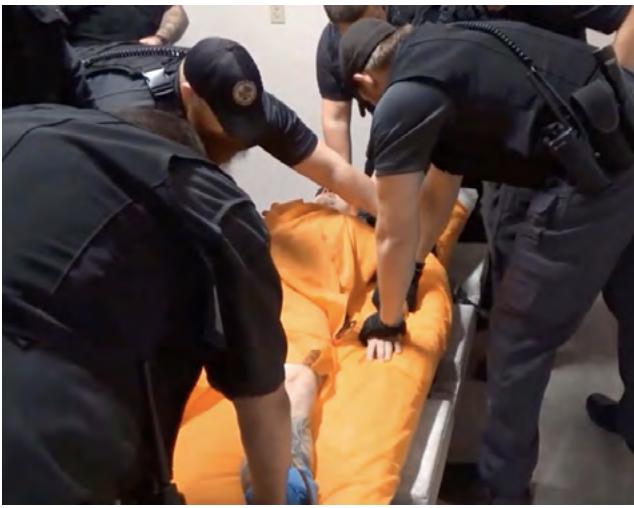
Marshall Project and NPR found that the newest U.S. penitentiary has quickly become one of the deadliest, with five suspected homicides and two alleged suicides since 2019.

“It’s beyond egregious,” said Jack Donson, a corrections consultant and former Bureau of Prisons official. “When you look at the policy and goals of the Special Management Unit, it blows my mind that there was [even] one homicide.

“The Marshall Project and NPR obtained federal prison data and agency documents, reviewed criminal and civil court cases and interviewed dozens of people with knowledge of Thomson. In stories that echoed with the same visceral details, dozens of men said they lived under the pressing threat of violence from cellmates as well as brutality at the hands of staff. Specifically, many men reported being shackled in cuffs so tight they left scars, or being “four-pointed” and chained by each limb to a bed for hours, far beyond what happens at other prisons and in violation of bureau policy and federal regulations.

Most people in the Special Management Unit are housed in double-celled solitary confinement — almost constant lockdown with





Officers at Thomson hold a man in a four-point restraint, with wrists and ankles secured to restrict movement. U.S. ATTORNEY'S OFFICE, NORTHERN DISTRICT OF ILLINOIS

another person. The Bureau of Prisons has said double-celling “mitigates suicide risks.” But psychologists and prisoners say living in such claustrophobic conditions with another person can be even worse than being alone, and often leads to violent outbursts.

Multiple people claimed in federal court filings that officers stoked tensions between cellmates and intentionally paired men who they knew would attack each other. One person formerly incarcerated at

Thomson said in a lawsuit that officers spread the false information that he was a sex offender, inciting physical and sexual assault from several cellmates.

The Marshall Project and NPR asked the Bureau of Prisons about multiple lawsuits and claims made in federal court filings out of Thomson, but agency spokesperson Scott Taylor said in an email that he could not comment on pending litigation or individual cases. He noted that people in federal prisons are not housed in “solitary confine-

ment,” because “in general, inmates in restricted housing are housed two to a cell.” To ensure safety, a team of prison officials consider gang affiliation, religion, geography and past incident reports and complaints when assigning cellmates. Intentionally ignoring a known threat from a cellmate would be misconduct by an officer and investigated, Taylor wrote.

The Bureau of Prisons’ Special Management Unit used to be housed inside the U.S. penitentiary in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania — a notorious, nearly century-old prison known as “The Big House.” A 2016 Marshall Project and NPR investigation found Lewisburg had been sued multiple times over the high rate of violence among cellmates and the use of harsh restraints by staff. In 2018, the Bureau of Prisons announced it was moving the unit to Thomson, Illinois.

According to lawsuits, letters and interviews, the violence and abuse at Lewisburg simply relocated to the new facility. The Washington Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Urban Affairs, a legal nonprofit, has spoken to dozens of men at Thomson, many of whom said conditions there were worse than at any other federal prison — including Lewisburg.

“They’re literally afraid for their lives,” said Jacqueline Kutnik-Bauder, deputy legal director of the committee, which had previously sued Lewisburg over a lack of mental health care. “[But] if they refuse to be celled with a person who they think could kill them ... they get pulled out of the cell and put into restraints as a punishment.”

Sue Phillips holds a picture of her deceased son, Matthew. Matthew died after an attack at the Thomson prison in March 2020. ALLYSON ORTEGON FOR NPR



Kutnik-Bauder has heard similar descriptions of shackling from numerous people held at Thomson. “They’re having their arms and their legs stretched out and held, separated, for hours and sometimes for days on end,” she said. “They are denied food. They are denied water. Many of them report being left in their own waste. It’s really akin to a torture chamber.”

According to Bureau of Prisons policy and federal regulations, such severe restraints should be used only as a “last alternative” for people in prison who are actively dangerous to themselves or others, and only for as long as it takes to subdue and control the person. “Force may not be used to punish an inmate,” the policy states.

“Generally speaking, per BOP policy, restraints are not used as a method of punishing an inmate or in any manner which restricts blood circulation or obstructs the inmate’s airways or in a manner that causes unnecessary physical pain or extreme discomfort,” Taylor, the bureau spokesman, wrote in an email. “Allegations of staff misconduct are taken seriously by BOP and are referred for investigation to the Office of the Inspector General.”

Federal prisons across the country are facing growing scrutiny over outbreaks of violence and abuse by officers, as documented by The Associated Press. And understaffing at many prisons escalated to crisis levels during the pandemic, increasing risks for staff and incarcerated people alike. In response, the Senate has formed a new group to investigate federal prison operations, and Bureau of Prisons Director Michael Carvajal announced his resignation in January. But there’s been little national attention paid so far to the ongoing violence at Thomson.

On March 2, 2020, officers put Matthew Phillips — a 31-year-old Jewish man with a large Star of David tattooed on his chest — in a recreation cage with two known members of a white supremacist gang, according to a federal court indictment. The gang members beat and kicked him until he went unconscious. Officers yelled at the men to stop, the indictment says. This wasn’t the first time Phillips had been targeted — he was previously attacked by gang members at Thomson and another prison, according to claims made in a lawsuit.

Phillips’ parents flew from Texas to a hospital in Iowa, where their son was unconscious and handcuffed to his hospital bed. They had to visit one at a time, limited to 10 minutes, with a guard in the room and two guards outside.

According to information from a Bureau of Prisons internal affairs report shared with The Marshall Project and NPR, officers laughed and made jokes at Phillips’ expense, prompting hospital staff to complain about their conduct.

Phillips died three days later, as he neared the end of his seven-year sentence for drug possession with intent to distribute and money laundering.

“It was a long horrible journey that ended in the worst possible way, a death with no degree of dignity at all,” said Phillips’ mother, Sue. When she flew home from Iowa, her son’s last letter was waiting in her mailbox. “I don’t think I’ll ever recover from it. The Bureau of Prisons doesn’t care about the damage they leave in their wake. He didn’t deserve to die, he deserved to come home.” The Phillips family filed a federal lawsuit this February, suing the bureau for failing to prevent Matthew’s death. In December 2021, federal prosecutors in Illinois charged the two gang members with committing a hate crime and murder. They both pleaded not guilty and face up to a life sentence if convicted.

Bureau spokesperson Taylor said he could not comment on the family’s ongoing lawsuit. “We can say, however, that BOP is cooperating fully with the investigation and prosecution related to the incident to ensure that justice is served,” he wrote.

After Phillips was killed, the violence at Thomson continued. In November 2020, Edsel Aaron Badoni, a 37-year-old member of the Navajo Nation, died from stab wounds after a fight with another prisoner.

Boyd Weekley, a 49-year-old man from South Dakota, died less than a week later by hanging, according to prison records. (Weekley was the only person to die in Thomson’s general population and not the Special Management Unit, according to prison officials.) Roughly two weeks after that, Patrick Bacon, 36, of Washington state, died by suicide, according to an autopsy. In February 2021, 41-year-old

Shay Paniry of California was stabbed to death. Bobby Everson was killed in December 2021.

And then in March 2022, James Everett, a 35-year-old man from Kansas City, Missouri, was found dead. The Bureau of Prisons confirmed in an email that his death was a suspected homicide. A death certificate and autopsy have not been released. “I think that’s what bothers me the most, you send somebody’s child home, and you don’t even tell them what happened to them,” said Everett’s father, James. When the family received the body, there were scars on his son’s wrists. “It’s like, ‘Here he is, go bury him.’ He had written letters that they were trying to kill him.” There have been at least 167 recorded assaults at Thomson between January 2019 and October 2021, according to data provided by the bureau. But this is an undercount, as it doesn’t include more serious incidents or deaths that were dealt with outside the prison disciplinary system.

Legislators said the violence is in part due to persistent understaffing. Congress members from Illinois appealed to the Bureau of Prisons in 2021 for worker retention bonuses, writing that the deaths at Thomson “may have been prevented with additional staff.”

Officials have struggled to lure enough officers to Thomson, a village of under 1,000 people, especially amid a nationwide prison staff shortage and a hiring freeze under former President Donald Trump. In May 2021, over 30% of the prison’s correctional officer jobs were unfilled, according to a letter by union officials. Staff, from counselors to cooks, were regularly conscripted to work as guards. (As of May 2022, prison officials report that 78% of corrections officer positions at Thomson are filled.)

“USP Thomson is experiencing a staffing crisis, bar none in the Bureau of Prisons,” said Jonathan Zumkehr, president of Local 4070 of the American Federation of Government Employees, in 2021. “The conditions witnessed at USP Thomson, without immediate intervention, have cultivated an environment with catastrophic potential.”

The Thomson facility was built in 2001 by the Illinois Department of Corrections. But it sat vacant for years until the federal government bought the complex, at the urging of Illinois

Congress members. Lawmakers said it would create over a thousand jobs and bring in millions of dollars for local businesses.

“Communities across our region of Illinois have spent over a decade thirsting for today’s great news,” Rep. Cheri Bustos, a Democrat from Illinois, said in 2014 of moves to open the prison. Illinois Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin called it “a significant investment in the economic future of northern Illinois.”

At the same time, Durbin was positioning himself as a critic of solitary confinement. “I have told the Bureau of Prisons to make sure that we’re learning lessons about humane treatment that is not going to endanger the inmate’s life,” he said of the new facility in a 2015 interview with The Marshall Project and NPR. Of double-celled segregation, “I hope we don’t see that at Thomson,” he said. “I believe it’s dangerous.”

President Barack Obama initially considered housing Guantánamo detainees at the building in Thomson. But in June 2018, Bureau of Prisons officials announced they were moving the Special Management Unit from Lewisburg to Thomson. The move was to increase capacity, according to Taylor, the bureau spokesperson.

Meanwhile, the bureau was fighting a decade-long legal battle against one man incarcerated at Lewisburg. In 2011, Sebastian Richardson sued the prison, claiming he had been left in painful restraints for nearly a month, in retaliation for refusing to cell with a man who had assaulted multiple roommates. The chains were so restrictive he was forced to sleep on the floor, Richardson said in a deposition, shoving toilet paper into his ears and nostrils to keep out bugs. Richardson’s attorneys tried to file a class-action lawsuit, citing the widespread practice of chaining up prisoners.

An April 2018 report by an agency that oversees prison conditions confirmed that multiple men in the Special Management Unit at Lewisburg were being chained and shackled, sometimes for days. Two men set themselves on fire in protest of the brutal conditions and were then forced into restraints, numerous prisoners told auditors. (In an email, Taylor said the men had set their belongings, not themselves, on fire “in an attempt to

have staff open their cell door while they were unrestrained” and assault officers. “It was determined the staff response was appropriate,” he wrote.)

But when officials announced the unit was moving to Illinois, the court ruled that the class-action claims were moot, as the Special Management Unit was no longer in Pennsylvania. The Bureau of Prisons settled the individual lawsuit with Richardson this February for an undisclosed amount. Over a decade after leaving Lewisburg, Richardson said in a recent interview that he still suffers searing pain, swelling and numbness in his hands.

Some advocates for men at Lewisburg hoped a new facility would mean better conditions. But not long after the Special Management Unit opened at Thomson, incarcerated people started writing letters making familiar claims of abuse, and local news reported as more men were killed.

In an emailed statement this week, Sen. Durbin, who is chair of the Senate Judiciary Committee and part of a Senate group working to strengthen prison oversight, called the deaths at Thomson “unacceptable” and said he was pushing for a “reform-minded” leader to head the Bureau of Prisons. Durbin called for agency director Carvajal’s resignation in November.

“For many years, I have sounded the alarm on BOP’s widespread failings,” he wrote. “It’s disappointing that the BOP has yet to fully address its staffing crisis and take the steps necessary to improve conditions of confinement and end the overuse of restricted housing throughout all of its facilities, including Thomson.”

Heather Sager, a spokesperson for Rep. Bustos, said in an email that Bustos would keep pushing to ensure that Thomson had the “resources and staffing necessary to help keep staff and those incarcerated safe.”

At Thomson, some call it “the dungeon” or “the torture room.” It’s where men say they are locked in hand and ankle cuffs so tight they leave scars and nerve damage, according to filings made in federal court. Others claimed in lawsuits that they were four-pointed, spread-eagle and immobile, for hours at a time. Several have claimed in legal filings that they were put in paper clothes, denied food and water, and forced to lay in their own urine

and feces.

Multiple men incarcerated at Thomson said that officers would fabricate reasons to justify restraining them, writing on internal forms that they were making threats or slipped their hands out of cuffs and hit a guard.

“To be chained down inside of an ice cold cell where the restraints are cutting into your flesh, forced to defecate and urinate on yourself ... is torture,” one man incarcerated at Thomson wrote in a letter to reporters.

Bureau spokesperson Taylor said any allegations of abuse of force were taken seriously and investigated.

The bureau did not provide data on the use of restraints at Thomson. But they did provide data on how many times officers there deployed emergency pepper spray: at least 231 times between January 2019 and August 2020 (the most recent data provided) — 72 more incidents than the second highest-use facility.

One man who sued the prison as “John Doe” claimed that officers mislabeled him a sex offender and told the other prisoners to “clean up their car,” meaning get rid of the sex offenders and snitches in their unit. According to his lawsuit, when Doe tried to avoid returning to his cell out of fear, he was pepper-sprayed and shackled by guards. Officers then chained him down to a concrete bed, beat his body and genitals with shields and left him there through the night, according to his court filing.

“This sort of extended physical and psychological torture caused the Plaintiff physical pain and suffering, and extreme, permanent mental anguish,” the complaint states.

After he was returned to his cell, Doe was repeatedly attacked by his cellmate. Desperate for help, he slipped a note about his blood pressure to a nurse, sneaking in tiny print, “please help me, I’m being sexually assaulted.” Even after that person was moved, Doe was beaten by his next two cellmates, according to his legal complaint.

“I’ve seen a lot of things, and I had never heard of something like this,” said Richard Dvorak, a civil rights attorney in the Chicago area who has taken on Doe’s case, along with another lawsuit out of Thomson. Doe has since been moved to another prison.

The agency has until July to file a response to the lawsuit in court.



A spokesperson for the Justice Department said in a separate statement that the department was “equally committed to ensuring that the Bureau of Prisons can meet its dual mission of 1) providing safe, secure, humane conditions for individuals in their custody and 2) doing everything they can to properly prepare individuals for a return to society.”

In December 2021, a Thomson prisoner named Demetrius Hill wrote a letter to the federal judge in Illinois, filed as part of his own lawsuit, about the man in a nearby cell. He had been writing regularly to the court to bring attention to what was happening at the penitentiary. “Between 10:00 and 10:47 pm the prisoner in cell F3-13 was brought out of his cell and placed on a stretcher, having blood all over his face and completely unconscious,” he wrote.

The man on the stretcher was Bobby Everson. Hill wrote in a letter to reporters that Everson, around 5’6”, had been housed with a much bigger man who had assaulted multiple previous cellmates.

“He was murdered in the SMU, forced into the cell with a raving lunatic who told the CO unit team over and over again that he’d kill him,” Hill wrote in another federal court filing. “He was a victim of staff and prisoners alike, the same prisoner who was put in chains, repeatedly slapped in the face, picked up and slammed, and had gas sprayed in his face.”

The man who Hill claims killed Everson has not been charged for Everson’s death. But that man had been writing his own federal legal complaints and motions, claiming he had been beaten by guards while in hard restraints, assaulted by past cellmates, denied his medication and previously housed with men who officers knew were dangerous.

“I am tired of fighting people,” Everson’s cellmate wrote, a month before Everson’s death.

Bureau spokesperson Taylor said he couldn’t discuss Everson’s death because it was still under investigation. He reiterated that allegations of employee misconduct are referred to the Office of the Inspector General. If someone in prison has a “security concern,” he wrote, they can tell the officers on their unit or file an administrative remedy and ask to be moved.



From left, Bobby Everson’s father Bobby Everson, his sister Ebony, and his mother, Sabrina. The family waited months for a death certificate explaining how Bobby had died. MALIK RAINEY FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT

Five months after Bobby’s death, the Everson family had not received his death certificate or an autopsy report. They did receive a phone call and a pamphlet from the FBI, which said the agency was investigating Bobby’s death. (Federal prosecutors have not filed charges, and an FBI official told reporters they could not discuss the case.) The family was mailed a box of his belongings, including handwritten rap lyrics, a Bible, deodorant and two self-help books. And they received his body — bruised and scarred — though they weren’t given enough financial support to bury him as they wanted. They had to cremate him instead.

Now there are memorials to Everson scattered throughout his sister Ebony’s house: a sketch of Bobby drawn by his cousin, a poster-sized photo collage with pictures of him at a Rick Ross concert, the program for his funeral lined up on the windowsill. Before he died, Everson wrote how he was excited to move home to New York, reconnect with family, pursue his rap career and get a job as a truck driver.

The family has been through this before. One of Everson’s cousins died in a New York state prison in 2005, when he was 20 years old. His death was ruled



Bobby Everson with his aunt Angela Everson, left, and his sister Ebony during a 2018 visit at a federal prison in South Carolina. PHOTO COURTESY OF EBONY EVERSON

a suicide, but his mother, Angela Everson, doesn’t believe it.

“I think you grieve longer and harder because you don’t know [what happened], but you can imagine,” Angela said. “My boys were not the only ones killed by the prison, and they won’t be the last. It’s a pain that just don’t go away.” ■





Visitors walked past cell blocks at Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia in June. AARON RICKETTS FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT



# Rethinking Prison Tourism

06.09.2022

Many former prison sites draw on the spooky and salacious to entertain visitors. But some are having second thoughts.

By HOPE CORRIGAN

Photography by AARON RICKETTS FOR  
THE MARSHALL PROJECT

Eastern State Penitentiary, a former prison turned museum in Philadelphia, used to lure in visitors every Halloween with an event called “Terror Behind the Walls.” The haunted house with evil doctors, a jailbreak, and zombie inmates jumping out to scare visitors, was one of the museum’s most lucrative fundraising events. But starting last year, the museum decided to drop the gore and emphasize the educational. Now the event is more optical illusions, eerie soundtracks and live performances focused on the museum’s mission of highlighting issues of incarceration.

Museum curators debated the appropriateness of the haunted house over the years. Sean Kelley, Eastern State’s senior vice president and director of interpretation, said he had grown uncomfortable with the use of prison scenes in the haunted house. “I’m amazed at how numb many of us can be about these sites. The whole subject of incarceration is less a source of amusement than it was 10 years ago in America, but there’s still like a layer of people thinking that it’s funny,” he said. “But it’s not funny to us.”

Prison tourism often relies heavily on the spooky, the gruesome and the salacious to attract visitors for a playful afternoon of ducking into cells and taking selfies in striped jumpsuits. But the entire industry, built largely on entertainment at the expense of incarcerated people’s dignity, is grappling with a growing criminal justice reform

movement — and the business is being challenged by questions about exploitation and voyeurism.

Some prison museums are less scholarly history than grotesque spectacle. At the West Virginia Penitentiary, visitors can sit in a defunct electric chair, and play “Escape the Pen,” an escape-room style game where players have a one-hour “stay of execution” granted by the governor to escape death. On the penitentiary’s TripAdvisor page, there are pictures of smiling children sitting in the electric chair. (Tom Stiles, the tour director, said that the West Virginia Penitentiary tour “does not try to disrespect an inmate or an inmate’s life. It does not try to disrespect the institution itself. We tell historical facts.”)

The Missouri State Penitentiary in Jefferson City encourages visitors to take photos in the old gas chamber used to execute 40 inmates, over half of whom were Black. The facility offers an eight-hour overnight ghost tour, asking attendees if they can survive the night on “the bloodiest 47 acres in America.” Texas Prison Museum, where the gift shop sells branded “Solitary ConfineMINTS,” displays nooses, images of a lethal injection execution and a defunct “Old Sparky” electric chair, and lets visitors pose for pictures in a replica prison cell.

In historian Clint Smith’s book, “How the Word Is Passed,” he recounts his visit to the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a prison built on a former slave plantation. Upon entering, he is greeted by a disturbing image of a White man on horseback overseeing a group of Black men working in a field. The photo hangs in a gift shop that sells Angola branded T-shirts, shot glasses

and koozies that say “Angola: A Gated Community.” Smith writes that he looked around the gift shop, wondering whom it was attempting to serve: “Who saw the largest maximum-security prison in the country as some sort of tourist destination?”

In addition to the prison tour and museum gift shop, Angola operates an annual prison rodeo, in which incarcerated men with no prior training compete for the entertainment of thousands of visitors. The most dangerous event is the Poker Game. Officials release a bull into an area where incarcerated men are seated at a table; the last man seated at the table is awarded \$500. The 2022 rodeo sold out in April. (An Angola spokesperson said the museum is a separate nonprofit from the prison or the Department of Corrections and “exists to provide a historical record of the prison’s past and present.” The voluntary prison rodeo “offers a unique opportunity for incarcerated persons to spend time with their friends and loved ones outside of regular visitation.”)

Prison tourism extends to hospitality as well. In Boston, the Liberty Hotel occupies the site of the former Charles Street Jail, which once imprisoned suffragists and civil rights activists, including Malcolm X. In the 1970s, a judge found conditions in the jail so horrible that they were inhumane. Today, guests staying at the luxury hotel can receive a tour of the jail with a complimentary glass of champagne, and dine at the restaurant, Clink, and the bars, Alibi and Catwalk, set on the former jail catwalk.

“The way the United States approaches prison tourism re-inscribes the kind of politics that support mass





Visitors walk past cell blocks at Eastern State Penitentiary. Prison museums are grappling with a growing criminal justice reform movement — and the business is being challenged by questions about exploitation and voyeurism.



The guard tower at Eastern State Penitentiary. The museum has turned away from gore and is now focusing more on highlighting issues of incarceration.





Eastern State Penitentiary was built in 1836 and closed in 1970.

incarceration,” said Jill McCorkel, a professor of criminology at Villanova University. “It turns human suffering into a spectacle.” To her, the “gold standard” of prison tourism sites are Robben Island in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela was incarcerated, and Kilmainham Gaol, a former prison in Dublin, Ireland, for their thoughtful depiction of the sites’ history.

Over the past several decades, interest has surged in mass incarceration as a humanitarian cause, fueled by exploding prison populations and outbreaks of deadly violence — from the 1971 Attica prison uprising to the current chaos at New York’s overcrowded Rikers Island jail complex. In some ways, the changing tone of prison tourism sites reflects the shifting public perception of the stresses and inequities of the penal system. It is part of a broader rethinking of how we memorialize the past, from Civil War statues and former slave plantations to lynching sites and concentration camps.

A new prison museum is in the works, adjacent to the still-operational Sing

Sing Correctional Facility in Ossining, New York. Brent Glass, the executive director of the forthcoming Sing Sing Prison Museum, says that Sing Sing’s history represents “every chapter in America’s criminal justice history.” Opened in 1826, Sing Sing is one of the best-known prisons in the country. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed there, the Yankees have played exhibition baseball games against incarcerated men and Warner Brothers Studios has used the prison as a film locale.

The fact that Sing Sing still houses over 1,500 men complicates the ethics of building a museum designed to tell the prison’s history while thousands of incarcerated men and their families are still living that history. Glass says the museum has been designed in conjunction with formerly incarcerated people and their families, taking into account any sensitivities that might arise.

“We’re not at all interested in pandering to voyeurism. And we’re not interested in exploiting, as some museums do, the paranormal interest,”

Glass said. “We think this story is compelling enough and interesting enough as a human story, a story of history, and a story of encouraging people to imagine a more equitable justice system.”

Last year, Alcatraz introduced an exhibit called “The Big Lockup: Mass Incarceration in the United States,” designed to “tell untold stories important to our nation’s history concerning the complex issue of incarceration.” The Fauquier History Museum at the Old Jail in Warrenton, Virginia, has a new exhibit focused on how the jail was a barrier to freedom for runaway enslaved people in the 19th century. The museum director told *The Washington Post* that he wants to “eliminate some romanticism about old jails and prisons.”

The seriousness with which Eastern State Penitentiary handles the subject sets it apart from most prison tourism sites. A timely art installation engraved on the glass encasement of the prison’s greenhouse illustrates the case of Doris Jean Ostreicher, an heiress whose illegal

abortion and death led to the imprisonment of Milton Schwartz, the bartender who performed the abortion. What once was the hospital ward now holds an exhibit on diseases in prison, from tuberculosis to AIDS to Covid-19. Photos and narration from both incarcerated people and correctional officers tell the story of the prison in the 20th century.

One thing a visitor learns on a two-hour self-guided audio tour of the Eastern State Penitentiary is that the United States prison system faces the same problems it did when the cells of the old prison were full: the spread of disease, gang violence, isolation, mental illness, and the disproportionate number of incarcerated Black and brown people. Many correctional facilities still don't have air conditioning and heat. During the narration on the audio tour, a formerly incarcerated man recounts being told by correctional staff upon his release that "they'll see him in six months." Last year, a formerly incarcerated man told me that correctional staff at his facility said upon his release that "they'll leave the lights on for him." What prison tourism can show us is how far we haven't come.

At the end of the audio tour at Eastern State Penitentiary, a 16-foot steel sculpture called "The Big Graph" offers a visual representation of mass incarceration in America. It illustrates the racial breakdown of prison populations since 1970 and charts other nations' rates of incarceration compared with the United States. (The U.S. sits far above the rest.) The exhibit, called "Prisons Today: Questions in the Age of Mass Incarceration," was added in 2016 in an effort to contextualize the impact of Eastern State Penitentiary and U.S. prisons.

Eastern State's Sean Kelley teaches a Zoom class to incarcerated men at SCI Chester in Pennsylvania, and during one recorded class, the men shared their thoughts about prison museums. Robert S., an incarcerated man at SCI Chester, said he doesn't have a problem with prison museums, but organizers should make sure that people have an understanding of the effect on the people who were housed there. "The museum is for amusement, but this was someone's pain," he said. "This was someone's struggle. This was someone's life. It wasn't amusement to them." ■

shackled when they were allowed out to shower or make phone calls. Conditions were so punitive that one expert described them as child abuse.

"The bottom line is that this is a terrible way to rehabilitate children," testified Rachel Gassert, policy director at the Louisiana Center for Children's Rights. She cited the findings of the investigation as "a great illustration of why this bill is necessary."

The state's Office of Juvenile Justice said that the facility was meant to provide additional support and security to its most troubled teens, but internal documents showed the harsh measures instead led to violence, property destruction and escapes.

After months of defending the treatment of teenagers at St. Martinville, the head of the juvenile justice office, Bill Sommers, publicly acknowledged to lawmakers for the first time that he was not satisfied with how the facility was being run. He also expressed support for the proposed legislation to limit the use of isolation in his facilities.

"The longer an individual is in solitary, the more they're likely to act out," he said. "I do believe in that correlation."

In Louisiana, current state policy allows a maximum of 12 hours of isolation in most cases, and seven days for "highly disruptive" behavior. Those policies are nonbinding and don't have the force of law, and even those limits stop short of what experts recommend. Most experts suggest that isolation should be used only until a young person calms down and is not a physical threat to themselves or others.

The new bill, which was introduced last month by State Rep. Royce Duplessis, a New Orleans Democrat, would make it illegal for the agency to use solitary confinement for young people for more than eight hours at a time. The bill would also require the state's juvenile justice agency to better track the use of isolation in its facilities and to notify parents when their children are placed in solitary.

"We're trying to keep the guards safe, we're trying to keep the juveniles safe," Duplessis told lawmakers in April 2022, adding that the bill "puts some guardrails in place, which currently there are none."

Both the American Medical Association and the American

# Solitary Confinement Harms Teens. Louisiana Lawmakers Took a Step to Limit It.

04.28.2022

An investigation by The Marshall Project, NBC News and ProPublica found that youth in a Louisiana lockup were held in isolation around the clock for weeks.

By **BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL**, The Marshall Project; **ERIN EINHORN**, NBC News; and **ANNIE WALDMAN**, ProPublica

A bill that would place strict limits on the use of solitary confinement for youth in Louisiana unexpectedly advanced out of a legislative committee in April 2022 after legislators heard testimony from people who had been

held in isolation as children.

Testimony during the hearing also included descriptions of conditions in a facility that was the subject of a recent investigation by The Marshall Project, NBC News and ProPublica. Teens at the Acadiana Center for Youth at St. Martinville were locked behind solid steel doors around-the-clock for weeks at a time, alone and frequently in the dark, and were handcuffed and





Photos taken by a then-staff member at the Acadiana Center for Youth at St. Martinville shows holes dug into cell walls. Teens were locked alone behind solid steel doors, around-the-clock, for weeks at a time.

Psychological Association have decried solitary confinement as a harmful, punitive practice, leading to depression and even psychosis. Research has found that more than half the kids in juvenile facilities who die by suicide are, or recently were, in isolation. Citing the harm the practice can cause, the federal government has banned the use of solitary confinement at its juvenile facilities, and at least 24 states have placed strict limits on its use.

“It turned me into an antisocial person,” said Therrin Dew, 21, who said he did numerous stints in solitary confinement — one as long as six months — during the 5 1/2 years he spent in facilities including Louisiana’s Swanson Center for Youth. “I was energetic and a free spirit once, but being in a cell that long, it kind of turned you against people.”

The conditions were unsanitary, he said, noting that he was once isolated in a cell that had someone else’s feces smeared on the wall.

“If you’re in solitary confinement, you can’t learn nothing but the way the bricks look around you.”

Some lawmakers came into the hearing skeptical about the bill, Duplessis said. “There’s a big push in the Legislature right now to make it safer,” he said in an interview Thursday,

referring to violence in the facilities. “By making it safer, in some people’s eyes, that means increasing punishment.”

State Rep. Debbie Villio, a Republican and former prosecutor from the New Orleans suburbs, raised concerns early in the hearing about a binding eight-hour limit, saying that young people’s behavior should be handled on a case-by-case basis. But later in the hearing, after testimony from Dew and others, she announced her support for advancing the bill.

“I can’t ignore what we’ve heard,” she said. “It sounds to me like there’s some serious issues that need to be addressed immediately.”

Among those issues is a debilitating staff shortage. Sommers testified that about a third of his agency’s positions are currently unfilled.

The bill ultimately won unanimous support from the House’s criminal justice committee and will now go to the full House.

Last year, legislators ordered an audit of the use of solitary confinement at youth lockups, after two teens died by suicide in isolation in the same week in 2019. That audit, released this week, found that the Office of Juvenile Justice routinely ignored its own policies on isolation, with 40% of confinements in 2019 and 2020 exceeding the maximum

duration allowed at the time. The average duration of confinement was about six days, more than 14 times the national average as of October 2020. In one instance, a child was held in solitary confinement for three months straight.

“It’s unforgivable,” said Gina Womack, executive director of Families and Friends of Louisiana’s Incarcerated Children, which advocates for youth in detention. “A lot of our young people already have some mental health issues, and solitary just really exacerbates that.”

The audit also showed that Black youth were disproportionately held in isolation in state facilities, accounting for 94% of placements in solitary confinement, greater than the 82% of the children in state-run lockups who were Black.

St. Martinville was not included in the legislative auditor’s report because it opened in 2021. But the investigation from The Marshall Project, NBC News and ProPublica found that the conditions there were even more extreme than those the auditor found at other secure care facilities across the state. Youth in the facility were in solitary for weeks on end and weren’t provided education or other legally required services, such as substance abuse counseling.

Witnesses at the hearing told the

committee that any time in solitary can be life-altering.

“I lost part of who I was as a human being,” Ronald Marshall, who was held

in isolation for seven months as a young person in Louisiana decades ago, told the committee. “My need to feel safe. My need to feel loved. My need to feel

in control of my life. It destroyed all of that.” ■

# Their Sentences Are Unconstitutional — But They’re Still In Prison.

05.10.2022

Louisiana’s high court considers the fate of more than 1,000 people serving sentences handed down by “Jim Crow juries.”

By BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL

Reginald Reddick is serving life in prison in Louisiana for second-degree murder, even though two jurors at his 1997 trial found him not guilty. Almost anywhere else in the country, he would have been acquitted: Even one juror would have been enough to change the outcome. This week, the Louisiana Supreme Court will hear oral arguments in Reddick’s case, in which he argues that he is entitled to a new trial. The court’s decision could affect more than 1,000 people who, like Reddick, are serving time for crimes that some of their jurors did not believe, beyond a reasonable doubt, that they had committed.

Until recently, Louisiana was one of only two states that did not require the unanimous vote of a jury, a vestige of a Jim Crow-era law designed to negate the growing power of Black jurors. In 2018, Louisiana residents voted to end the practice, and in 2020, the U.S. Supreme Court found non-unanimous jury verdicts unconstitutional. But the high court declined to make the ruling retroactive, leaving it up to Louisiana and Oregon (the only other state that allowed split juries) to decide whether people already serving time in such cases were entitled to new trials.

One night in 1993, Reddick was drinking in the same bar as Al Moliere in a small town south of New Orleans. A witness said he saw Reddick shoot Moliere later that night in the course of a robbery, but the story he told on the stand conflicted with multiple versions he had previously told police. All the other evidence against Reddick — including a gun recovered months later with the initials “R.R.” carved into the



Reginald Reddick. PHOTO COURTESY OF PROMISE OF JUSTICE INITIATIVE

handle — was circumstantial, said Jamila Johnson, one of his attorneys. In the more than 20 years he’s been in prison, he’s maintained he did not shoot Moliere.

Should Reddick win a new trial, many other incarcerated people in Louisiana might also be entitled to the same opportunity. But Johnson and the New Orleans nonprofit The Promise of Justice Initiative and others have struggled to answer the surprisingly vexing question: Who, exactly, was convicted by a non-unanimous jury in Louisiana?

“Our record-keeping in the South is horrible,” said Jason Williams, the district attorney in the parish that includes New Orleans. “It has been very difficult just to find all of the records and information necessary to do a complete review.”

That challenge was compounded by a deadline: Even if the state Supreme

Court rules in Reddick’s favor, only those who filed applications with the state courts within one year of the U.S. Supreme Court’s 2020 ruling will have a shot at new trials. Anyone who discovered later that their jury was not unanimous would need legislators to pass a new law in order to ask for relief, Johnson said.

Racing the clock to find people sitting in prison because of split juries, three paralegals attended community meetings, visited prisons and sent letters trying to reach people who might have been convicted by a split jury. “Their job was talking to family members, walking them through documents that were in their closets. ‘You have a giant box. Let’s start in envelope one,’” said Johnson.

Eventually, the team filed petitions on behalf of about 1,000 people they could prove were convicted by split juries. In these cases, each juror’s vote was recorded in court transcripts or polling slips at the defendants’ original trials years, or even decades, ago.

Hundreds more had no recourse, said Sara Gozalo, a paralegal with The Promise of Justice Initiative: The results of the jury polling were not recorded anywhere, or the polling never happened in the first place. “Maybe you were convicted by a 10-2,” Gozalo had to tell them. “You’ll never know.”

In most cases, district attorneys have opposed attempts to challenge these convictions, arguing that the Supreme Court’s ruling should not apply to older cases. But in more than 50 cases, prosecutors have been willing to revisit the convictions without waiting for a ruling in the Reddick case.





On Tuesday, May 10, 2022, attorneys from the Promise of Justice Initiative argued *Reddick v. Louisiana* before the Louisiana Supreme Court. PHOTO COURTESY OF PROMISE OF JUSTICE INITIATIVE

Williams, who was elected Orleans Parish district attorney in 2020, campaigned on a promise to right many of the wrongs of his predecessors. “There are a realm of cases that are wrongful convictions because, for example, they used a law that was specifically written to exclude Black voices from the jury — whether or not they actually did it,” said Emily Maw, who heads Williams’ Civil Rights Division. For 68 people, that meant vacating their convictions and negotiating pleas that resulted in less prison time.

Mark Isaac was convicted of second-degree murder in 1992 and had spent decades behind bars before a fellow prisoner at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola told him, “Man, check your paperwork, you might have 10-2,” Isaac recalled. He had maintained that he had acted in self-defense when he shot and killed Elton Williams in New Orleans in 1988, and it wasn’t until he reached out to The Promise of Justice Initiative that he discovered two jurors may have agreed. His attorneys struck a deal with Williams’ office to have Isaac plead to the lesser charge of manslaughter, and he was released with time served last year.

When Gozalo joined The Promise of Justice Initiative, she discovered that each parish in Louisiana had its own system of keeping records and its own rules about how to request them. Court

clerks often demanded requests be faxed. Who uses fax machines in 2020, she wondered. “I’m at an office with a fax machine, but what does an incarcerated person do?” Gozalo said. “These random rules ... from one clerk to the next, seem arbitrary and almost violent to me — like little landmines that make it harder for people to fight their cases.”

The non-unanimous rule has its roots in the years after Reconstruction, when White lawmakers were looking to weaken the civic power of newly enfranchised Black citizens. In crafting the rule, “Our mission was, in the first place, to establish the supremacy of the White race in this State,” said delegates to the state’s 1898 constitutional convention. They determined how many Black people were likely to be seated on a jury, and then set the minimum number of votes so prosecutors could reliably obtain convictions over Black jurors’ objections. While the number of votes has changed over the years — first it was 9-3, then it was 10-2 — critics argue, the impact has not.

An investigative series by the Louisiana newspaper *The Advocate* analyzed six years of trial records, finding that Black defendants were more likely to be convicted by non-unanimous juries. A subsequent analysis of the same dataset by Thomas W. Frampton, then a Harvard lecturer, found that Black jurors were significantly more likely to cast votes that

don’t change the outcome of the case. In a 2018 court case, Frampton argued that “the non-unanimous jury verdict system operated today just as it was intended in 1898: to silence African-Americans on juries and to render their jury service meaningless.”

The history of the rule and its consequences are so striking that critics have taken to calling them “Jim Crow juries.”

The state attorney general’s office and the Louisiana District Attorneys Association did not respond to requests for interviews. But in court filings, attorneys for the state argue that “the State’s interest in the finality of its non-unanimous verdicts is overwhelming and untainted by racial discrimination,” and warn that hundreds of new cases would flood the courts if the new rule were to be made retroactive. “Evidence deteriorates, memories fade and witnesses become unavailable over time. It will be difficult — if not impossible — for the State to retry these cases,” they write. “Even if the State could retry some defendants, doing so would subject the victims of their crimes to fresh pain and difficulty.”

Gozalo and her colleagues say they’re hopeful the state’s high court will recognize that people convicted by non-unanimous juries deserve new trials. “We’re not saying, ‘Free everyone,’” she said. “We’re saying, ‘Give everyone a fair trial.’” ■



# A Tupperware of Heroin, or How I Ended Up in Prison

06.07.2022

In an excerpt from her new memoir, "Corrections in Ink," Keri Blakinger puts us at the scene of her drug arrest — and her path to becoming The Marshall Project's first formerly incarcerated staff writer.

By KERI BLAKINGER



Author Keri Blakinger. ILANA PANICH-LINSMAN

ITHACA, N.Y. — I have problems: I am out of clean clothes, I cannot find my glasses, my English paper is late and my pockets are not big enough for all the heroin I have.

But honestly, more than anything, I want a cigarette.

I'm only 10 minutes from where I'm going, and it's cold outside. The sun is deceptive; it looks like a nice upstate New York morning, but really it's December and the wind is whipping up from Ithaca's gorges. I stop walking and push my fingers deep into my pockets in search of a Parliament.

In a minute, there will be police, with questions and handcuffs. By tomorrow, my scabby-faced mugshot will be all over the news as the Cornell student arrested with \$150,000 of smack. I will sober up to a sea of regrets. My dirty clothes and late English paper — one of

the last assignments I need to graduate — will be the least of my problems.

But that's all in the future. Right now, I just want that cigarette. *Where the fuck did I put them?*

When I woke up this morning in the stash house on Stewart Avenue, the first thing I did was look at my day planner; I am over-organized as ever, even on the brink of disaster. Then, I answered the phone after my boyfriend called repeatedly. We got in a fight. I emailed one of my professors to beg for another extension and promised myself today would be the day I would finally finish everything I need to graduate.

Then I mixed up a spoon of heroin and coke and spent the next two hours poking my arms and legs, fishing around under the skin with a 28-gauge needle in search of relief. My veins are all shot out and scarred and hard to find, so my stabs at oblivion usually involve a few hours of crying as I bleed all over the floor, leaving behind the speckled blood spatter of a crime scene.

This time, I got extra-high, and that last shot was really just out of spite; my boyfriend had the nerve to accuse me of stealing from our heroin, and frankly, I'm pissed. I'm pissed at him, I'm pissed at myself, I'm pissed at every moment that's led me here, and I'm pissed that he's calling on repeat, screaming and threatening me while I'm just trying to get high, to get smashed, to get far away from the darkness I'm running from — or toward. Sometimes it's hard to tell the

difference.

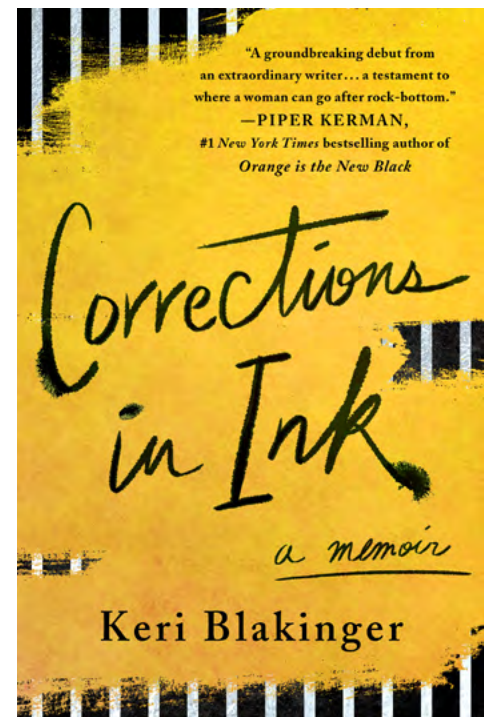
The phone goes off again, buzzing with the pop-punk notes of a New Found Glory ringtone bought with drug money.

*You were everything I wanted, but I just can't finish what I started.*

It's him, of course: Alex. He's been smoking crack all morning, holed up with my skittish dog in our basement apartment in Collegetown. I can imagine him there, his tattooed arms prying the blinds open as he checks for the black bears and SWAT teams of his drugged-out hallucinations. He is 14 years my senior, but I know how his face looks childish with terror when his dark eyes gape at what is not there and he begins muttering in his parents' native tongue. They are Greek, and he is whispering a tragic chorus.

Right now, it seems, he's more focused on his phone than on his fear, as he's been calling me again and again to demand that I come back immediately with our Tupperware of drugs. He wants me to bring the whole six-ounce stash so that he can check the weight and make sure I didn't steal any before we sell it.

Before leaving, I take out three or four grams and tuck it under the insole of my black suede sneakers. I like to be prepared. You never know when you might need more heroin. I leave behind the tiny digital scale, an array of baggies and needles, some assorted pills, and my backpack of schoolwork. But then



the drugs kick in, and I accidentally nod out for an hour or so in the bathroom before I finally head out into the cold in a black, dragon-print hoodie that leaves me significantly underdressed for 25-degree weather.

I'm a couple houses away — right next to the gorge where I tried to kill myself three years earlier — when I realize I can't find the smokes.

*I was damaged long ago, though you swear that you are true, I still pick my friends over you.*

Without even glancing down at my beat-up flip phone, I send Alex straight to voicemail. Then, I whip the clear container full of heroin out of my oversized hoodie and put it down on the curb.

This — like so much else in my life — is probably not a good idea. But it'll only take a minute, and I need a damn cigarette. I lose sight of everything else as I hunch over to empty out my pockets, pawing through ballpoint pens, mechanical pencils, gram-sized drug baggies, lint and the assorted debris of my life.

When I look up, empty-handed, there's a cop walking toward me. Given the presence of the patrol car a few houses down, I'm guessing he drove, but he sure seems to have materialized out of thin air, a harbinger of bad things ahead breaking through the haze of my high.

Instinctively, I toss the heroin under the nearest car before I stand up, hoping he didn't see my roadside discus toss. I smile to show that everything is okay. *Of course it's okay, Officer! Why wouldn't it be?*

Then something happens — did I just nod out or black out? — and I'm still yammering away to this cop about the weather (which is not as nice as I'm claiming it is) when a middle-aged lady who works at the nearby flophouse comes plodding across the parking lot. She is large and largely unmemorable — except that she is holding the next two years of my life in her hands.

"Are you looking for this, sir?"

Shit.

Eying the contents of my Tupperware, the cop clears his throat and instructs me to empty out my pockets, which I know hold at least a \$150 eight-ball of coke and 10 or 20 of the deep-green 60-milligram Oxy's.

Welp.

I decide to make this arrest as painless as possible. I take out the coke with my left hand and as I'm handing it over, I take my right hand and pop the pills into my mouth and swallow them all dry. The cop threatens to pepper spray me if I don't spit them out — but it's too late because I've already eaten them all. It's enough to kill most people, but I've built quite a tolerance through nearly a decade of self-destruction.

Soon I'm handcuffed and in the back seat, bouncing around like one of those annoying little jumpy dogs. The policeman is standing outside doing paperwork, but when he notices the flurry of movement gently rocking the car, he glances over, disinterestedly asking if I'm okay.

"Okay" is not the word I would use to describe this situation.

But I nod and smile; I need him to turn back around so I can finish transferring the heroin from under my insole to a far less accessible spot — up my ass. I know I'm probably going to jail, at least for a few days, so I'll do anything to stave off the impending dopesickness.

As the pills really start to kick in, the day proceeds in snapshots of clarity surrounded by dense pillars of cognitive fog. The present fades to the past, and I am 17 and alone, sitting on a cement step somewhere around Brattle Street in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

I came here for Harvard Summer School; my promising figure skating career had fallen apart, and my parents realized there was something wrong. This seemed like a fix. They know about the eating disorders, the depression. They do not know about the suicide attempt. They do not know what to do. And neither do I.

So here I am — in far too public a place for this — staring down at a brown line of heroin laid out hastily across my copy of *Sons and Lovers*, a high school summer reading assignment that I will never finish. These are about to be firsts for me. Both my first line and the first time I will not finish my reading assignment.

I am tightly wound, a taut rubber band of perfectionism and self-destruction. And I am about to make things worse.

The rubber band snaps, and I'm back in the present, handcuffed in the Ithaca police station.

At some point, I remember nodding

out in an interview room, while police pepper me with questions I don't remember answering. The next thing I know, I'm staring up at a judge. She talks about me as if I cannot hear her, and the look on her face could be annoyance from being called in on a weekend or sheer disdain at the scabby, smelly junkie in front of her.

Time contracts, and the scene changes. Now I have Fritos all over my chest, and I'm alone in a room with a metal toilet but no toilet paper, a shower stall caked in vomit, a two-inch-thick mattress with holes in it and two walls made of security glass. I think I'm in a holding cell in the county jail, and I'm guessing that I was just served lunch or dinner, which probably included the Fritos that I've nodded out on and made such a mess of.

Another flash, and I'm sitting at a metal desk in front of a jail guard, who's asking me intake questions I'm entirely too high to answer accurately. My hair is wet from a delousing shower, and I'm wearing a two-sizes-too-big jail-issued snap-up orange jumpsuit paired with flip-flops. Someone took a mugshot, but I don't remember it.

Everything goes black again, and this time when the world flashes back, I'm holding a blue plastic bin of jail-issue items as I stagger forward, following the commands of a sour-faced guard. I put my bin down on the bunk where I'm told. Before I can turn around again, she's slammed shut the metal bars, locking me into what I now realize is my own cell.

I've been too out of it to pay attention to my surroundings — and I've lost my glasses, anyway, further blurring the corners of this unfamiliar world. I only realize that I'm not entirely alone here when another girl wanders up to my cell bars. I am confused. *How are other people out and walking around? Why am I locked in my cell and everyone else is not? She explains: You are locked in because you are new and awaiting medical clearance. It could be a week before you get out to mingle.* But she has been here some time, and it's not her first stay. This is her milieu, and she knows how it works. When she starts peppering me with questions, I do my best to answer, but I don't really understand any of this.

*No, I don't know what my charges are. No, I don't know if they're serious. No, I*

*don't know if I've been arraigned. No, I don't know if I have a lawyer. But, I say, I do know this: I am too high to remain upright any longer, and I have a very important question. I have drugs on me right now, and if you tell me how and when I can best do them without getting caught, then I will give you some.* She smiles slowly, a sly Cheshire cat in an orange jumpsuit.

*You'll fit in just fine here.*

I wish, for the me I was then, that I could add one more flash, much further forward. I wish that the me nodding out in a cold cinder block cell could see ahead five years, or even 10. I wish that she could see herself getting out of prison, getting sober, finally finishing those college papers and getting a

degree. Her last class will be about mass incarceration — and she'll get an A. That cop who arrested her will run up to her one day on the street and want to shake her hand, smiling in the face of an apparent success story. She'll get her first job as a reporter — here, in Ithaca. And she'll love it.

I wish that, instead of being so bitter and broken right now, she could be grateful for the opportunities and chances she'll have that not everyone will. I wish she could see how she'll grab at those chances and run with them.

I wish she could see the day in 2018, when she is crying alone on the bedroom floor, not because she is sad, but because she did a thing, and it mattered. She wrote a story about

prisoners and how the prison system wouldn't give them teeth. But then the people in charge read her story and changed their minds and decided to give more prisoners dentures. And yes, sure, it's a little thing, in one corner of the world — but it made a difference to people who live where she is about to spend the next two years of her life.

I wish she could see who she will become, and the parts of herself she will leave behind. The darkness that she will learn to live with, and the light she will learn to let in.

But I can't show her those things yet. She'll have to learn the hard way, on a thin plastic mattress in the Tompkins County Jail where — right now — she really, really wants a cigarette. ■

# I Joined the Parole Board to Make a Difference. Now I Call It 'Conveyor Belt Justice.'

06.17.2022

Between the grueling schedule, copious paperwork, abrupt hearings and risk-averse colleagues, prison reformer Carol Shapiro realized the New York parole system was dysfunctional by design.

By CAROL SHAPIRO as told to BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL

Illustration by MICHELLE KONDRICH FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT





I visited my first jail in 1970, when I was 16. I had a high school sociology teacher who talked about the disparity of bail and how people were being held simply because they couldn't afford to pay it. Disturbed, I wrote to many wardens asking if I could come and talk to them about the issue. The only one who would meet with a teenager was John Case, warden of the Bucks County jail in Pennsylvania.

When I arrived with my notebook and pencil, Case said to me, "Carol, it's great you came with your list of questions for me, but you really need to talk with the men here." What I learned was that a lot of them were there for minor things, like drug use and resisting serving in the Vietnam War. On my way out, I remember thinking, I just met human beings. I am going home for dinner, and they're not. It gave me a purpose in life.

I started a pre-release life skills program at Lorton Prison in Virginia while I was a grad student studying social psychology and social work. In the '90s, I worked as an assistant commissioner at New York's Rikers Island Jail, and I went on to start a family-based drug crisis center called La Bodega de la Familia. We worked with the Lower East Side community to provide support for families at risk of being or already involved with the criminal justice system through probation, parole and arrest. We mapped their family systems to find the strengths and connections. There might be child welfare, public housing, probation and parole all in one household. But you might also see that Grandma takes care of the kids and is a positive influence. It was a strengths-based family case management system.

My time on New York's parole board started with a 2016 New York Times analysis that found a dramatic difference in parole rates between White prisoners and Black and Latino prisoners. Gov. Andrew Cuomo really wanted to change the composition of the parole board because it had calcified so much. I had always believed I could be a change agent from the inside, so when my colleagues asked if they could put my name up for consideration for the board, I said yes. When I was appointed in 2017, the board could hold up to 19 members, but there were only about a dozen in place.

I really didn't know what I was getting into.

The job itself was difficult. Even before COVID-19, almost everything was via video conference. We'd drive hours and hours to parole offices all over the state to sit behind a table for 12 hours doing video interviews. At some offices, if you were interviewing mostly short-termers, you could do 40 a day. At others, it was 25 to 30.

The rooms where we worked were often windowless, with drab green walls and hard chairs. Along with rotating teams of one or two other board members, there would be a court reporter and institutional staff who brought boxes of files from the local facilities and sat in on the interviews. Each file would be labeled, "Commissioner 1," "Commissioner 2," and so on. That's how you knew which interviews you were responsible for leading that day.

I started to call what we were doing "conveyor belt justice," because you'd be busy preparing to lead the next interview instead of watching and listening closely to the one taking place. Then you might be writing an opinion during the next interview.

And the paperwork was a huge challenge. There was a lot of it, and since it wasn't digitized, you'd have to wade through

dozens of pieces of paper. The files included prisoners' COMPAS risk-analysis scores and the programs they completed. Then there might be letters from victims, judges and prosecutors. If the crime involved a police officer, the police union would gather hundreds of letters, saying, "Do not release this person." We had to physically sign each victim impact statement. More paper.

The files for the most heinous offenses — the ones where the prisoner was denied parole umpteen times — were the worst. They were hundreds of pages, so you could end up relying on a top sheet that summed up how many years the person had been in prison, what their sentence was, and what the pre-sentence investigation said at the time. The problem is that these investigations were fixed in time; they could be from 30 some-odd years ago.

The purpose of parole is not to focus on a static event; that is the purpose of sentencing. Parole should consider primarily who the person is today. But New York parole laws have a "deprecation" clause, which basically means that the seriousness of the crime justifies keeping you in prison. This gives commissioners an easy out, even when someone has been before the board three, five or seven times, or they committed the crime at 17, and they're now 70. If you can always have the seriousness of the crime as your hook to keep people in prison, that's what you'll do. This is particularly true if there's political pressure from the governor, police commissioner or a mayor. It gets pretty ugly. And commissioners are really risk-averse if they are up for reappointment. If you need the job, why would you let somebody out who's controversial?

My colleagues also heavily considered the role of the victims in their decisions. I did not think that was particularly appropriate. Our country just needs a better system to address the harms that victims and their families face. They have no other recourse besides retribution and punishment. They are angry and want to keep people in prison, but we need a process to help them heal.

My own mother was crushed by a drunk driver when I was 5, and she was 35. He was a U.S. sailor who was drunk on July 4. She lived, but had 96 bones broken. She was in the hospital for two years. That's what got me interested in these labels we use — "victim," "perpetrator," "offender" — instead of "people." I grew up with redemption and forgiveness.

So I tried to do things differently. Some of my colleagues were very terse with the people we were interviewing. These people were already nervous. Instead of starting my interviews with, "Name?" I would say something, like, "Hi, Mr. Smith, how are you feeling today? I'd understand if you're nervous. Maybe we should take a deep breath." I would lead with questions about what they felt positive about. The idea was to be asset-oriented as opposed to starting with the crime they committed.

We were given templates to frame our potential decisions in ways that would stand up in court if the prisoner appealed. But I hand-wrote mine with a pen and paper and gave them to the court reporter, who would type them up and have me sign them.

I also started to write dissents when my colleagues wouldn't let people out of prison who I believed should receive parole. This was frowned upon because they didn't want prisoners who appealed their cases to have a board member talking on record about how they'd changed their

lives and deserved to go home.

After a while, I realized that I was dissenting more than agreeing with my colleagues. It's really hard when you're always against everybody else. Even though they may have said, "I respect your values," there was this idea that I should try and be a team player.

Often I'd go into the bathroom to cry, upset because my colleagues didn't recognize that a person had transformed and deserved to go home. I just couldn't make a difference in the way I thought I could. Work was an uphill battle, and I was Sisyphus. This was just not a healthy place for me to be working anymore. I had a five-year term, but only made it through two.

Now, there's a fair and timely parole bill before the New

York State Senate that requires the board to release people who are eligible without as much consideration for the seriousness of their crime. Commissioners definitely need a roadmap to follow a different line of questioning, because when you look through a file and really talk to somebody, that's when you learn what they've done to try and improve themselves. Factors like going to school, working and helping others in the prison should be taken seriously. Otherwise, there's no point in these interviews. People are way more than the worst thing they have ever done. ■■

*The New York Department of Corrections and Community Supervision did not respond to questions by press time.*

## Tackling a Huge Taboo: Sexual Desire Behind Bars

11.18.2021

On the outside, most discussions about incarceration and sexual desire are limited to exploitative "reality" shows, violent movies and terrible jokes about homosexuality and prison rape. But like all humans, we deserve some semblance of dignity.

by TARIQ MAQBOOL

Illustration by DIANA NGUYEN FOR THE MARSHALL PROJECT





For a de facto lifer like me, contact with family and friends is crucial to my mental health and survival. Visits and phone conversations are my lifelines out of this dark place. And when visits were cancelled because of the pandemic, daily calls kept me from becoming totally depressed.

One day, during one of those calls, a childhood friend asked me a surprising question.

"Tariq, what do you do to ... control yourself?" she asked uneasily.

Our relationship spans continents and almost a lifetime, so we usually speak freely. But, you see, she and I are devout Muslims from Pakistan. In our conservative culture, conversations about sex are off limits unless you are someone's spouse or a relative of the same gender. This question was even more complicated because she's married.

Still, for clarification I asked, "You mean how do I control my sexual urges?"

"Yes," she confirmed, sounding relieved at my bluntness.

I answered her as honestly as I could: I admitted that I have moments of weakness like millions of other human beings. I told her I work to control myself by fasting, as dictated by our Islamic traditions. I also avoid lewd content on TV so that I don't get sexually stimulated. This is no easy feat given much of today's television.

My friend's question caused me to reflect on how we think about sexual desire and incarceration. In open society, most discussions are limited to exploitative "reality" shows, violent movies and terrible jokes about homosexuality and prison rape. But our needs are a matter of normal human behavior, and we deserve some semblance of dignity.

Decades ago, a number of states at least allowed conjugal visits with spouses and extended family time. But tough-on-crime politics and program budget cuts have eliminated most of these rare sources of intimacy.

As an unmarried prisoner for the past 19 years, I can tell you that we all struggle with a deprivation that feels like castration. I can also tell you that being lonely and sexually frustrated can lead to feelings of hopelessness, depression and even violence. Families of the incarcerated also suffer.

General prison policy works against normal human needs. It seems like everything is covered under the abstract concept of "lewd behavior." For example, we've been told that we have to maintain an upright posture during visits and avoid crossing legs with our visitors. In practicality, it means that your legs can't even touch and you can't lean forward to talk.

Moreover, even if you're married to someone, contact can't be too intimate. You can briefly hug or kiss at the beginning and end of a visit only. Officers apply the rules in a completely arbitrary fashion. If you hold your wife for too long, or you kiss her too passionately, you can be charged with a lewd act.

I remember when a good friend of mine—a devout and respected older Muslim—got locked up for a "lewd act" after a visit through a window with his wife of 30 years. Their violation: She had flashed him her breasts and blown him a kiss.

When the news of his lewdness charge spread, officers and prisoners alike humiliated him. They laughed at him and suggested that he was not "the good brother" after all. He was also placed in solitary confinement.

When he came out, I asked him if he had really done something lewd. He stared into my eyes, with tears wetting his

thick gray beard. "She is my wife, Tariq," he said. "I got locked up for seeing my wife's breasts!"

I'm still filled with shame when I think about how I doubted my friend. I also can't comprehend the absurdity of it all. A man was shamed for having feelings for his wife.

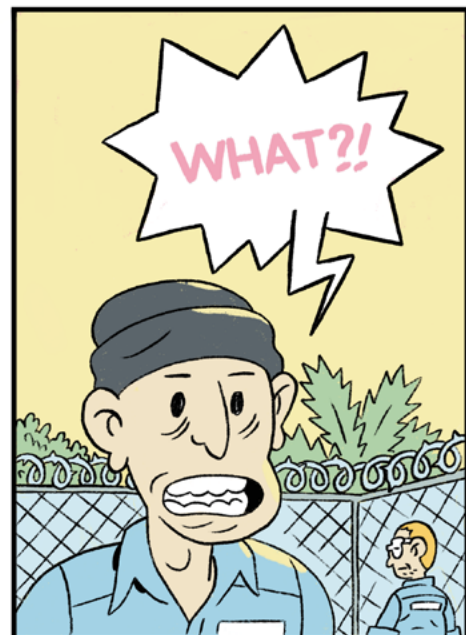
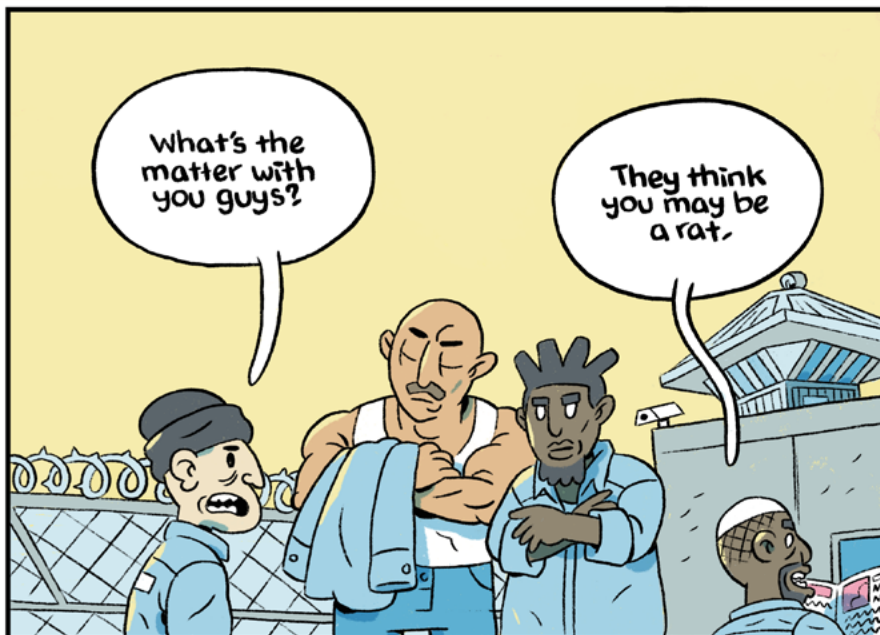
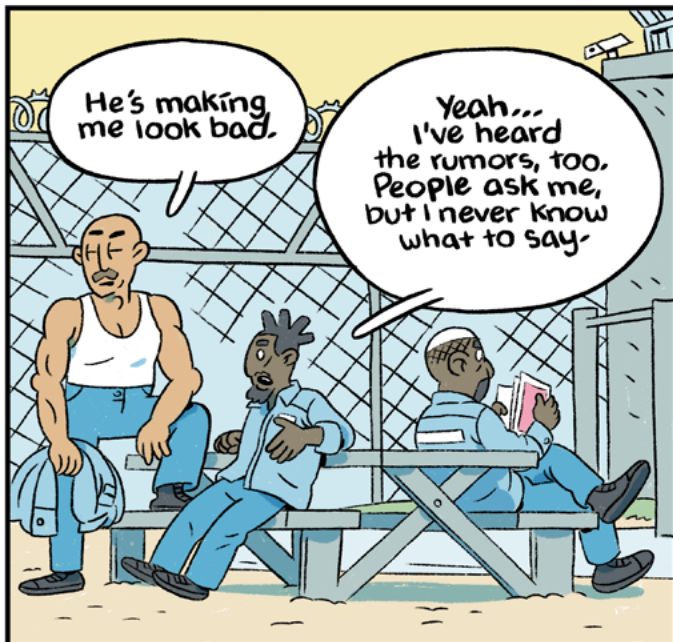
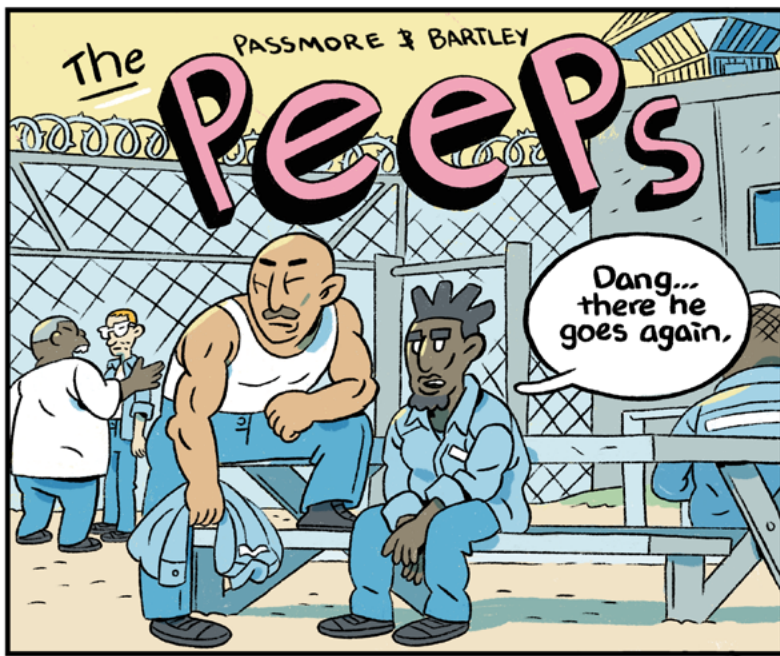
Another reality here is that many of us have been locked up since our teens and early 20s. There are men here who have never had a meaningful intimate relationship with a woman. Their idea of sexual satisfaction is to read dirty magazines, masturbate and work out so they can flash their six-packs to female officers when they make their rounds. This practice is known as "gunning down." Most female officers are highly offended, but that is of no consequence to the men who have spent their entire adult lives behind bars. To the incarcerated men this behavior is a normal sexual act. That should not surprise anyone.

People who claim to champion traditional family values are out in force. Yet, when it comes to the incarcerated, all of those so-called values magically disappear. Mandatory-minimum life sentences keep loved ones apart for excessive amounts of time with no avenue for intimacy. But intimacy is essential to a healthy family life.

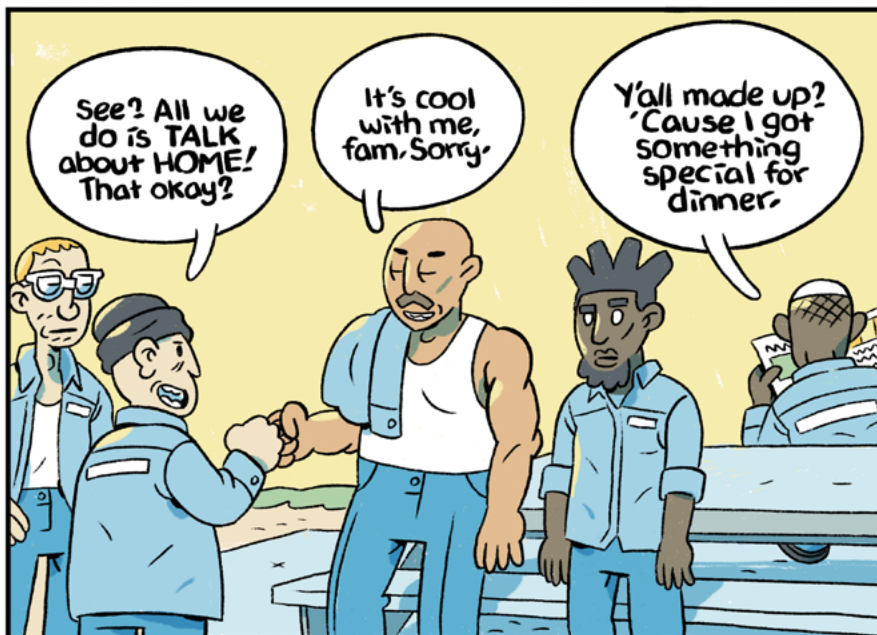
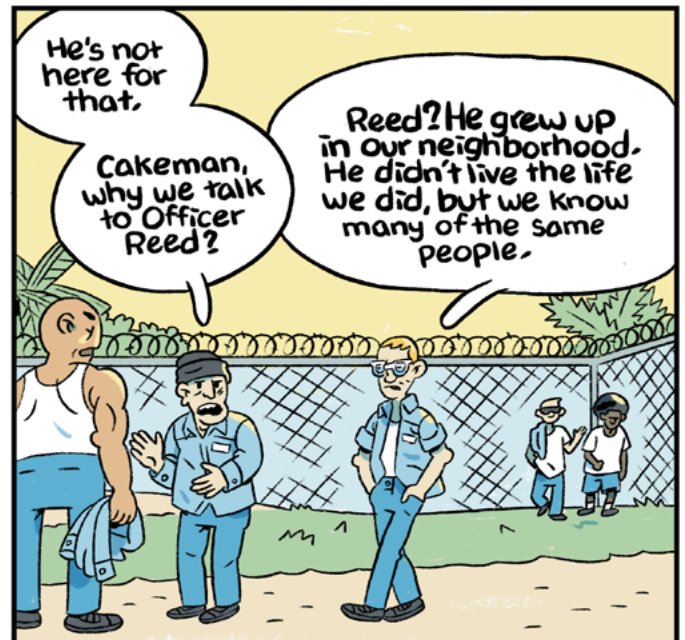
I believe policymakers are willfully ignorant about the effects of sexual deprivation on people serving long sentences. And I also believe that such ignorance only exists because the majority of people behind bars are minorities. Those proponents of family values fall silent when it comes to incarcerated people and their loved ones who suffer along with them. ■

*Tariq MaQbool is a contributing writer at the Prison Journalism Project. He maintains Captive Voices, a blog where he shares his poetry and essays and the writings of other incarcerated people. He was convicted of double homicide in 2005 and is serving 150 years at the New Jersey State Prison.*

*A spokesperson for the New Jersey Department of Corrections stated that solitary confinement is no longer used at New Jersey State Prison, and could not comment on the incident involving MaQbool's friend, who has since died, without more identifying information.*







## Reader to Reader

Finding ways to connect to faith and spirituality can be an important source of peace and strength, especially behind bars. But practicing religion while incarcerated can in some ways be different or come with some challenges.

We know that religion is an important part of our readers' life, that's why in our last Reader to Reader callout, we asked our incarcerated audience across the country to share an experience of practicing their faith. Readers of any faith and religion submitted responses to our callout, letting us see the diversity of faith of people who are incarcerated, and the experiences that different people have practicing in prisons across the country.

*Tell us about a holy day that you had to celebrate behind bars.*

For Easter, I prayed. Being away from family, I grieved in a healthy manner. We can celebrate in ways that can bring us close to our creator despite our current situation.

From a reader in CA

On Easter, I thought about God and did some fasting and prayed about a few things. I don't really have any difficulties with practicing my religion in here.

From a reader in MT

Air 1 Worship Radio helps me.  
The music speaks to me.

From a reader in ID

Enjoy the little things in life.  
Don't be so serious.

From a Reader in MT

I just recently celebrated Ramadan with the Muslim population to promote unity amongst people in my pod. I utilized a form of meditation to strengthen my spirituality. Fasting for long periods of time can be trying. At the same time, it cleanses you of all toxins, elevates your self control, and prepares you mentally especially for high stress settings like solitary confinement and long term segregation. To all those who practice any religion: when times get hard, you have to dig deep and continue to believe that you can build a better tomorrow, regardless of your current situation. Sacramento county deprives us of religious diets for the most part. So it's up to us to find ways to stay within our dietary beliefs. If you don't have outside support to buy from commissary, it is almost impossible at times. It takes a solid group of strong and caring individuals around you when your meals are against your religious beliefs.

From a reader in CA

Well no matter what, I know the four directions: North, East, West, and South. Given that I am Muslim I have access to a Quran. So just because the facility may be motionless does not mean my faith is, as a strong African American. Allowing ourselves to be pure as incarcerated men. We have the food and a place to sleep, as unfortunate as our situation is!!!! So have faith and keep on keeping!!!! Allahu Akbar!!!!

From a reader in CA

As a Native, my religion is Wa-shut. I think of the Spring Salmon fishing season that happens during March and April on the Columbia River. This is the time when the season really starts: we have feasts for the first fish of the year. Myself, I just like to think of the good old days and pray for everyone's safety while they are fishing on the river.

From a Reader in WA

I read my Bible and went to church.

From a reader in MT

Pray better in my cell.

From a reader in CA



# What did you do to connect with your spirituality? What were the challenges, and how did you overcome them?

For Christmas and Thanksgiving  
I just try to stay in contact with  
my family and have a good visit.

From a reader in CA

I celebrated Easter behind bars in a  
county jail. We saved our juice from  
breakfast and had crackers from  
commissary for communion. When  
I got prison, I wanted to smudge.  
Growing up on a reservation, this  
is part of my religion as well. I was  
disappointed: the first opportunity  
I had to smudge I wasn't able to  
because I couldn't have a lighter to  
light the sage. I'm still waiting to  
smudge.

From a reader in ME

When you're locked away, you have  
to substitute certain foods, habits,  
indulgences and walks to meet holiday  
obligations. If you're not able to meet  
them, praying and advising why, you're  
covered. There are certain individuals  
that don't care about your religion and  
will go out of their way to desecrate  
you. Through meditation, silence, and  
concentration you can reach spiritual  
awareness as well as thin king outside  
the box. The Lord said "be still" and  
"My sheep know my voice."

From a reader in FL

I am Catholic. My prison  
does nothing to facilitate  
services for Catholics. They  
do not comply with our  
diet of fish on Fridays. So  
there's not much I can do  
but celebrate by myself and  
watch church services on  
my tablet.

From a reader in AR

For Easter: prayer and  
in-depth thought with  
myself and God.

From a reader in CA

I've had to celebrate the holidays  
in prison for 14 out of the last 15  
years. October through December  
is my favorite time because you  
get Halloween, Thanksgiving, and  
Christmas. Often, being behind  
bars diminishes the beauty of  
holidays because they tend to feel  
like every other day. You may get  
a special meal or a hand out but  
ultimately you're still in prison.  
I would encourage everyone to  
still take something positive away  
from the holidays because at the  
end of the day, whether you're free  
or not, everyone's going through  
something. Pain is not an excuse to  
throw away your spirituality.

From a reader in MT

Every day I just remain grateful no matter  
what happens throughout the day. I know  
that I can only control my feelings and  
emotions. I can treat people nice and  
politely, show everybody love and respect,  
and make my own positive impact on  
everybody's lives. When you spread love and  
genuinely care about people, the world is a  
million times better and full of joy-out-of-  
this world. Make everyday "your party at  
the beach". When you spread love it's always  
an extravagant affair.

From a reader in NY

I prayed and had a  
clear mind.

From a reader in CA

Being a solitary Wiccan in jail is challenging because I only get to go outside once a week in the morning and I don't have a window in my cell. So honoring the monthly cycles of the moon requires me to keep track, meditate and visualize. I was able to get a lunar calendar from the Chaplain. For the solar equinox and solstice holy days, I orientate myself towards the sun based on the time. Then visualize as I recite ritual chants softly or internally. I also make offerings of packaged food, coffee and energy to the local spirits, my ancestors, God and Goddess before bed. I leave them out overnight then give them away to others the next day. It's a private, quiet practice that keeps me from feeling isolated and alone here.

From a reader in CA

Christmas is hard to celebrate because these jail premises make it hard.

From a reader in CA

I was incarcerated during the Easter holiday, which was hard for me because my faith and Christianity were in the very early stages. I was away from my family and had to really seek deep within myself to stay focused on my faith. I would tell others that as long as you keep God first in your life you will succeed.

From a reader in AR

I am a lifer. I have seven life sentences and the death penalty. I am used to being here during the holidays. I do not really practice any of the traditional religions, but I am a practicing Odinist. I do my own private things during each solstice.

From a reader in MT

I pray and keep contact with my family.

From a reader in CA

For Candlemass, I just walked the outdoor track and said my prayers to the Goddesses, Gods and My Ancestors. I asked them to forgive me for my inability to properly celebrate the fire festival without a fire. As long as you are true to yourself, it doesn't matter if you say your prayers or celebrate with others. I do not have to fast for any reason other than I choose to.

From a reader in MT

I have spent every single holiday since I was 13 incarcerated. They have been the worst days. I miss my family.

From a reader in CA

I'm a spiritual person, but I don't follow a certain religion. I believe in God, I believe in Spirits, and I believe that people whom I've loved or were close to that have died watch over me and work in many ways to connect with me or show me my path and help me on my journey of life. My most "Holy" day of being incarcerated was when I finally stopped feeling the guilt and shame and I started believing in myself and my future. Don't get me wrong, it took a few years for it to happen after catching my case, but it's a feeling I've never felt before so I know it's real and different than anything else in my past. Thank you.

From a reader in ME

June 13 is the day that my tribe celebrates the progenitor of our cosmos, Rao. I was actually able to properly celebrate in prison for 2 years, which made the other 18 not so bad.

From a reader in CA

I woke up in the hospital on Christmas after suffering a severe hypoglycemic event after being in custody since October. They told me I was a living miracle and lucky to be alive since I am a diabetic.

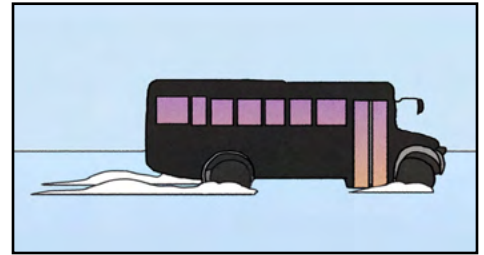
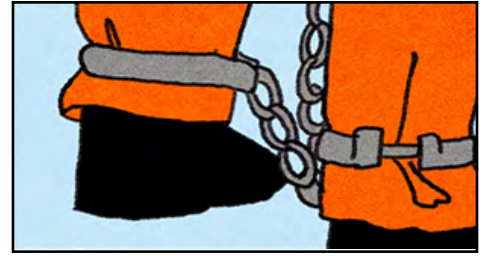
From a reader in CA



Our next Reader to Reader is about ...

# Transfer Talk

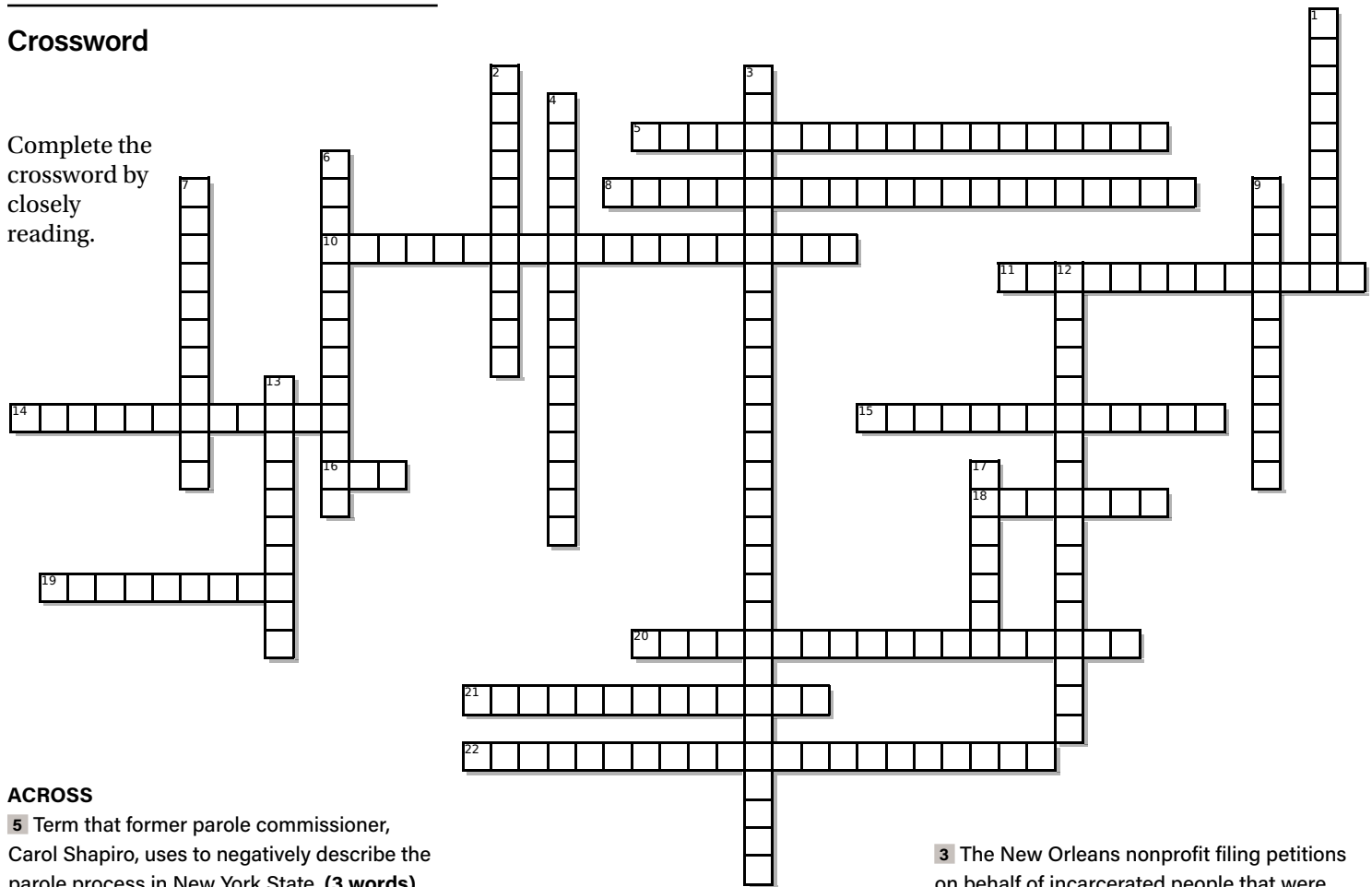
Transfers can be a mixed bag. There's the shackling, herding, and waiting. You don't know if you'll see your belongings — or even your friends — again. There can be excitement in the transfer process too. This may be a move you've waited a long time for — to a preferred facility that has the amenities you want, or allows you to see family more. These conflicting feelings can make the process even more complicated.



Tell us about an experience you had with the transfer process. What was the most difficult part? What was the most exciting part? What surprised you? How did you mentally prepare for going into the unknown? What advice would you give to someone going through the process for the first time?

## Crossword

Complete the crossword by closely reading.



### ACROSS

**5** Term that former parole commissioner, Carol Shapiro, uses to negatively describe the parole process in New York State. **(3 words)**

**8** "In historian Clint Smith's book, 'How the Word Is Passed,' he recounts his visit to the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, a prison built on a \_\_\_\_\_. **(3 words)**

**10** The new bill, which was introduced last month by State Rep. Royce Duplessis, a New Orleans Democrat, would make it illegal for the agency to use \_\_\_\_\_ for young people for more than eight hours at a time." **(2 words)**

**11** "The history of the rule and its consequences are so striking that critics have taken to calling them '\_\_\_\_\_.'" **(3 words)**

**14** An abstract concept of prison policy that covers explicit actions that you are not allowed to engage in with a loved one while on a visit. **(2 words)**

**15** "Now, there's a \_\_\_\_\_ parole bill before the New York state senate that requires the board to release people who are eligible without as much consideration for the seriousness of their crime" **(3 words)**

**16** In our conservative culture, conversations about \_\_\_\_\_ are off limits unless you are someone's spouse or a relative of the same gender. **(1 word)**

**18** "That challenge was compounded by a deadline: Even if the state Supreme Court rules in Reddick's favor, only those who filed applications with the state courts within \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2020 ruling will have a shot at new trials." **(2 words)**

**19** "Until recently, \_\_\_\_\_ was one of only two states that did not require the unanimous vote of a jury, a vestige of a Jim Crow-era law designed to negate the growing power of Black jurors." **(1 word)**

**20** "Citing the harm the practice can cause, the federal government has banned the use of solitary confinement at its \_\_\_\_\_, and at least 24 states have placed strict limits on its use." **(2 words)**

**21** Scarring on the wrists, ankles and abdomen of people incarcerated at the U.S. penitentiary in Thomson, Illinois that is caused by the excessiveness tightness of shackles. **(2 words)**

**22** Housing in the U.S. penitentiary in Thomson, Illinois that has "a program meant for some of the most violent and disruptive prisoners." **(3 words)**

### DOWN

**1** Container where Keri held her drugs at the time of her arrest. **(1 word)**

**2** "In addition to the prison tour and museum gift shop, Angola operates an annual \_\_\_\_\_, in which incarcerated men with no prior training compete for the entertainment of thousands of visitors." **(2 words)**

**3** The New Orleans nonprofit filing petitions on behalf of incarcerated people that were previously convicted by non-unanimous juries, which the U.S. Supreme Court rendered unconstitutional, but did not apply retroactively in a 2020 verdict. **(5 words)**

**4** Memoir written by Keri Blakinger of The Marshall Project. **(3 words)**

**6** "\_\_\_\_\_ often relies heavily on the spooky, the gruesome, and the salacious to attract visitors for a playful afternoon of ducking into cells and taking selfies in striped jumpsuits." **(2 words)**

**7** "The Washington Lawyers' Committee for \_\_\_\_\_ and Urban Affairs, a legal nonprofit, has spoken to dozens of men at Thomson, many of whom said conditions there were worse than at any other federal prison — including Lewisburg." **(2 words)**

**9** "...New York parole laws have a '\_\_\_\_\_ ' clause, which basically means that the seriousness of the crime justifies keeping you in prison. **(1 word)**

**12** "\_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_ life sentences keep loved ones apart for excessive amounts of time with no avenue for intimacy." **(2 words; hyphenated)**

**13** The executive director of Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children, an organization which advocates for youth in detention. **(2 words)**

**17** University that Keri attended at the time of her arrest. **(1 word)**





I remember discovering News Inside shortly after I reported to federal prison. Beforehand, I had felt unsupported in my journey through the criminal justice system. When I found News Inside and learned more about the reporting of The Marshall Project, I felt like someone was looking out for me and helping to chart my journey. Following my release, this trajectory has continued, as The Marshall Project provides constant vigilance over the criminal justice system and remains a daily companion in my work as an advocate for criminal justice reform. Really, what could be more important in journalism than documenting the abuse and injustice meted out daily under the banner of government? As a returning citizen, I have dedicated myself to addressing the challenges facing those still imprisoned; including the challenges they face in selective policing, access to fair trials, lack of services while incarcerated and hurdles upon reentry. My belief is that even the worst of us deserve second chances and no human being is beyond redemption. I launched the Redemption Radio podcast to draw attention to these challenges, and I encourage everyone to join in our call for sensible, responsible criminal justice reform.

**Thad Bereday** is a criminal justice reform advocate and host of Redemption Radio podcast. You can learn more about Thad Bereday at his website, [www.4Redemption.com](http://www.4Redemption.com), and follow Thad on social media. You can find the Redemption Radio podcast on your favorite platform or here: <https://4redemption.com/redemption-radio/>

Give these questions a try after you've read the stories in this issue. We'll include the answers in the next issue.

- 1 T or F:** New York parole's "deprecation" clause means that the seriousness of the offense should be ignored at parole hearings.
- 2 T or F:** The Special Management Unit at the U.S. penitentiary in Thomson, Illinois is an incentivized housing unit exclusively designed to house incarcerated people with a history of good disciplinary behavior.
- 3 T or F:** Program budget cuts and tough-on-crime politics have eliminated most moments of intimacy that were allowed during conjugal visits and extended family time.
- 4 T or F:** Citing the harm the practice can cause, the federal government has banned the use of solitary confinement at its juvenile facilities, and at least 24 states have placed strict limits on its use.
- 5 T or F:** Angola operates an annual prison rodeo, in which incarcerated men with no prior training compete for the entertainment of thousands of visitors.
- 6 T or F:** After prison, Keri wrote an article that convinced corrections staff to provide incarcerated people with more access to dentures.
- 7 T or F:** "Jim Crow juries" is the term that people used to refer to juries that received unanimous decisions.

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## Last Issue's Answers

**1** To facilitate creative content for "The Tank," like essays and poems, the warden makes an exception to the prison policy that bans prisoners from writing letters to each other. **TRUE** **2** Cuyahoga County has 34 elected judges who preside over felony cases. These Common Pleas judges consider the cases of thousands of people a year, making decisions about bail, plea deals and sentencing. **TRUE** **3** In Louisiana, because of decreasing population levels, medical spending is also decreasing. **FALSE** **4** In spite of visitation restrictions due to COVID, Demetrius was able to develop a healthy relationship with his daughter. **TRUE** **5** Tariq MaQbool was born in the United States. **FALSE** **6** The National Academy of Sciences was not the most prestigious scientific body in the country. **FALSE** **7** The organization "Hour Children" organizes and provides transportation for trips free-of-charge for family members to visit incarcerated loved ones. **TRUE**

is a nonpartisan, nonprofit news organization that seeks to create and sustain a sense of national urgency about the U.S. criminal justice system. We achieve this through award-winning journalism, partnerships with other news outlets and public forums. In all of our work we strive to educate and enlarge the audience of people who care about the state of criminal justice.

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