Impact Report

The Marshall Project

Spring 2023

LEFT: HOST LAWRENCE BARTLEY AND DIRECTOR DONALD WASHINGTON, JR., WITH VICE NEWS CONTRIBUTOR ALZO SLADE AT THE NYC LAUNCH PARTY.

CENTER: THE MARSHALL PROJECT IN THE NEW YORK TIMES.

BOTTOM: AFTER A MARSHALL PROJECT SCREENING OF INSIDE STORY AT THE KYLE CORRECTIONAL CENTER IN TEXAS.

The New York Times

What to Watch › 'Master Gardener' 'Fast X' 'White

A New Video Series Explores Criminal Justice From the Inside Out

"Inside Story," produced by the Marshall Project and Vice News, reports on crime and punishment from the perspective of former prisoners.

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Lawrence Bartley, left, and Donald Washington Jr. created "Inside Story" as a way to inform and inspire imprisoned viewers. Devin Greenleaf

The Marshall Project tracks the impact of our journalism on policymakers, advocates and other media.

Generally, we do not consider the size of our audience to be a sign of impact. If a story reaches one person, but that person is the mayor — and she announces a change in policy because of what she read — that's impact.

In the case of our new video series for incarcerated audiences, *Inside Story*, simply reaching people with the product is an achievement in itself. We seek to serve an audience that no other major media outlet has treated as a priority: people in prison, and their families and loved ones. Just getting the product to them is a challenge and a victory.

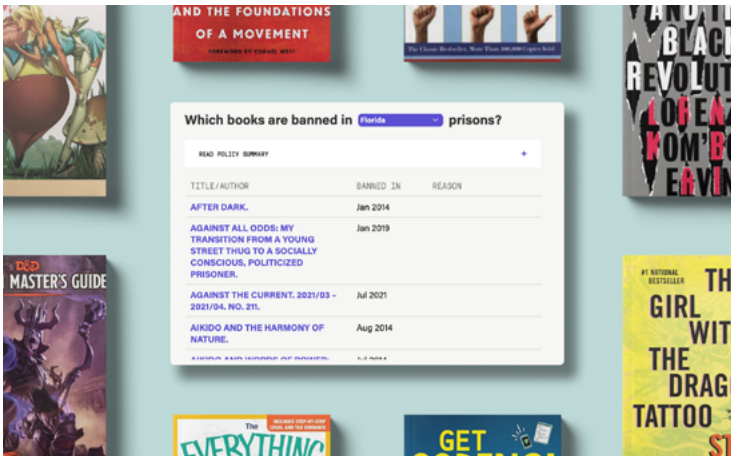
On YouTube, the trailers and eight episodes of Season One of *Inside Story* have collectively been viewed more than 1.4 million times, making this one of the most widely-consumed news products The Marshall Project has ever published. On The Marshall Project's Instagram, the series' video clips have been viewed more than 385,000 times.

Millions more were exposed to *Inside Story* via media coverage about the series. The New York Times published an extensive profile on the day of our launch, and the show's host, Lawrence Bartley, appeared on ABC News Live Prime, CBS Mornings, NPR's All Things Considered and Cleveland's Jimmy Malone Show.

For obvious reasons, it's much more difficult to track the size of our audience *inside* prisons. The series is distributed to roughly 750 prisons and jails via tablet companies Edovo, APDS and PayTel, Ameelio, and on closed-circuit prison television in Illinois and Colorado. Currently, our estimated total audience behind bars is approximately 273,100 incarcerated individuals based on the sum of all the tablets deployed by the tablet companies, and the number of people incarcerated across Illinois and Colorado state prisons.

We do have anecdotal and qualitative feedback from incarcerated viewers of the series:

- "You beat the rumor mill to a bloody pulp. Dudes were waiting on some sort of truth in this joint… Keep up the good work. Fantastic bro." — James, incarcerated in New York
- "It feels good to see *Inside Story* talk about the truth of what it is to be incarcerated. We're fortunate to get this series in our N.C. prisons." — Cadell, incarcerated in North Carolina
- "I bawled my eyes out after watching 'I wonder if they know my son is loved' because I've been here. That feeling of helplessness, of utter fear for your child, who this system views as an adult." — Ari, parent of an incarcerated person



BANNED BOOKS Our new database of banned books makes it easy to look up which books are banned from prisons in your state. The database has had an impact on advocates and other media outlets, who are carrying the information to their audiences and expanding on it. A TV station in North Carolina, WRAL News, has filed their own Freedom of Information Act request with state corrections officials to find out more. They also aired a segment about The Marshall Project's database. Meanwhile, a TV station in Austin used our database to make a local version just for Texas. They also broadcast a segment on our work. And a Reddit group with nearly 3,000 members, r/bannedbooks, has included our database in their carefully curated resource page.

Our database includes information about how to appeal the banning of a book — because sometimes, these appeals succeed. That's what happened recently when Keri Blakinger, a former Marshall Project reporter who now works for the Los Angeles Times, appealed Florida's decision to ban her memoir, "Corrections in Ink." Officials there had claimed in a September 2022 notice that the book is "dangerously inflammatory" and "presents a threat to the security, order, or rehabilitative objectives of the correctional system or the safety of any person."

Blakinger began an appeal process that ended up taking five months. A statewide Literature Review Committee twice upheld the decision to ban the book, despite letters of support from the ACLU, PEN America, and others. Finally, the matter went before the head of the state's prison system, who overturned the ban in February 2023.

ON THE SCENE IN WASHINGTON

Is criminal justice reform dead in Washington? Our board, senior staff, and a few top supporters spent a day in March 2023 speaking with members of Congress and the Biden administration about what federal action, if any, might be possible in this politically polarized moment.

Lawmakers discussed a few possibilities for policy change. Republican **Sen. Rand Paul** and Democratic **House Leader Hakeem Jeffries** believe Congress has enough votes, from both sides of the aisle, to rebalance federal sentencing policy for powder cocaine and crack, which was still punished much more severely and with much greater impact on Black people. (Right-wing advocates for criminal justice reform don't necessarily share their optimism for the EQUAL Act.)

Sen. Dick Durbin is proud of how many federal judges he'd gotten through the Senate Judiciary Committee — 119 by the end of March, with women judges more than half the total. He also confirmed that it was our investigation with NPR on the special management unit at Thomson penitentiary in Illinois that prompted its closure.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal said she expected to push forward on mental health and social worker responses to 911 calls, at least with funding in her own district. **Sen. Tim Kaine** thought the tight labor market might be opening up possibilities for bipartisan immigration reform.

A meeting with **Rep. Jamie Raskin** ended our visit on a more ominous note. He pointed out that some Republican members of Congress are referring to those awaiting trial for the Jan. 6 insurrection as "political prisoners." With no political consensus around the legality of the insurrection, it's harder to reach a political consensus around the criminal justice system — and who belongs in it.

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: ATTORNEY GENERAL MERRICK GARLAND MEETS TMP SUPPORTER DAVID BROWN; TMP REPORTER NICOLE LEWIS INTERVIEWS REP. HAKEEM JEFFRIES, LEADER OF THE HOUSE DEMOCRATS; TMP BOARD CHAIR LIZ SIMONS WITH SEN. TIM KAINE; TMP MANAGING EDITOR MARLON A. WALKER INTERVIEWS SEN. RAND PAUL; REP. PRAMILA JAYAPAL MEETS TMP BOARD MEMBER BILL MCCOMB.