

FROM VICTIM¹ TO VICTOR:

An Inquiry into Death by Incarceration, Gender, and Resistance in Pennsylvania

Report Authors:

Juliette Rando, MPH
Emma Fenstermaker
Valerie Kiebala
Sheená King
Lolo Serrano

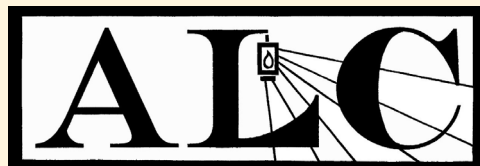
Report Contributors:
Jonas Caballero, MPhil
Cynthia Alvarado

Inside Collaborators:

Rose Dinkins
Jamie Silvonek
Cyd Berger
Elizabeth Collazo
Sarita Miller
Kal-El Carey
Kristin Edmundson
Denise Crump
Michelle Hetzel
Jennifer Rhodes

Acknowledgements:

Autumn Redcross, Ph.D
Bret Grote
Dmitra Gideon, MFA
etta cetera
Roxanne Horrell, Esq
Saleem Holbrook
Phyllis “Grandma” Hardy



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¹The title of this report is adapted
from a quotation from Cyd Berger:

“I am no longer a victim but a victor. I am no longer broken, rather, I am mended. No longer do I have low self-esteem; I have strength, courage, and like a Phoenix rising out of the ashes, I have risen above circumstances.”

Content warning: this report contains explicit detail of abuse

DEDICATION

This report is dedicated to
Sharon “Peachie” Wiggins
(1951-2013)

Peachie was my BEST friend, my family. Not only were we best friends, so were our mothers. Everyone loved and respected her. Her brilliance, kindness and leadership was something to behold. Her charisma captured people like Oprah’s. When she spoke, everybody listened. She was so articulate, so cool, with beautiful teeth, funny as hell. She was bigger than life at only 5’2” and weighing about 120 pounds. She used to dance her ass off.



Picture of Sharon “Peachie” Wiggins screenshot from a 1993 interview between Wiggins and Howard Zehr for his book, “Doing Life, Reflections of Men & Women Serving Life Sentences”

Peachie was the longest incarcerated woman in Pennsylvania when she passed away in 2013 at the age of 62. She entered the prison system at the age of 17. She was the only female juvenile to come from Death Row. In 2012, when the Supreme Court declared in *Miller v. Alabama* that it was unconstitutional for a juvenile to be sentenced to life without parole, she gained permission from the Superintendent to go inside every unit and assist every juvenile with their legal briefs. At that time, Pennsylvania held the most children to die in prison of any state in the country or any country in the world (Owens, 2016; Juvenile life without parole (jlwop), 2021).

In 1983, Peachie filed a class action lawsuit with other incarcerated women that challenged the lack of vocational, educational, medical, rehabilitative, psychological, and legal resources (Duncombe, 1988). As a direct result of the suit, SCI Muncy opened a law clinic and instituted other reforms. She was completely devoted to the many organizations we had here and served on the board of every single one.

Peachie strongly believed in education. She was the only one here [at Muncy, at the time] to receive a college degree. She was a tutor in many subjects but her favorite was math. She was the only woman in SCI Muncy to be employed for Penn State University and receive a legitimate paycheck while incarcerated here.

Unfortunately, Peachie died of a heart attack in our unit in front of most of her friends, before her freedom came to fruition. Life at Muncy hasn't been the same since. Peachie and I were roommates for a long time and shared a cell when she had her first heart attack. It never slowed her down. Freedom was her quest. After her passing, I established the Sharon "Peachie" Wiggins Angel Achievement Award in our Muncy Inmate Organization (MIO) for those who graduated from high school with excellence. For those who loved her, our hearts will forever hurt. Our tears will forever flow at the mention of her name. Her spirit will forever rise in liberation.

—Rose Marie Dinkins



Picture of Rose Marie Dinkins taken on her 75th birthday during a visit at SCI Muncy with Valerie Kiebalá

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Much of the art included in this report was taken from the End Death by Incarceration Art Show, organized by Let's Get Free in 2020, that featured work from artists both inside and outside the prison walls. And the photos for "A Life Inside" were either provided by participants or taken from the Women Lifer's Resume Project website (wlrppa.org).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The experiences of women and trans people behind bars are all too often overshadowed by those of men in conversations about life without the possibility of parole sentences – herein referred to by their true name, Death by Incarceration (DBI) sentences. In this report, 73 of the over 200 individuals serving DBI sentences in women’s facilities in Pennsylvania were surveyed about their life histories, experiences in prison, and perspectives on what needs to change. A team of individuals both with and without lived experience in women’s prisons analyzed the surveys and gathered emergent themes that resonate throughout.

Alongside the omnipresent pain and oppression bleeding through the pages of this report radiates the love, resistance, and power of the women and trans people sentenced to live the rest of their lives behind bars. Their experiences and perspectives engender concrete policy changes that the Pennsylvania Governor, Legislature, and Department of Corrections can enact in order to uproot the patriarchal violence of incarceration and build towards a future of safety, healing, and community care.

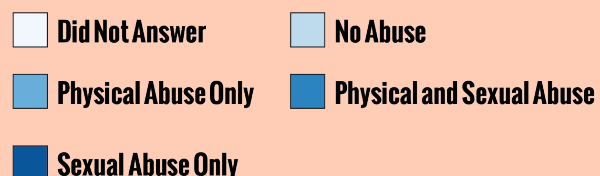
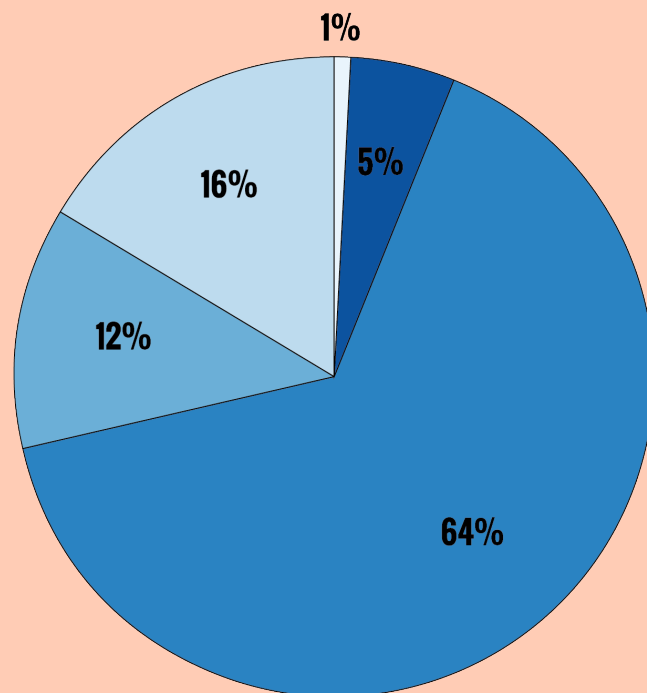
SURVEY FINDINGS

Environmental Factors

Theme 1: Patriarchal violence throughout the lifespan

“I learned way too young the thin line between love and hate”

Physical and Sexual Abuse



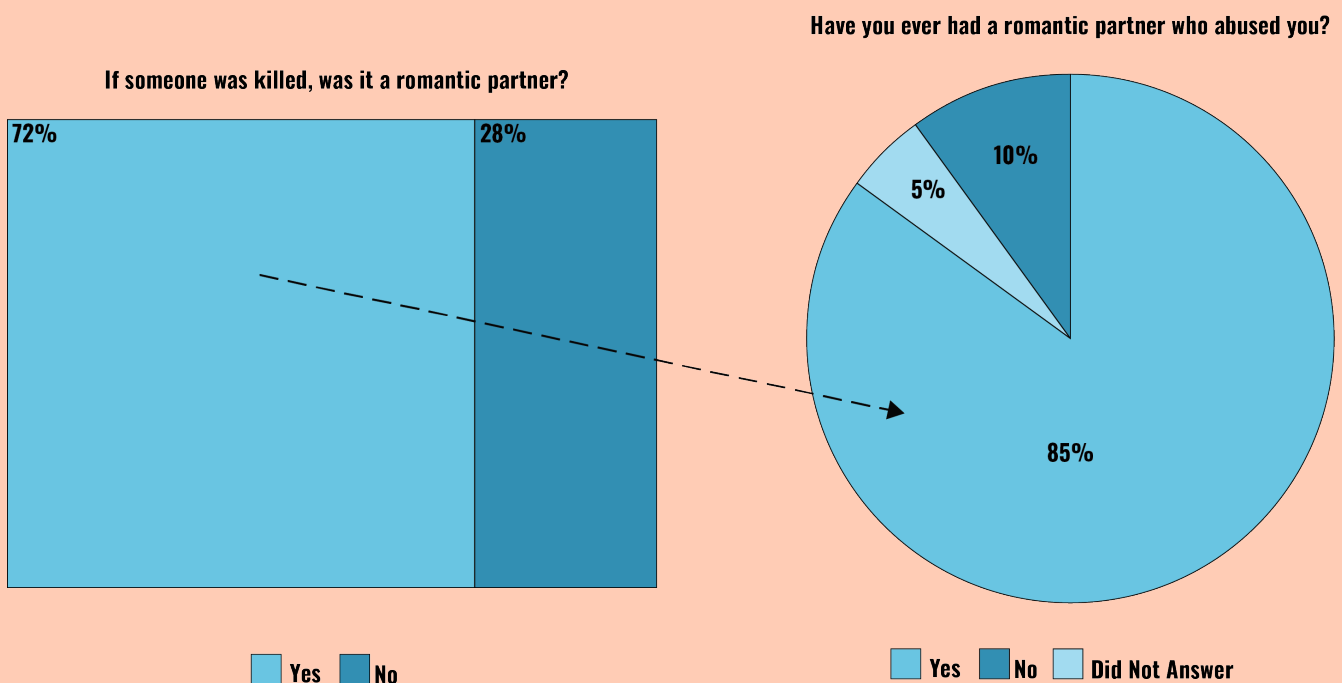
From childhood physical and sexual abuse by male relatives and family friends, to sexual assault by male friends and strangers, to partner abuse by boyfriends and husbands, violence at the hands of men can be traced throughout and between participants' lives.

An overwhelming majority experienced physical and/or sexual violence prior to incarceration (81%). More often than not, the abuse they endured as children was at the hands of men – fathers, mother's boyfriends, uncles, brothers, family friends. Following childhood, most participants became involved in abusive romantic relationships (81%). Even regarding the crimes for which they are incarcerated, many testimonies depict individuals trapped in situations that turn violent due to escalation by men.

“Every relationship I ever had was physically abusive as well as verbally. When you're told that you're not good enough or that you are ugly and no one else would want you, you start believing what is being told to you day after day. And when you're being beaten you think it's your fault and that they must love you enough to want to put their hands on you.”
(Marsha Scaggs)

Theme 2: The cycle of trauma, abuse, and crime throughout the lifespan

“My life became a journey of pure darkness, hurt, and going to jail for life”



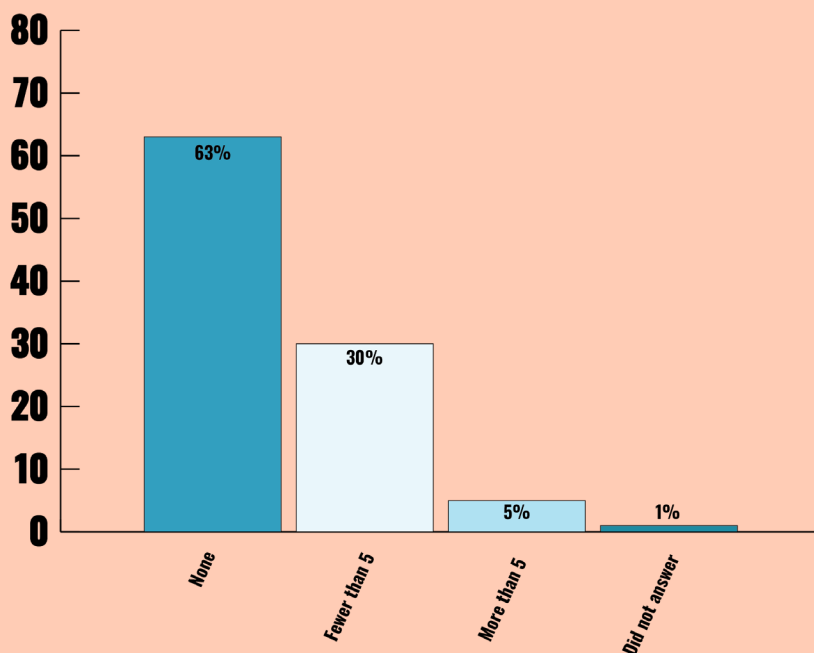
Many respondents wove the thread between the environments of abuse they endured and the situation for which they are incarcerated. For many, the link is direct – they were convicted of killing their abuser. One third of cases involved the death of a romantic partner, and in 85% of those cases, the participants had experienced partner abuse.

Other participants described how the act of violence for which they were convicted originated from a lifetime of violence they were subjected to, drawing connections between childhood and partner abuse to drug addiction to prison.

“I didn’t just wake up one morning and decide to commit such a heinous act. That day was a very bad outcome of a life and past I was subjected to. I was mentally abused a lot as a child, beat on and brought down by my peers all through school. As I got older the only time I was ever wanted was if it involved sex. I was raped multiple times, fell into addiction and toxic relationships. I started resorting to drugs to self harm and tried to commit suicide multiple times. My victim was my last abusive relationship and all my pain that was bottled up caused me to do something that I regret and mourn deeply. However, this doesn’t make me a bad person. It has taken me years to get society’s voice out of my head that tells me I’m a monster.” (Jade Olmstead)

Theme 3: Lack of a history of violence

Before your current life sentence how many arrests did you have?



“I was never in jail before”

The majority of respondents (59%) were first-time offenders. Survey after survey reported no or minor criminal histories prior to the participants’ current life sentence. Of all the respondents, only five listed a previous conviction for a violent offense. And most participants (63%) had never even been arrested prior to the current sentence.

Theme 4: Injustice in legal proceedings

“I really believed in justice-but justice only believes in itself”

Discrimination in trial proceedings

Multiple participants described the blatant discrimination that ensued during their trials. Story after story described instances of racism, transphobia, and homophobia on the part of lawyers, judges, and juries.

“I was portrayed as the villain. My relationship with a girl was the biggest talking point. At trial the rings we exchanged were passed around to the jury. The rainbow sticker on my car was photographed and blown up for the jury.” (Michelle Hetzel)

Over half of respondents were incarcerated for a crime involving a white victim. This statistic is in accordance with research demonstrating racism in the prosecution of cases – sentencing for crimes involving white victims tends to be harsher (Gross et al., 2022).

“I was tried in front of a known racist judge, prosecuted by a known racist DA, plenty of articles on him as well concerning false racial allegations, arrested drunk, the list goes on and on. And I was taken to trial found guilty by an all white jury, the only black juror was stricken by the DA. I had questioned my lawyer at the time, “Wasn’t I entitled to a jury of my peers?” He told me that there is no such thing, and this was the best I was going to get.” (Jennifer Rhodes)

Attorney misconduct

Survey after survey described incompetence or negligence on the part of participants’ legal representation. This ineptitude was especially apparent when it came to plea deals – many wrote that their lawyer a) did not communicate the existence of a plea deal offer, b) refused the plea deal without informing them, or c) pressured them to take the plea deal.

“The plea was never made available to me because my court appointed lawyer intercepted it My court appointed lawyer turned down the plea agreement without my knowledge of the agreement; I didn’t know about the plea until after appeals” (Kimberly Joynes)

Sentencing structure

Twenty-one percent of participants (15 individuals) are serving life sentences for felony murder, a charge of committing a felony during the course of which someone died, even if the individual did nothing to directly cause or intend their death. Pennsylvania is an outlier regarding felony murder sentencing; it is one of nine states that imposes a mandatory minimum sentence of life without parole for felony murder.

Theme 5: Strides in rehabilitation

“I am a different person and not a horrible human being”

Participants report minor disciplinary records

Most participants reported disciplinary infractions since being incarcerated, the majority of which were minor. The most common reason for a disciplinary sanction was possession of contraband (8 people). Reported contraband included perfume, fruit salad, earrings, electrical tape and extra cable cord, a lamp, ketchup and a seasoning packet.

Participants are dedicated to personal growth and self-improvement

Many participants expressed a deep desire to understand their pasts and heal themselves, describing an ardent commitment to self-improvement.

“I have spent the last 32 years of my life doing everything possible that I could to make me a better person. I know that no change will ever overshadow the death of another human being: wish that I could change the events of that night. I understand my moral obligation, not only to the victim, but to others and with that comes a deep remorse and conviction to contribute to something positive to those around me. I want to reach teens and let them know that they are not alone, that it is okay to speak and there is always someone who will listen.” (Anonymous)

Participants listed long resumes of accomplishments inside, including earning their GED and enrolling in educational, vocational, self-improvement, support groups, and other programs. Countless participants wrote that they had enrolled in every program available to them.

“But since I’ve been incarcerated I have discovered who I am. I have accomplished more programming and education inside these walls than I have out there. I am a good person with a lot of good to give. I was only 18 years old when I committed my crime and it’s so devastating to think that I’m condemned to die in prison. I don’t ever seek pity. But understanding and justice. I know that I deserve time for what I’ve done...but life?”
(Jade Olmstead)

Theme 6: Barriers to rehabilitation

“There is nothing here to do to grow”

Mental Illness

Half of participants reported having a mental illness diagnosis and 63% said that they are not receiving treatment inside prison. Many spoke to the staff’s neglect and abuse of individuals facing mental health crises.

“The mentally ill are locked in their cells 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They get upset and start yelling to get out or to talk to someone and then get misconducts for yelling. It’s shameful and cruel. The guards call them names and can be violent to them...Last week I argued with two COs for calling a mentally ill patient dirty names and mocking them.”
(Maria Spencer)

Participants explained that when individuals demonstrate mental health issues, they are often sent to solitary confinement over treatment.

“I attempted suicide multiple times throughout this period; each time, I was placed under an even more restrictive solitary confinement protocol, in which I was stripped of clothing, reading materials, and access to my family.” (Jamie Silvonek)

Solitary Confinement

In fact, 62% of respondents reported being placed in solitary confinement, despite the disciplinary infractions they listed being primarily minor. The experiences they described are torturous.

“There was feces smeared over the walls and not cleaned properly. They made us share razors to shave. They never answered the buttons for help. The inmates had to bang and kick the doors if someone was having a medical emergency. Sleep deprivation = torture.”
(Anonymous)

Lack of Access to Programming

Numerous participants described barriers to accessing DOC programming because individuals with life sentences are given last priority.

“Not much is offered to Lifers here. We are at the bottom of the list because the thought is: why waste resources on someone who is not leaving? I have registered for the restaurant trade. There is only one lifer allowed per class.” (Anonymous)

Other participants described not being given access to therapy or counseling. Given the frequency with which participants described early life abuse and partner abuse, this fact is troubling.



Untitled by Lulu Obaditch

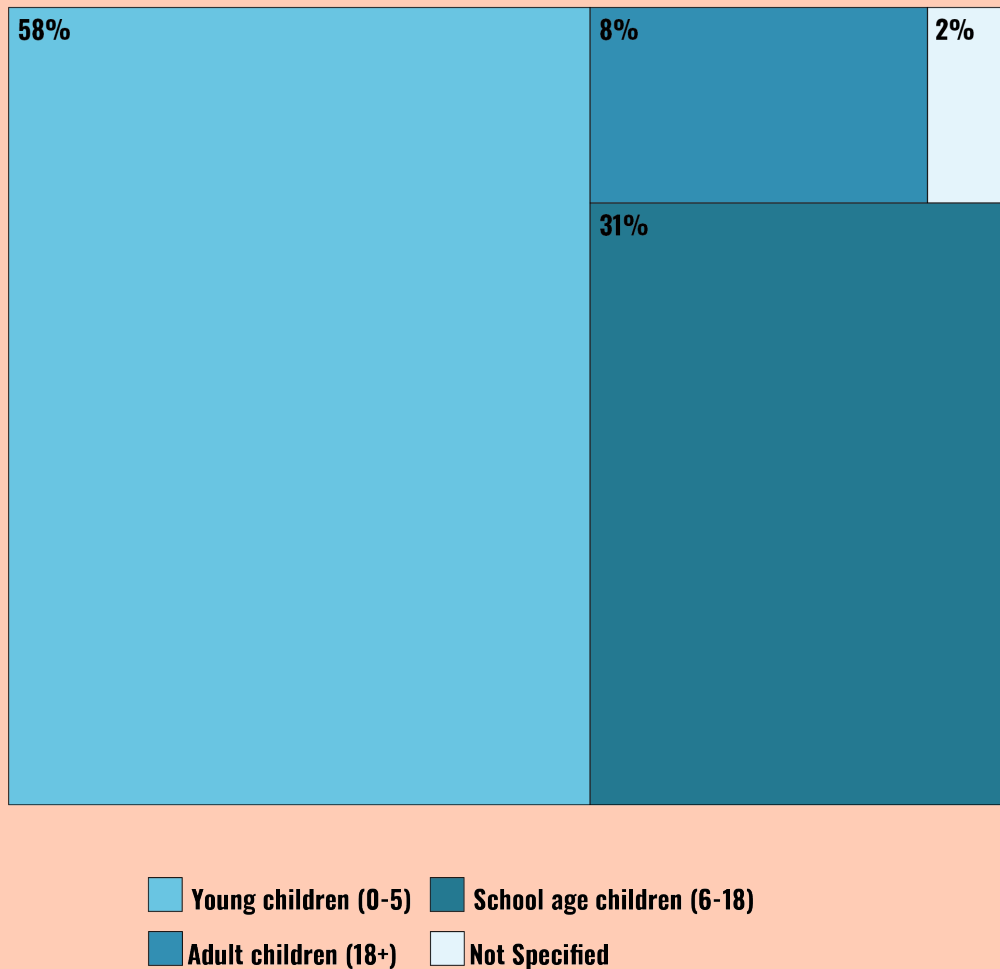
Theme 7: Disability and aging in prison “LWOP means you will die in a dirty diaper, begging for someone to come help you”

Many participants described prison life as one hostile to the aging and disabled, fearing how they would be treated in their old age.

“The disabled and mentally ill have a lot of difficulty in prison... One inmate named [name redacted] is 90 years old. She has been here 40 years. She NEVER gets out of her cell. She can’t walk and she has dementia. She often cried out for someone to come and talk to her. Another lifer named [name redacted] had a stroke. She has beginning stage dementia. She rarely gets out of her cell. The officers tell me they don’t have the time to watch her. There are so many others. The real tragedy is these women will get lonely and frustrated and start screaming. The COs will give them a misconduct, the women will be taken to the RHU for 30-90 days and then brought back.” (Maria Spencer)

Sarita Miller wrote that most of the elderly women in prison are serving DBI sentences and have spent well over 20 years in prison. She asks, “Why must they die like this? Who are they going to hurt?”

Age of children at time of incarceration



Theme 8: Family disruption

“I haven’t seen them since I’ve been locked up”

A major impact of DBI sentences revealed in the surveys was the disruption of families. A quarter of participants reported receiving few or no in-person visits, likely because the families of most individuals are farther than three hours from their facility (60%).

Sixty-seven percent of participants have children. Over half of respondents with children were separated from them when they were under 5 years old. Several participants described losing contact with their children or not knowing much about their children’s lives. Some participants reported that their children were incarcerated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In addition to their experiences, participants shared their perspectives on how our carceral system needs to be transformed. Using these responses as guidance, we offer a rough and inevitably limited blueprint for state and institutional policy changes that can build towards the liberation of not only women and transgender people, but all people.

Abolish Death by Incarceration

Death By Incarceration sentences are absolute and unforgiving. By incarcerating a person for life, without the possibility of parole, the state refuses to acknowledge the reality that humans are capable of growth and transformation.

In 2021, PA Senator Sharif Street introduced Senate Bill 135, which would begin the process of dismantling the structures that uphold Death by Incarceration sentencing in the state. The bill would provide parole eligibility for every individual serving a Life Without Parole sentence, including first and second degree murder convictions.

Restructure Felony Murder Sentencing

Currently, in Pennsylvania, the felony murder statute mandates that any individual convicted of involvement in a felony in which a life was lost, even if they did not kill or intend to kill anyone, must be sentenced to death by incarceration. It is one of only 9 states that imposes a mandatory minimum DBI sentence for felony murder. One of these states, California, recently introduced Senate Bill 300 that would provide parole eligibility to individuals serving felony murder convictions after they have served 25 years in prison. We call on the Pennsylvania legislature to follow suit and introduce legislation that will abolish mandatory DBI sentences for felony murder.

Establish Geriatric and Medical Parole

Prisons are not equipped to adequately provide health care for an aging population. Geriatric and medical parole would provide all aging or ill people an opportunity to return to their communities after they have, in most cases, already served decades in prison. Senate Bill 136, introduced by Senator Sharif Street in 2023, would ensure that all incarcerated people are able to see the parole board once they turn 55 years old, have served 25 years of their sentence, or have been diagnosed with a chronic, terminal, or debilitating illness.

Expand Clemency and Grant Mass Commutations, Especially for Survivors

In Pennsylvania, the only mechanism besides compassionate release that exists for people sentenced to DBI to come home is clemency, which includes pardons—a dissolving of the convictions completely—and commutation—a lessening of the sentence. For decades, clemency has been nearly inaccessible to most everyone serving Death by Incarceration in Pennsylvania. Due to bureaucratic and political barriers, between 1995 and August 2, 2021, only 44 people serving DBI received commutation.

In rare cases, governors have granted mass commutations, such as in 2015 when Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear granted clemency to 10 women, all of whom had been convicted for violent crimes after enduring years of abuse. We call for the mass commutations of survivors and to overhaul the clemency process.

Weigh Abuse and Trauma Heavily as Mitigating Factors in Sentencing and Resentencing

Countless survey respondents reported that their trauma and abuse histories were not acknowledged during their trials, even though these details are incredibly relevant in determining an individual's culpability. In 2023, PA Senator Amanda Cappelletti introduced SB385 Alternative Sentences for Domestic Violence Survivors, which would mandate the court consider an individual's history of partner abuse as a mitigating factor in the sentencing process, allowing the court to impose a sentence below the state sentencing guidelines or choose not to incarcerate the person at all. In the bill, currently incarcerated survivors would also receive consideration for resentencing or release.

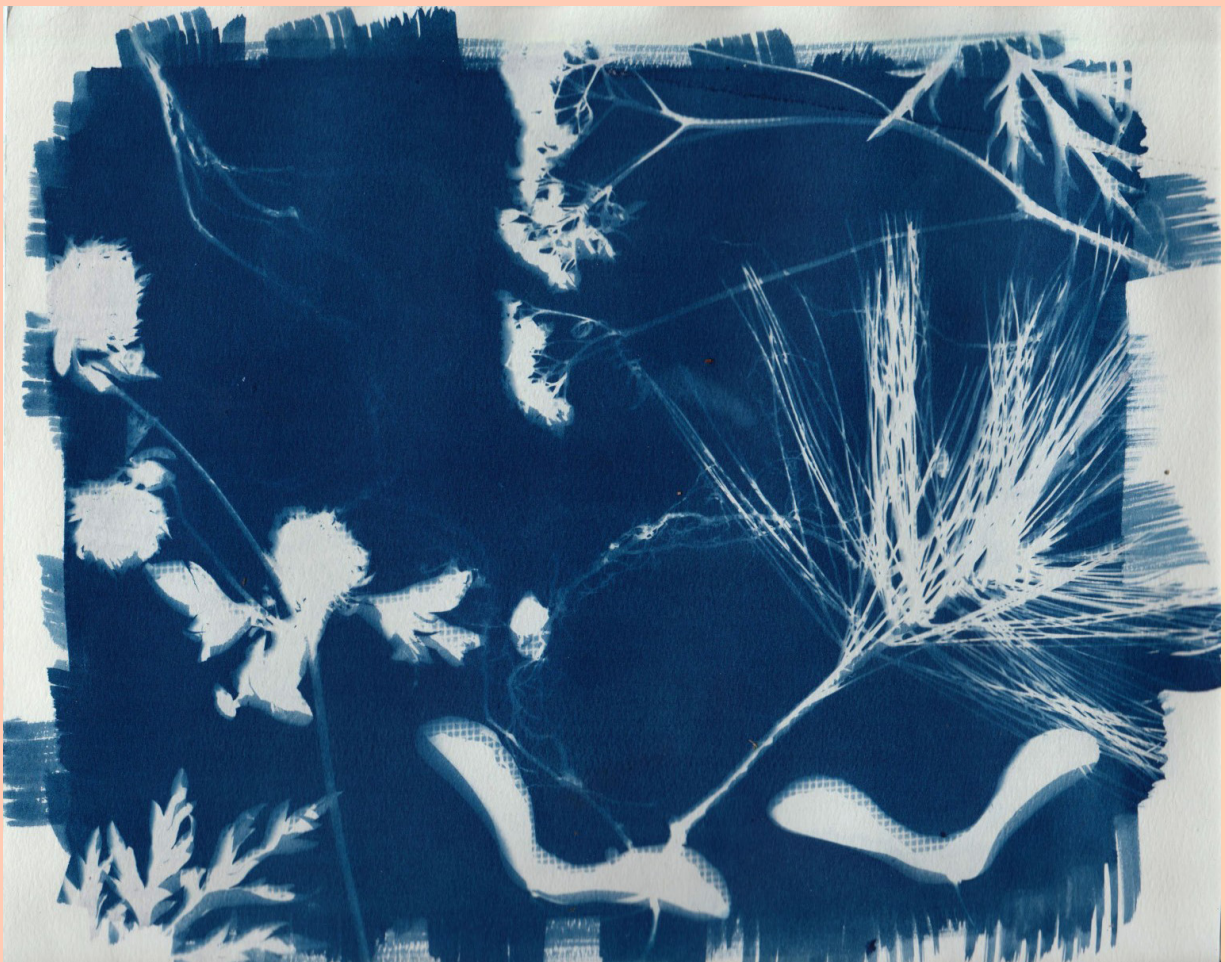
Create humane living conditions and meaningful opportunities for incarcerated people to grow and thrive

As much as abolition is needed for the system as a whole, we must not lose sight of the fact that millions of people are experiencing unlivable prison conditions everyday. In order to provide humane living conditions and true opportunities for growth and transformation to those inside, we recommend that Pennsylvania:

- A. Abolish solitary confinement
- B. Overhaul prison oversight
- C. Release all survivors of sexual assault by correctional staff
- D. Provide opportunities for meaningful prison programming
- E. Expand access to and quality of healthcare

While the above recommendations present viable next steps for the Pennsylvania Governor, Legislature and Department of Corrections, these changes still leave considerable leeway for the whims and discretion of individual state agents who are often influenced by the same biases, racism, and rigidity that shaped the carceral system in the first place. This is why, above all, we call for abolition. We envision a complete reshaping of the social systems that allow for the patriarchal violence and trauma that enmesh so many people in the suffocating web of the prison industrial complex. In the words of Jamie Silvonek,

“Prisons are not designed to make the people they cage whole. Any reforms made to prisons only legitimize their inherently racist, classist, sexist, and ableist existence as a weapon of oppression and social control. I would not change the programming and counseling offered by Muncy, though it is woefully inadequate; I would imagine and build community-based systems of accountability and mutual aid that could truly serve those caged by the punishment industry.” - Jamie Silvonek



We Depend on Each Other To Survive (2020) by **Nikolai Peacock**

INTRODUCTION

Written by: Sheená King

In the 1578 edition of *The Inquisition*, it states that “punishment does not take place primarily and per se for the correction and good of the person punished, but for the public good in order that others may become terrified and weaned away from the evils they would commit.” The Inquisition was produced by the Church and in keeping with these identical patriarchal practices of locking away for the good of the public, during the 18th and 19th centuries husbands forcibly committed their wives to asylums without their consent or an opportunity to appeal that decision in the U.K. and the U.S. These women were criminalized and institutionalized because their behavior was deemed unacceptable according to male societal standards. For these women, their only crime was hormonal changes which are common to all women. These changes were diagnosed as insanity or hysteria and were thought to be caused by uterine fury. It is no stretch of the imagination to determine that men had no idea why women behaved unseemly. The solution to put away what you do not understand is still exercised today as it pertains to women and crime. In contrast, there is a basic understanding and acceptance of men who commit crimes because men have been and remain violent rivals for dominance, status, power, sex, property, and wealth. Their aggression is practically excusable because of this same patriarchal system that created the ideology of one above and others beneath. In matters of race, white people reign supreme and every other race is beneath. In the case of the sexes, women are the weaker submissive and this is the chief reason for man’s inability to comprehend why women commit crimes, particularly crimes of violence.

It was December 16, 1993. I had just turned twenty on the fourth and I was being sentenced for a crime I committed when I was eighteen years old. Among other things, the sentence confounded me after my attorney among others said that I would be paroled after serving “about 15-20 years.” Twenty years would have been March 20, 2012. That was almost thirteen years ago.

Life imprisonment or Life Without Parole in Pennsylvania has been appropriately coined Death By Incarceration (DBI) because freedom is ensured when my ashes are shipped to my daughter in a cardboard box. But, I am not the only one. The 1990’s were the “tough on crime” era and harsh, excessive sentences were imposed in an attempt to deter others from committing violent crimes. Sound familiar? It didn’t work in 1578 and excessive sentencing didn’t deter others from committing crimes in the 90’s or any other decade.

On October 20, 2022, there were upwards of 740,000 women and girls held in penal institutions throughout the world (Rise in female incarceration: “a cause of great concern,” 2022). At least 172,700 are in the United States, making it the country who incarcerates more women and girls—than any other (Kajstura et al., 2023). From the 172,000 women incarcerated in the U.S., more than 90% are estimated to have been subjected to sexual assault and/or physical trauma prior to incarceration (Women in prison: Seeking justice behind bars, 2020). Forty percent of these women and girls have been convicted of a violent crime, and the number of women and girls

serving DBI sentences in the United States of America has increased 43% between 2008 and 2020 (Nellis, 2021a). Why? What happened? Strikingly obvious—the patriarchal penchant for punishment as a terrifying deterrent has reared its head once again, although it has not been successful.

When women are arrested for crimes of violence, the patriarchal ideals are so deeply ingrained in the criminal justice system that the reason for these crimes MUST be the hysterical fluctuations of our hormonal cycles, therefore we MUST be imprisoned beyond menopause for the good of society. What is incomprehensible, they prefer to put out of sight in the U.S.

As of February 28, 2023, nearly 2,000 women are languishing in Pennsylvania state prisons (PA DOC, 2023). The female population swells because of the overzealousness of arrest and the goal of imprisonment for a lifetime, especially for women of color. Policing was for the recapturing of slaves and penal colonies, like life sentences, were for the worst of the worst. In Pennsylvania, as in the U.S., both of these institutions have ballooned tremendously and their intended purposes forgotten as this concept of hiding us away or throwing away women and girls continues.

Is this justice? Justice is defined as fair treatment, yet current PA law dictates that if a woman is beaten and/or raped, she does not have the right to defend herself or her children. How exactly is that justice? Perhaps then justice exists for men, just not us.

The following report is a mere representation, a small sampling of the larger problem of women serving DBI sentences in Pennsylvania. In the pages of this report, it may be tempting to view these women through the lens of the crime that was committed, the painful loss of life. However, I challenge you to see these women and trans people beyond that moment and see how, for many of us, our eventual incarceration was unfortunately the natural trajectory of our lives. The majority of the women and trans people suffered childhood trauma, especially sexual abuse by someone they trusted. Many were victims of violence and used drugs or alcohol to cope with the atrocities visited upon them. Not surprisingly, almost all of the women were represented by court-appointed attorneys and could not afford private counsel although it was their first offense. More than a few were convicted on the testimony of co-defendants who were granted immunity and several were offered plea agreements but were advised by their attorneys to refuse the plea or were never informed. The majority had male codefendants, or men were involved, or men were the reason for the crime.

Perhaps the abuses suffered, the undiagnosed or untreated mental illness, or the violent dominance of men over women is why some women commit crimes of violence. In a patriarchal society what isn't considered is the grief, guilt, and remorse that becomes the catalyst to transforming our lives and becoming someone better than who we were.

RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of the surveys yielded eight overarching themes that were encompassed within four broader topics: environmental factors, legal factors, rehabilitation, and impacts of incarceration. These themes are outlined below, accompanied by visualizations of the quantitative results.

OVERVIEW OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

Seventy three individuals serving death by incarceration (DBI) sentences (also known as life sentences without the possibility of parole (LWOP)) completed and returned the initial survey.¹ These individuals are incarcerated in Pennsylvania's correctional facilities for women, SCI Muncy and SCI Cambridge Springs. Compared to the racial composition of Pennsylvania overall, the sample was disproportionately Black (Pennsylvania: 11% Black, sample: 41% Black)². Surveyed individuals primarily identified as cisgender female (90%) with a minority identifying as transgender males (3%) and genderfluid/queer (1%).

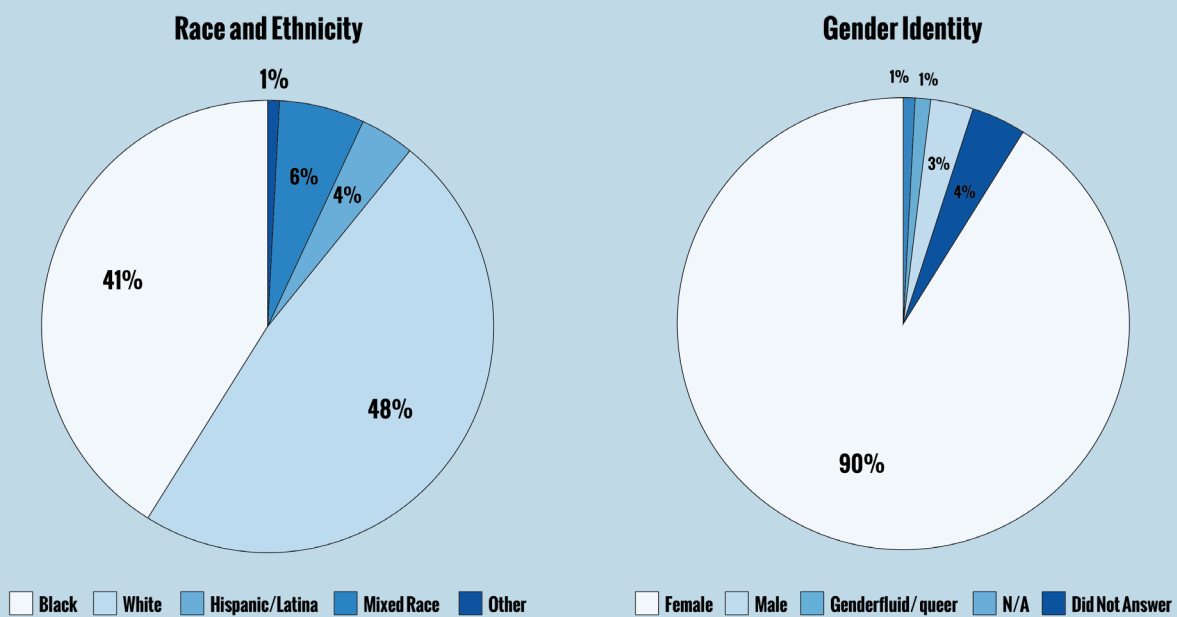


Figure 1. Race/Ethnicity and Gender Identity.

The sample was primarily white (48%) but disproportionately Black (41%). Most participants identified as female (90%). The average age at initial incarceration was 29 years. At the time of the survey, the average age of the sample was 53 years.

¹ Approximately 239 individuals were serving life sentences in women's facilities in Pennsylvania as of June 2020 (Pennsylvania Department of Corrections. DOC ALL POPULATION SPREADSHEET 6-10-20 (2020)).

² This overrepresentation of Black women is consistent with national carceral trends. In 2017, Black women were incarcerated at nearly 2 times the rate of white women (The Sentencing Project. 2019. Incarcerated Women and Girls).

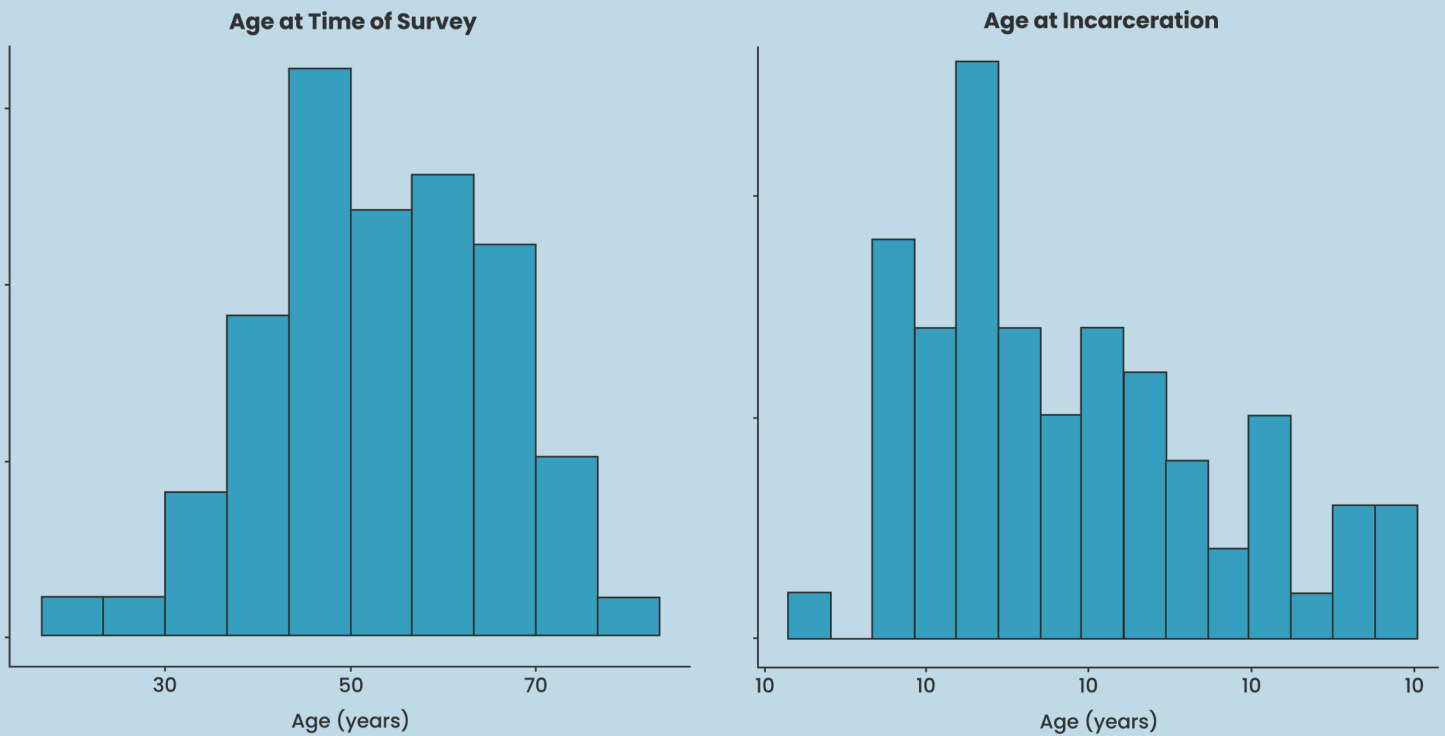


Figure 2. Current Age and Age at Incarceration. Current ages of participants range from 20–80 with a mean age of 53 (12.1) years. The mean age at incarceration ranged from 14–50 with a mean age of 29 (9.1) years. Participants reported hometowns spanning Pennsylvania. Philadelphia County was listed most often (34%)³, followed by Allegheny County (11%). 15% of the sample grew up outside of Pennsylvania.



Figure 3. Hometown. 34% of the sample grew up in Philadelphia county, 11% in Allegheny county, 15% outside of PA and the remaining 40% from PA counties across the state.

³Philadelphia is the “DBI capital of the world.” With almost 2,700 individuals serving DBI sentences, Philadelphia sentences more people to die in prison than any other country or U.S. county/parish (Cozzens and Grote, A Way Out at 17).

ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

Theme 1: Patriarchal violence throughout the lifespan

“I learned way too young the thin line between love and hate”

Patriarchal violence was a common thread within and between participants’ life stories.⁴ When asked about their role models growing up, most participants described looking up to mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, sisters, and aunts, often for their compassion and kindness, morality, strength, unconditional love, and spirituality. Charmaine Pfender wrote:

“My grandmother [was my role model] because she loved me unconditionally and taught me what it meant to be loyal. She stood by me throughout my childhood, fought to see me as an infant against an abusive father and then got custody of me at age 18. Stood by me through this incarceration in every way. She showed me what strength looked like in a woman. She even shaped me spiritually.” (Charmaine Pfender)

But in contrast to Ms. Pfender, whose grandmother advocated for her wellbeing in an abusive household, several other participants described how these role models introduced them to abuse. They witnessed their role models (often female caregivers) in abusive relationships or were themselves abused by their caregiver’s romantic partners or friends.

“My mom was so kind and sweet but looking back on it she was also a doormat to my father. I guess watching her I learned that bad influence when it came to men.” (Anonymous)

“My father was abusive towards my mother and became abusive towards me when I was 7 years old.” (Rita Pultro)

Some female caregivers even enabled or covered up the abuse.

“My father’s sickness was horrible and no child should have to endure the suffering physical and psychological torture he inflicted upon me. My grandmother covered everything he did, mostly turning a blind eye while her boyfriend made sexual advances towards me which she knew about.” (Sarita Miller)

“I was raped by my brother at age 12. He was 9 years older than me. My mother said I could not tell. I was hospitalized, stitched so I never dealt with this...” (Sylvia Boykin)

⁴“Patriarchy” refers to social systems in which positions of power and privilege are dominated by men in both the public and personal spheres.

In fact, nearly 60% of respondents described witnessing violence at home as children.⁵ Over 75% were physically abused and over 70% sexually abused prior to incarceration. Sixty-four percent reported experiencing both kinds of abuse.⁶ In over half of these cases, the abuse was at the hands of a family member. The abuse itself was severe. Participants described being beaten by family members to the point of hospitalization. They described being molested and raped by family members and family friends. More often than not, the abuse they endured as children was at the hands of men – fathers, mother’s boyfriends, uncles, brothers, family friends.

Did you witness acts of violence in your home as a child?

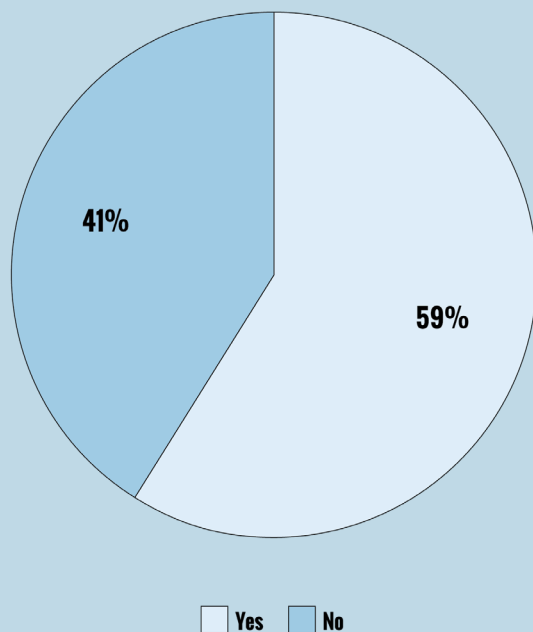


Figure 4. Violence at Home. 59% of respondents reported witnessing acts of violence at such as hitting, yelling, shoving, and/or stabbing at home as a child.

“My biological father molested me at age 8 and attempted to when I was 18. When I was 9 until 12 my mother’s boyfriend used me to perform every sex act except anal penetration. He used the threat of violence and the possibility of raping my younger sisters to control me and keep me quiet about what he was doing.” (Sheená King)

“My father and I was tight when I was growing up. We used to stay up late and watch cowboy movies. He first touched me inappropriately when I was 12 and told me not to tell my mom. It happened again at 13 and 14 and when I threatened to tell, it turned violent until I ran away and stayed with different people.” (Anonymous)

⁵ Childhood trauma – physical abuse, sexual abuse, parental desertion, mental illness, and loss of loved ones – is one of the most common factors among incarcerated women (Wesely & Dewey, 2018).

⁶ This rate of childhood abuse is dramatically higher than that of the general population. It is estimated from self-report data that 1 in 7 children (14%) experience child abuse and/or neglect each year (Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015). The rate of sexual trauma we report here is slightly lower than that reported for national estimates of women in jail (86%) (Swavola, Riley, & Subramanian, 2016). For state prisons, it is estimated that 60% of incarcerated people have a history of physical or sexual abuse (and in some geographic regions, as high as 94%) (Prison rape elimination act of 2003 (prea), 2011).

“My father sexually abused me in the form of fondling my breasts, placing his hands inside my underpants and fondling my genitals. Masturbating in front of me and making me finish to the point of ejaculation either in my hand or mouth. When no one would be looking, he would slide his hand down the back of my pants and put a finger in me, then smile and lick his finger. I would be humiliated because there were people in the room and I couldn’t react. I eventually fought back and ended up leaving the home.” (Charmaine Pfender)

“My mother’s father sexually abused all 7 of his children. In their shame no one talked about it. Each believing they were the only one it happened to. When our parents took us to grandma for babysitting, grandpa would send her out (ice cream, cookies, candy, etc.) for treats for us. When she left he would pose us with each other, penetrate, fondle, etc, then give us treats to keep us quiet. I was 5, my brother 3 years old.” (Joann Helfrich)

So many of these accounts speak to the secrecy that accompanies abuse. Some participants described how their abuser coerced silence by threatening further violence against them or their loved ones. Others expressed the paralytic effect of shame, which bound them in their silence. As children, their options to escape the abuse were limited – several respondents described running away from home.



If we can break the system (Aging in Prison) by Monica Davis

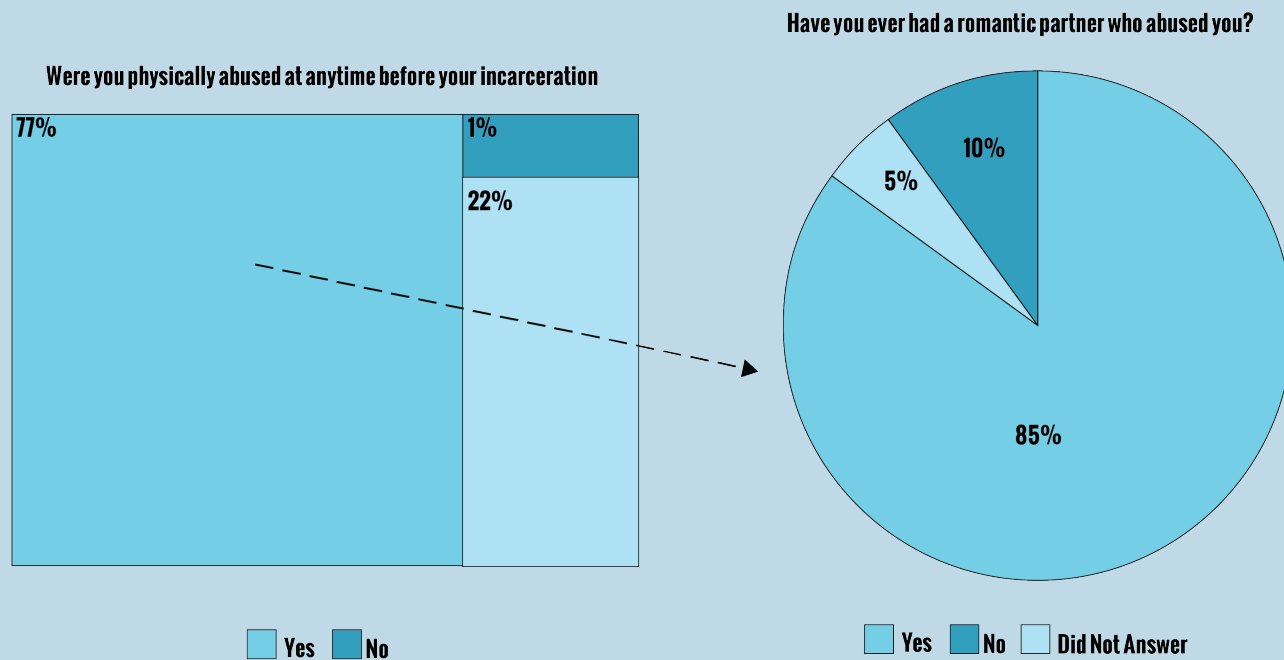


Figure 5. Physical Abuse. 77% of respondents reported being physically abused prior to incarceration. Of those 56 people, over half were abused by a family member.

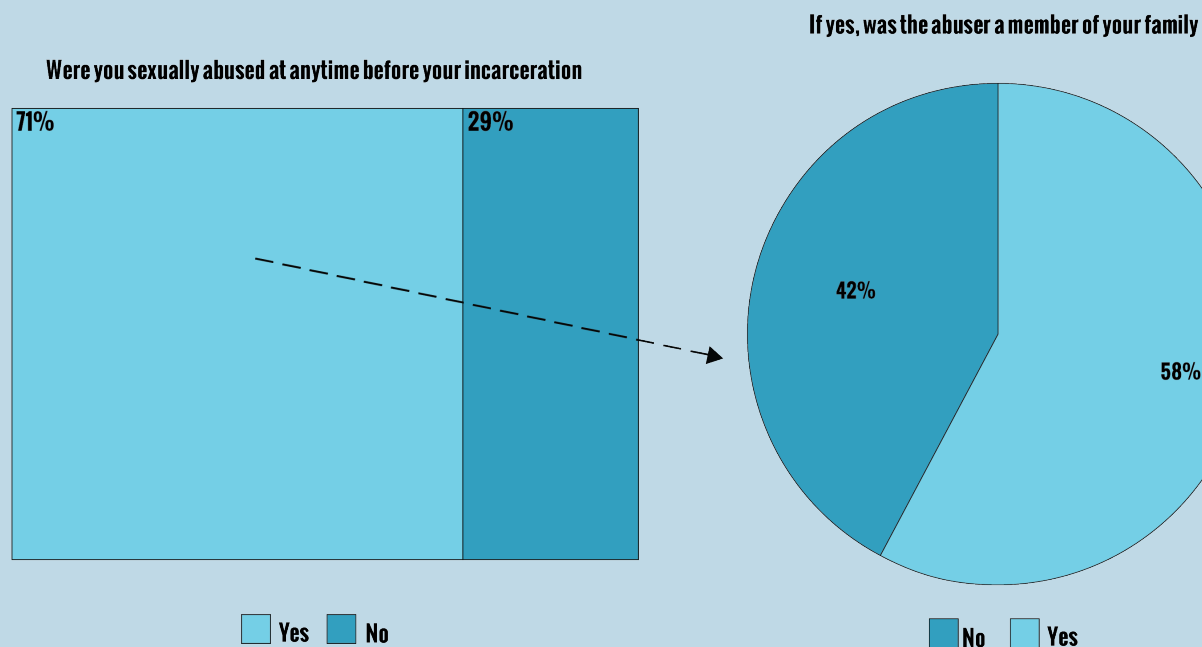


Figure 6. Sexual Abuse. 71% of respondents reported being sexually abused prior to incarceration. Of those 52 people, almost 60% were abused by a family member.

Co-occurring Physical and Sexual Abuse

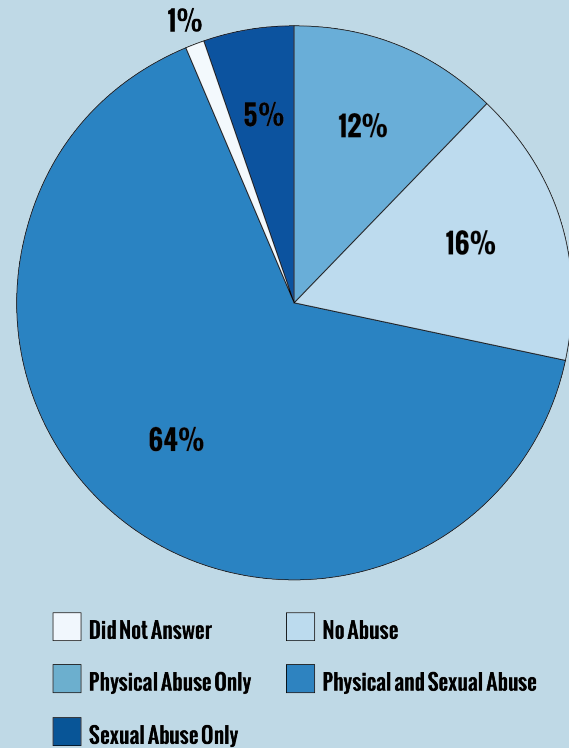


Figure 7. Co-occurring Physical and Sexual Abuse. 64% of respondents reported experiencing both physical and sexual abuse prior to incarceration. Only 16% of the sample reported no prior abuse.

As Karen Phillips wrote, these early experiences of abuse affected her understanding of love. She began to identify hate and love as closely intertwined:

“The person who physically abused me all my life was my father. He was a severe alcoholic and he physically abused us on a regular basis. We never knew what would bring on the beatings. I would get beat more than my brother. I began to identify with the beatings as the darkness because that’s what I would see in his eyes when he was in a drunken stupor – the darkness would always come. You would learn at a young age to wait for it to pass. I learned way too young the thin line between love and hate.” (Karen Phillips)

This feeling was echoed by another participant, Marsha Scaggs, who described confusing hatred and violence as love.

“Every relationship I ever had was physically abusive as well as verbally. When you’re told that you’re not good enough or that you are ugly and no one else would want you, you start believing what is being told to you day after day. And when you’re being beaten you think it’s your fault and that they must love you enough to want to put their hands on you.” (Marsha Scaggs)

Following childhood, many participants became involved in abusive romantic relationships. 81% of respondents reported experiencing sexual, physical, or psychological partner abuse.⁷

⁷ Compared to the general population, this estimate of intimate partner violence is much higher. A 2016/2017 CDC survey estimated that 47.3% of women in the U.S. have experienced intimate partner violence (sexual violence, physical violence, and/or stalking) in their lifetime (Leemis et al., 2022). The rate of intimate partner violence we identified is only slightly higher than that reported for national estimates of women in jail (77%) (Swavola, Riley, & Subramanian, 2016).

“My husband was physically abusive. He would hit me if the grass wasn’t mowed before he came home from work. He would take checks out of my checkbook and not tell me. Then the checkbook would be off. The check would bounce. He would grip me up stating I did it when it was actually him. I worked, too. He would get mad if I spent money. He would smash jelly jars and put my face in it. He smashed the battery of the drill in the wall because I got formula for our baby. We always lived on eggshells,My husband would hold me down when he wanted to have sex. He would say, “I’m married to you, I can’t rape you because we have rings.” I would tell him no, he would hold my mouth closed. I would just let him do what he wanted because I did not want to get hit.” (Mirinda Boob)

“My boyfriend at the time was my abuser. He would hit, threaten, and kick me. He even molested my daughter when she was 4 years old. He even hit my mother. When I reported these incidents to the police nothing ever happened to him.” (Sherry Bair)

“I was involved with a man who was merciless. I was forced to become a prostitute and was beat almost everyday. He would beat me with anything and for any reason (especially not making enough money). He would beat me with his fists, bricks, extension cords, shoes, etc. He had a blackjack that had red, yellow and green rubber bands on it. He called it “Cyd’s Stick” and beat me mostly with that. No matter how many times I tried to leave, he wouldn’t let me.” (Cyd Berger)

“I was abused by my second daughter’s father. He would beat on me, keep me locked in a room and only allowed me up sometimes. He choked me until I passed out when I was 2 months pregnant. Also my last two children’s father would hit me, verbally abuse me and pulled guns out on me numerous times.” (LaTosha Harper)

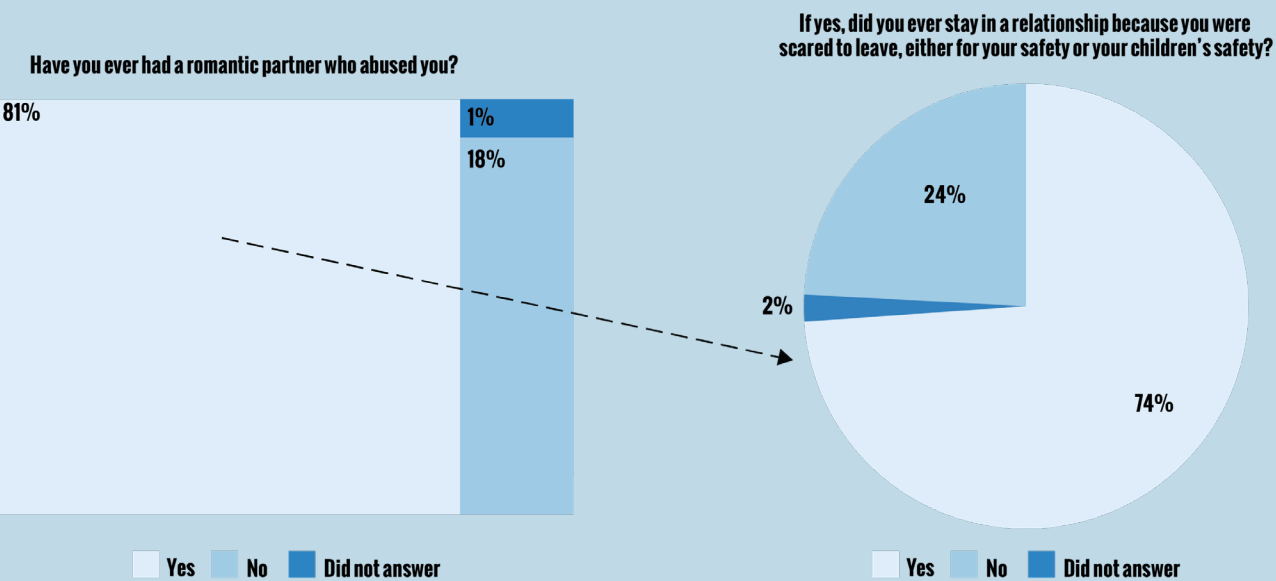


Figure 8. Partner Abuse. 81% of respondents experienced sexual, physical, or psychological partner abuse. Of those 59 people, 74% reported staying in the abusive relationship due to concerns of safety.

Participants described feeling trapped in these relationships. Three quarters of those in abusive relationships said they stayed due to concerns for their or their children's safety.

Again, many participants kept this abuse secret. They described feelings of shame and guilt for what happened to them, identifying the abuse as their fault.

"My fiancé abused me physically and mentally. I kept it to myself because I was embarrassed. I moved my whole life across the country to be with this man and he wasn't who I thought he was. In the past I'd witnessed worse abuse being done to other women and he'd told me himself that I was lucky because he had done worse to other women in the past." (Anonymous)

"I was raped at age 16 and age 17 by a stranger. I never reported either incident because I blamed myself. I shouldn't have been where I was at." (Anonymous)

"When I was 7 years old my mother's best friend sexually abused me. At the age of 15, I was raped by my best friend and at the age of 19, I was raped by two men when I lived in Baltimore, Maryland. I always felt it was my fault because I placed myself in these situations." (Marsha Scaggs)

From participants' accounts emerges a common story arc – a lifetime of patriarchal violence. From childhood physical and sexual abuse by male relatives and family friends, to sexual assault by male friends and strangers, to partner abuse by boyfriends and husbands, violence at the hands of men can be traced throughout and between participants' lives.

The two system-impacted members of the qualitative research team described how this patriarchal violence follows most incarcerated women beyond childhood abuse and romantic relationships. Qualitative team member Rose Dinkins described how patriarchal violence persists in women's prisons at the hands of guards, who are primarily male. This information was not addressed through the initial survey, so in a follow-up survey completed by 10 individuals, participants were asked how they felt they were treated by correctional officers. Several participants claimed that their treatment was fair, while others described severe abuse by staff. Jamie Silvonek, who was incarcerated as a minor, wrote:

“I was consistently and regularly emotionally abused by the C.O.s charged with my care and custody throughout the three years I was confined in the YOU. They regularly forced me to stand in front of their office in the YAOP while they verbally disparaged and humiliated me.⁸ They sometimes forced me to stand in front of their office for hours at a time as they degraded and taunted me, the C.O.s charged with my care were well aware of my PTSD and fraught mental health, yet they used my mothers death as a tool with which to humiliate me...The C.O.s retaliated against my reporting of them by beginning to write me up at every opportunity. I believe I received about 30 misconducts during this period—I was, as a result, often unable to talk to my family, and permitted even less interaction with my peers.” (Jamie Silvonek)

In this passage, Ms. Silvonek describes the escalation of psychological abuse by guards as they witnessed her mental health deteriorate. They used her traumatic past as a tool of manipulation, accelerating the abuse as they saw her suffer.

Several other participants described verbal abuse by guards. As Sylvia Boykin explained, “the officers always talk smart to [you], or degrade you, or have no compassion.” One individual, who is a trans man, described the transphobic harassment⁹ he is subjected to by guards, writing:

“I am targeted by a handful of c/os daily. Whether it’s my hair, the way I dress, my medical needs, and my housing. I have grieved to no avail. I have been told, “This isn’t a men’s prison, you can’t get your hair cut the way you want to.” “My tax dollars aren’t going to pay for your medical,” “you can’t wear athletic tees,” “I don’t want you ‘boys’ running around on my open units” – insinuating we’re sexual predators. “I’m confused.” Telling other inmates to not refer to me as him or he. “There’s no men in this prison.” Continuously calling me she or her after I ask them not to. Inappropriate sexual comments about dildos and a whole other host of insults.” (Anonymous)

One respondent wrote that “COs are having sex with inmates” (Anonymous). It goes without saying that sex between a correctional officer and incarcerated person can never be consensual due to the severe power imbalance. Ms. Dinkins explained that, approximately every month, male officers are suspended or moved to other units for sexually harassing those in their custody.

Another member of the qualitative research team, Cynthia Alvarado, explained how many women sentenced to life are convicted of crimes initiated by male individuals. In follow up surveys, participants were asked for more detail about the crime for which they are serving time. Indeed, many participants described situations where the violence was set in motion by men.

⁸ The Youthful Offender Unit (YOU) and Young Adult Offender Program (YAOP) are housing units at SCI Muncy for incarcerated young adults between the ages of 18 and 21.

⁹ Transgender people, and particularly transgender people of color, experience higher rates of police mistreatment, incarceration, and physical and sexual assault in jails and prisons (James et al., 2016). 11% of incarcerated trans people report sexual assault by prison staff (James et al., 2016).

“Once I got to Ms. Nagel’s door and she opened it recognizing me, the unthinkable took place. My co-defendant pushed his way in and began brutalizing her. I stood back frozen and watched. I did nothing to help her. I couldn’t believe it! When I was threatened to participate, I hit Ms. Nagel in her head once.” (Sarita Miller)

“Everyone in my case I had just met maybe a couple weeks or month [before], one guy I started dating. I drove my codefendants, Aaron Mayor and Lamont Blagman to pick up some money not knowing this would change my life forever, I did not know anyone would be killed, nor did I order anyone to shoot.” (Sylvia Boykin)

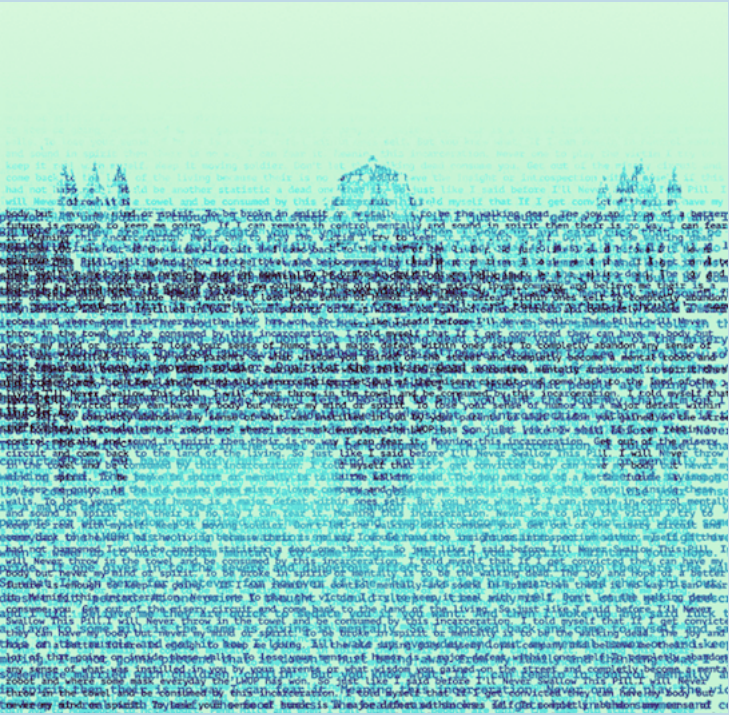
“I went back downstairs and I saw Barry (co-defendant) and the other guy over Mr. Dave while he was lying on the floor. I became hysterical, as the plan was not to harm Mr. Dave. I said stop and they did, but Mr. Dave didn’t move.” (Denise Crump)

“I was involved with a man who threatened to kill me and my family if I did not commit a murder for him and in the exact manner that he directed. I believed him because he claimed to have ties to the Junior Black Mafia, a notorious and dangerous gang of drug dealers and murderers. At the time, I felt that I had no other choice and although I never wanted to hurt anyone, I didn’t know what else to do except what Reginald Boykin said.” (Sheená King)

“My co-defendant was my husband. My best friend, Devon Guzman, was also the person I was having an affair with. She was killed by my husband. I was there, I lied and helped cover it up.” (Michelle Hetzel)

These testimonies depict women trapped in situations that turn violent due to escalation by men. In several cases, the respondent had no part in the actual the violence. In other cases, the respondent was coerced into participation after men threatened them with violence.

I'll Never Swallow This Pill
by Christine Lorenz



A LIFE INSIDE: JAMIE SILVONEK

Written by Valerie Kiebala in
collaboration with Jamie Silvonek



Where I end, prison begins.
So long since I've been touched
my nerve endings mistake fabric for flesh.
Senses dulled, I confuse my feet for concrete
and I live by plangent bells here. They ring
at set times but they never stop sounding
for me. A shrill playlist screams like
the youth I robbed myself of. Reversed,
I don't bleed anymore: I feel a wet warmth
on my lips, finger my nostrils
to feel the red river. Now, it's my shirts that are stained.
Clocks anchor and torture as I stare at the hands
cycling through the hours
while my own wither.
Prison begins behind closed eyelids:
stirring from visions, noticing my freshly mutilated skin;
faces, names, lifetimes in the cell with me but I'm alone still.
I sleep obliviously sometimes. When I wake,
I realize I was only watching someone else folded in their dark cell
as I held my breath.
I know that when I end, prison will begin.

—Jamie Silvonek

Weeks after her 14th birthday, Jamie Silvonek's 20-year-old ex-military boyfriend Mr. Barnes murdered Jamie's mother. While Jamie was a child at the time and not actively involved in her mother's murder, the state deemed her to be "incorrigible" and sentenced her to die in prison. Jamie was sentenced in adult court to 35 years to life, despite the victims of the crime vocalizing their desire for Jamie to be tried in juvenile court. Not only did the court fail to take into account the victims' desires or her age but, as is commonplace in the U.S. court system, it failed to take into account the violence she endured as a girl. In resistance to the state attempting to throw away her life, Jamie has tapped into her own strength to develop into an astute, educated, principled, and empathetic young woman.

Society's obsession with the appearance and sexuality of girls and women can chip away at a person's psyche. And as a young queer girl with a facial deformity, Jamie faced the brunt of this patriarchal moral code. When Jamie fell into an abusive relationship with an older man, she faced even more profound violence against her being.

"The effect of the patriarchy on my life has been total," Jamie wrote. "Because of the patriarchy, the abuse I endured from an adult man in the military was glossed over, and I was portrayed by our legal system to be an inherently evil and sociopathic seductress who manipulated her boyfriend into murdering her mother."

Jamie's mindset leading up to, during, and after her mother's death was the product of "the complex weaving together of the effects of trauma that made her vulnerable to depending on a man who said he loved her, her immature thinking and unformed identity, her emotional childishness, her difficulty in reading social cues, and being coerced in a domestic violence relationship," according to her court documents. NO evidence was presented to show either the scope or effect of Mr. Barnes' physical and emotional abuse of Jamie. ¹⁰

The abuse and violence only escalated upon her incarceration. When she arrived at SCI Muncy, Jamie was held in the Youthful Offender Unit (YOU) where children are held in solitary confinement separated from the adults. Jamie lived in solitary confinement from the age of 14 until she was 18 years old.

"I was consistently and regularly emotionally abused by the C.O.s charged with my care and custody throughout the three years I was confined in the YOU," Jamie recalled. "The treatment I received resulted in a complete deterioration of my mental health. At this time, I was still struggling to process my mother's death and my role in it, as well as the abuse I sustained from my codefendant. The C.O.s charged with my care were well aware of my PTSD and fraught mental health, yet they used my mother's death as a tool with which to humiliate me. I attempted suicide multiple times throughout this period; each time, I was placed under an even more restrictive solitary confinement protocol, in which I was stripped of clothing, reading materials, and access to my family."

¹⁰ In Pennsylvania, expert testimony regarding "Battered Women's Syndrome" is admissible in court, though the expert may not testify as to whether the defendant herself is a "battered woman" (U.S. Department of Justice, 1996). However, in the sentencing phase, once an individual has been convicted of first or second degree murder, the courts have no discretion in applying a sentence lesser than life without the possibility of parole, the mandatory minimum sentence. Therefore an individual's abuse history can not be considered and applied as a mitigating factor. In cases where an individual is facing the death penalty, abuse histories can be applied as a mitigating factor - but the only lesser sentence that is possible for the court to apply is life without the possibility of parole.

Jamie developed a severe eating disorder and engaged in escalating forms of self-mutilation. “I learned to cope with my trauma and circumstances by punishing myself physically and emotionally, believing that I deserved the abuse which defined my life at that point,” Jamie wrote.

However, Jamie has refused to allow these deeply traumatizing and life-altering experiences to define her. She is now a straight-A college student, pursuing a Bachelor of Social Science in sociology and criminal justice. She has written a book-length manuscript of poems and a scholarly article exploring America’s history of eugenic sterilization and its perpetuation by the punishment industry. Jamie now defines herself as an “antiracist, anti-capitalist, antifascist prison and police abolitionist” who seeks “to expose the human rights crises faced by incarcerated people” through her writing and poetry.

Jamie has dedicated her life to bettering herself, supporting her family and fighting for a better world—a world in which equality, compassion, truth, and elevation reign. “I have incurred a lifelong obligation to my family to do everything I can to make them as whole as possible after what I’ve done. I owe it to my mom to honor her life by becoming a person she can be proud of.” Yet, being trapped behind bars prevents Jamie from being able to fully live out her love and sense of responsibility for her family.

“I cannot care for my aging family while confined, and I can do little to tangibly repair the harms I am responsible for,” she continued.

As a white woman, Jamie constantly examines her privilege and the complexity of her identity in a country that continues to live out its racist, sexist, classist, and ableist history. In an article published in the magazine *Daughters*, Jamie called on white people to: “educate ourselves about amerika’s sordid history so we can resolve to rise above it and make the future better for those who come after us. Our silence and ignorance makes us complicit in the racist and capitalist institutions that harm and exploit our white bodies alongside bodies of color.

“Those whites who have succeeded in capitalist hegemony have done so on the backs of hundreds of years of slave labor and institutional racism. When we have the moral courage to look critically at amerika, we’ll find the bravery to analyze ourselves similarly. We will discover that, as much as we claim to be anti-racist, we have implicit biases as a result of being raised in this society. When we are ready, we will see ourselves in others, see our fight in the struggles of nonwhite people. We will recognize our shared humanity and dignity, the common desire we all have to live lives unimpeded by hatred and violence.” (Silvonek, 2022).

You can write to Ms. Silvonek here:

Smart Communications/PADOC

Jamie Silvonek, OX8508

SCI Muncy

PO Box 33028

St. Petersburg, FL 33733

Theme 2: The cycle of trauma, abuse, and crime

“My life became a journey of pure darkness, hurt, and going to jail for life”

Several respondents wove the thread between these environments of abuse and the situation for which they are incarcerated¹¹ For many, the link between abuse and the crime for which they were convicted was direct – they were convicted of killing their abuser.

“[My abuser] was my father, my victim, he would touch me and feel me inappropriately saying how pretty I had become. But mostly he would have his friends touch and feel me and then having me give them massages and/or oral sex” (Chanel Wiest)

“I was abused by three different men in my life. Two left, one I remained with for 18 years. We had children together. My abuse was physical, financial, mental, emotional, spiritual, all from the same person The abuser was my victim and it was a game to him” (Elizabeth Collazo)

One third of cases involved the death of a romantic partner, and in 85% of those cases, the participants had experienced partner abuse.

One such participant explained how the act of violence for which she was convicted originated from a lifetime of violence she was subjected to, drawing a connection between abuse to drug addiction to the death of her abuser.

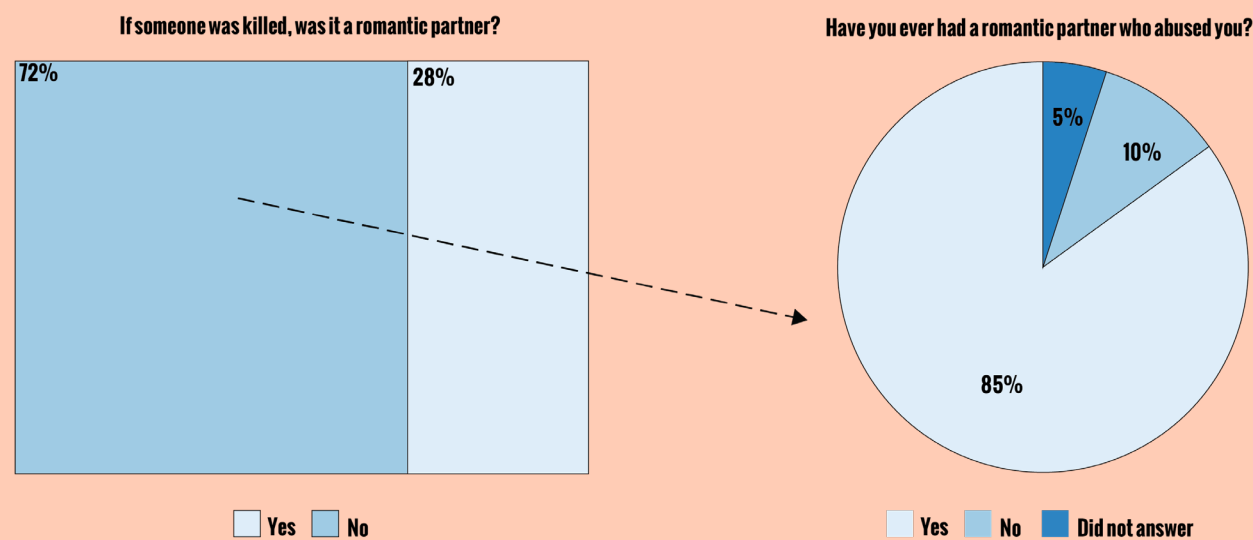


Figure 9. Death of Romantic Partner. Almost one third of cases involved the death of a romantic partner. Of those 20 cases, 85% of participants had experienced partner abuse.

¹¹ The psychological and behavioral effects of childhood victimization put people at greater risk of incarceration (Salisbury & Patricia, 2009). One study of incarcerated women in a sample of US jails found that women who witnessed violence in the home as children were at twice the risk for fighting or assaulting others relative to those who did not (DeHart, Lynch, Belknap, Priscilla Dass-Brailsford, & Green, 2014).

“I didn’t just wake up one morning and decide to commit such a heinous act. That day was a very bad outcome of a life and past I was subjected to. I was mentally abused a lot as a child, beat on and brought down by my peers all through school. As I got older the only time I was ever wanted was if it involved sex. I was raped multiple times, fell into addiction and toxic relationships. I started resorting to drugs to self harm and tried to commit suicide multiple times. My victim was my last abusive relationship and all my pain that was bottled up caused me to do something that I regret and mourn deeply. However, this doesn’t make me a bad person. It has taken me years to get society’s voice out of my head that tells me I’m a monster.” (Jade Olmstead)

She describes how the pain she carried with her impaired her ability to react in that moment. Other participants also described the psychological impacts of surviving abuse. Joyce Schofield described how the emotional abuse she endured severely altered her mental state,

“My ex-husband was a master at mental control and mental abuse. I tried so hard but when he used me up and then told people he was going to kill me, my mental understanding of right vs wrong was gone.” (Joyce Schofield)

Charmaine Pfender described a life trajectory involving abuse at home, the shelter system, and then prison—and how that early abuse affected her development.

“I have been raised in an abusive house that shaped the decisions of my young mind at 18. I had already suffered from 6-14 years old in an abusive home, then for 3 years in a shelter, then a group home. After being granted custody by my grandma, I lived freely for the first year of my life from 17 to 18. Then I came to prison for life where I served 36 years, I was free from abuse or incarceration only 7 years of the 55 years I have been on Earth.” (Charmaine Pfender)

Another participant traced the thread of trauma from childhood to adulthood, being a parentified-child¹² and becoming a parent at a young age without any support. She used drugs to relieve pressure, and the drugs were directly involved in the crime for which she is incarcerated.

“I was an abused child physically and mentally by my father who was a severe alcoholic. I was sexually abused by my older brother from a young age all the way into my teen years. I was a very quiet and shy child. I found myself always scared. As time passed and the abuse continued, I found myself becoming more and more depressed.

¹² “Parentification” refers to when a child must assume parental or caretaking responsibility in the home (Earley & Cushway, 2002). This overburdening of responsibility affects parentified people throughout their lives, with links to codependency, poor self-image, compulsiveness, anxiety, and depression (Earley & Cushway, 2002). This intersects with race and gender in the broader pattern of “adultification,” where adults “view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers,” assuming they need less nurturing, protection, and support and disproportionately punishing them in educational and carceral settings (Epstein, Blake, & Gonzalez, 2017).

At the age of 13, I dropped out of school to take care of my younger brother. Then when I was 15, my mother had another child, therefore I became responsible for two young children and that's when I realized I was a child thrown into adulthood.

I then started doing drugs to relieve the pressure I was going through at home. During the times of my father's drinking sprees, we had to endure verbal abuse and physical abuse, myself more so than my older brother. Any little thing could bring on these beatings

I was a confused child crying out for help but it was a cry that went unheard for many, many years. I grew up with knowledge that what happens in your house stays in your house, you speak to no one about it, not even family.

At the age of 18, I became pregnant and I was more scared than ever before. I was told by my father that if I was pregnant that I had better find somewhere else to live because I was never allowed back home. A child with a child, trying to support my child on my own with no sense of direction. That was really hard to do. I was desperate and alone.

I became so depressed that I wanted to die. I tried suicide and was committed to a psychiatric ward for observation. Yes, they thought that something was wrong with me. I then started using any form of drug that I could get my hands on. So, my values like most troubled teens, I found myself in an adult world, making adult decisions but with an immature mind. The trouble I encountered was inevitable. My life became a journey of pure darkness, hurt, and going to jail for life.

On April 29, 1988, I went out with my oldest brother at 12:30 AM and we did drugs and were driving around. I remember feeling sick and dizzy and having the feeling like I was going to pass out. The next thing I remember was police officers arriving and asking a bunch of questions. I became trapped, scared and confused. I feel like I was outside myself, watching the scene before me. It was all a dream but the dream turned into a nightmare - one that I would relive for the rest of my life." (Anonymous)

In the months immediately before your current incarceration, how often did you use drugs?

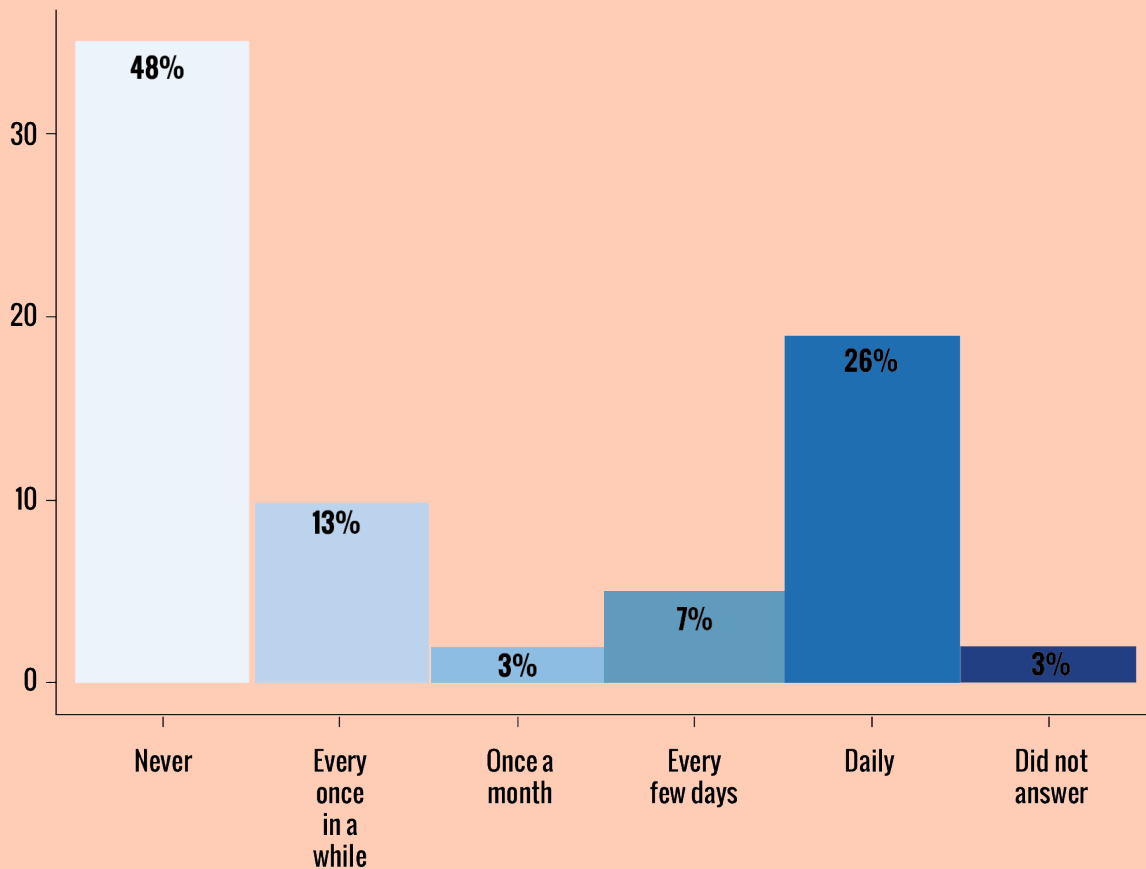


Figure 10. Drug Use. Almost half of respondents used drugs in the period immediately prior to incarceration (48%). Almost one third of participants were daily users (26%).

As qualitative research team member Cynthia Alvarado explained, “When a woman is being hurt repeatedly and then we break down emotionally, we are criminalized for it’s Mind starts to bend, children are threatened, [it’s] emotionally draining.” Many women are subjected to violence throughout their lifespan, which has deep psychological impacts. Once they react to the abuse, they are criminalized by the state.

As Jamie Silvonek so precisely put it,

“The vast majority of women in prison are incarcerated because of past trauma and mental illness. Trauma, race, mental illness, poverty - it is all intersectional.” (Jamie Silvonek)

A LIFE INSIDE: CYD BERGER

Written by Valerie Kiebala in
collaboration with Cyd Berger



“I have a victim, and I was a victim. You find yourself involved in things you would never imagine, like sex for sale. I felt like a fly caught in a spider web and I just didn’t know how to get out. Trauma is real and even though I have worked through so much of putting my life on track, I believe the hardest part of it all is getting past all the harm you have caused and the people you have hurt.” —Cyd Berger

Back in 1980, Dwayne Hicks was 25-year-old Cyd Berger’s boyfriend and pimp. Dwayne forced Cyd to become a sex worker and would beat her nearly everyday. “He would beat me with anything and for any reason, especially not making enough money,” Cyd said. He pummeled her with his fists, bricks, extension cords, and shoes. But most often, he bludgeoned her with a blackjack that he dubbed “Cyd’s stick.” Cyd vividly remembers the red, yellow, and green rubber bands that he kept wrapped around the weapon.

No matter how many times Cyd begged Dwayne to let her leave, he physically, sexually, and psychologically abused her into continuing to live with him and sell her body for sex. Dwayne threatened to kill Cyd and harm her children if she left.

According to court documents, on the night of October 24, 1980, Dwayne strangled a man to death, while Cyd was sitting in another room. Though Cyd takes responsibility for not stepping in to save the man’s life, she never killed anyone. And the lack of control she held in the situation is undeniable. But the people sitting in the jury box, deciding Cyd’s fate, did not know this at the time. The depth of the abuse that led Cyd to be in the vicinity of the crime was never elucidated in the courtroom.

Cyd refused to take a plea that would have lessened her sentence in exchange for testifying against her co-defendants. But one of her co-defendants, another woman that Cyd identified as her wife-in-law, agreed to testify to what Cyd characterizes as lies concocted by the state that demonized Cyd as the “mastermind.” Her co-defendant received a third degree murder charge, and Cyd was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to life without the possibility of parole.

Forty three years later, Cyd remains trapped behind the walls of State Correctional Institution Cambridge Springs. Cyd is now nearly 68 years old. Without even a moment to breathe freely, Cyd went from living under the dominance of an abusive man in the streets to living under the control of an abusive prison system. “Everyone thinks that the system is broken, but truth be told, it is not,” Cyd wrote. “It is like the ‘old boys club’ that uses their power and control to keep the least of us in our place. To look at us through blinded eyes, which in reality ‘keeps us invisible.’”

According to Cyd, she has never had any problems with any correctional officers. “I believe you get out of life what you give to life, and I have always treated the officers with respect and they have reciprocated in kind,” she said. “I may not always agree with everything that happens inside these walls, but instead of always looking at the negative side, I try to see the positive in it.”

Cyd names her greatest achievement as her relationship with her faith and her Lord, which has been the stabilizing force in facing “the challenges of this life sentence” allowing her to “live a life of peace, love, and joy (even inside these walls) on a daily basis.” Cyd has earned her Associate’s Degree in Letters, Arts, and Sciences from Penn State University as well as her license in upholstery. Cyd has completed several classes, ranging from photography to business management to gardening and computer programming. She has held numerous jobs, completed a laundry list of programs, and participated in tons of groups and workshops.

“My passion is for people,” Cyd told the Women Lifer Resume Project. “I have a heart for those who are lost and I would one day like to open a safe house for women who are suffering from abuse and who have nowhere to go.” She would also like to earn her graduate’s degree.

Cyd refuses to be defined by the patriarchal violence and trauma in her life. “I am no longer a victim but a victor. I am no longer broken, rather, I am mended. No longer do I have low self-esteem; I have strength, courage, and like a Phoenix rising out of the ashes, I have risen above circumstances,” she said.

“I am a leader. I have ceased hiding in the shadows and now embrace the front line. The face that had no voice, is no longer silenced, but speaks with truth and conviction. The woman I am now is proud of who she has become and now that woman who looks back at her in the mirror, can smile and say, ‘I love you and I celebrate you.’”

You can write to Ms. Berger here:
Smart Communications/PADOC
Cyd Berger, OO6896
SCI Cambridge Springs
PO Box 33028

A LIFE INSIDE: SARITA MILLER



Written by Sarita Miller
in collaboration with Valerie Kiebala

Sarita Miller is the founder and editor of the magazine called Daughters, published by Let's Get Free. Daughters gives incarcerated women a "platform to be heard" and "encourages courage and seeks to bring a resolution to the mental isolation that is carried with shame," according to Sarita. "I know for myself, when I read other people's narratives on their survival, it always gives me spirit," she wrote.

Back in Sarita's childhood, she faced severe sexual, physical, and emotional abuse from people in her own family. At around the age of eight years old, Sarita said, "[My] little girl fantasy was short lived." Her father physically abused her, directing his anger at Sarita's deceased mother at Sarita. "Often the beatings would get so bad that my skin was literally whipped off of my body. His verbal and emotional abuse was just as bad. I was often left alone to take care of myself for days. I had no idea where he would go. My only refuge was to go to my grandmother's home, but there lurked another abuse. Her long time, live-in boyfriend. That's where the sexual abuse started." With these two main male figures in her life assaulting and molesting Sarita, she said, "Male leadership to me had become distorted."

Sarita began running away from home at 11 years old, became pregnant by 16 years old, and fell deep into a crack addiction by 19 years old. Sarita had no problem making her way into professional settings and landing excellent jobs. But her shattered self-esteem prevented her from maintaining any of them. At that time, Sarita had deeply internalized her father's words: "You aren't shit, just like your mother. You'll never be good enough." The only time the broken record of her father's voice would cease was when she used drugs. She could finally feel free when the high numbed her feelings.

Sarita recalls the fateful night in 2003, when her addiction had turned into an “insatiable desperateness.” She went to her co-defendant with the intent to use crack cocaine. Sarita and her co-defendant drove to Ms. Rita Nagel’s apartment, on the first floor of a building where they and others would use crack. When they arrived, Sarita said, “the unthinkable took place. My co-defendant pushed his way in and began brutalizing her.” After Sarita’s co-defendant threatened her, they went on the run with Ms. Nagel’s credit card but ended up in a motel in the city. “Each and every time I suggested to my co-defendant that we should leave, he would provide me with more and more crack. By this time, I had fallen into a cocaine psychosis. His supply was never-ending.”

Later, when Sarita awaited trial in the county, her cellmate told Sarita that she knew her co-defendant because he had convinced her to go with him to rob people to get money for drugs. Sarita’s co-defendant received immunity for his testimony against her, claiming that Sarita confessed the murder to him and that he was not present or involved.

Sarita vividly recalls her court-appointed attorney lunging at her across the table, screaming with his eyes bulging out his beet red face: “THIS WAS A WHITE WOMAN THAT WAS KILLED!” At the trial, none of the violent physical and sexual abuse that Sarita had endured in her childhood was even mentioned. Instead, the prosecutor “did an excellent job of discrediting me in front of the jury,” questioning Sarita about her sexual performance with her female ex-partner— completely irrelevant to the case—and describing Sarita as a “predator” and “an admitted murderer.”

Sarita is now in her 20th year of a Death by Incarceration sentence. At the time of her arrest, Sarita’s children were 4 years old, 12 years old, and 17 years old. They are now in their twenties and thirties, and Sarita has four beautiful grandchildren. Sarita has accepted God into her life, which helped her discover herself, face herself in the mirror, take accountability, and forgive herself. “I have learned throughout the years to respect authority and my peers,” Sarita wrote. “I have learned to make healthy decisions considering the consequences. I am no longer compulsive. I have a heart today. I care about people. I have learned to have empathy and admit when I am wrong...I choose to serve, instead of being served. I am at peace now, though I still long for a second chance.” Sarita always aims to provide a space free of judgment for every person who comes to her.

The following is addapted from a letter that Sarita wrote to then-Governor of PA, Tom Wolf:

There has not been one day, one hour or one minute of my incarceration that I haven’t recollected subconsciously or in my consciousness the magnitude of the devastation of my actions and the events that lead to my incarceration and the loss of life. The remorse and mental anguish of the occurrences of my life sentence will forever haunt me.

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Although I take responsibility for my imprisonment, I know beyond a shadow of a doubt I would have never entered these prison gates if it were not for my drug addiction. I must implore to you the great dilemma of drug abuse that is plaguing our country and its catastrophic effects that it has on all people of all nationalities and backgrounds. During the past 17 years that I've been in prison, I have come to know that more than half of the female prison population is serving time for drug offenses, each time coming back into prison more beat down and hopeless than before because of their chronic drug use. Some don't make it back, dying in their addictions...

If you sit and talk to any of the women here and ask them what brought them to prison, I guarantee you drug abuse will rear its ugly head. But even more frightening than this is the reason why people use drugs in the first place. No one that has ever shared their life stories with me has ever said that when they were children, they had dreams of becoming a drug addict. Most of the women's stories are heartbreaking tales of mental, physical, and sexual abuse, and I can relate.

Drug addiction is a disease and should be treated as seriously as cancer. Instead of the astronomical amount of money that is being poured into the penal system and building new prisons, legislators should take a serious look into extensive drug treatments for those offenders with prolonged criminal histories involving drug related offenses because of addictions. Just maybe, Pennsylvania can win the war on drugs by building more centers versus prisons, where people can get the much needed long-term, psychological help that is needed to build back up self-confidence, self-esteem, faith and positive drive to believe in oneself and capabilities.

Most prisons are storage places for people to come in and out, and with prison overcrowding, people are thrown into programming and rushed through in order to cram in the remaining groups awaiting to make parole. Building centers with scenic and tranquil surroundings that provide extensive therapy and tough love, people could successfully rehabilitate from their drug addictions.

Unknown to society, they have the foot soldiers that have been on the front lines firsthand for years and years seeing the effects of drug addiction within prisons. Those foot soldiers are our PA lifer population. We do so much inside of these gates that most people on the outside couldn't even imagine, but I also know that we can do an even better job on the outside by going to treatment centers and prisons, sharing our testimonies and struggles that we faced behind our addictions...

My hope is to become a motivational speaker. I want to go back into the county jails or wherever else I can to promote recovery and the eradication of drug addiction. The good side to giving most lifers a second chance is the years we have behind us that have allowed us to be molded into remorseful, caring people who want a better future for ourselves and our communities.

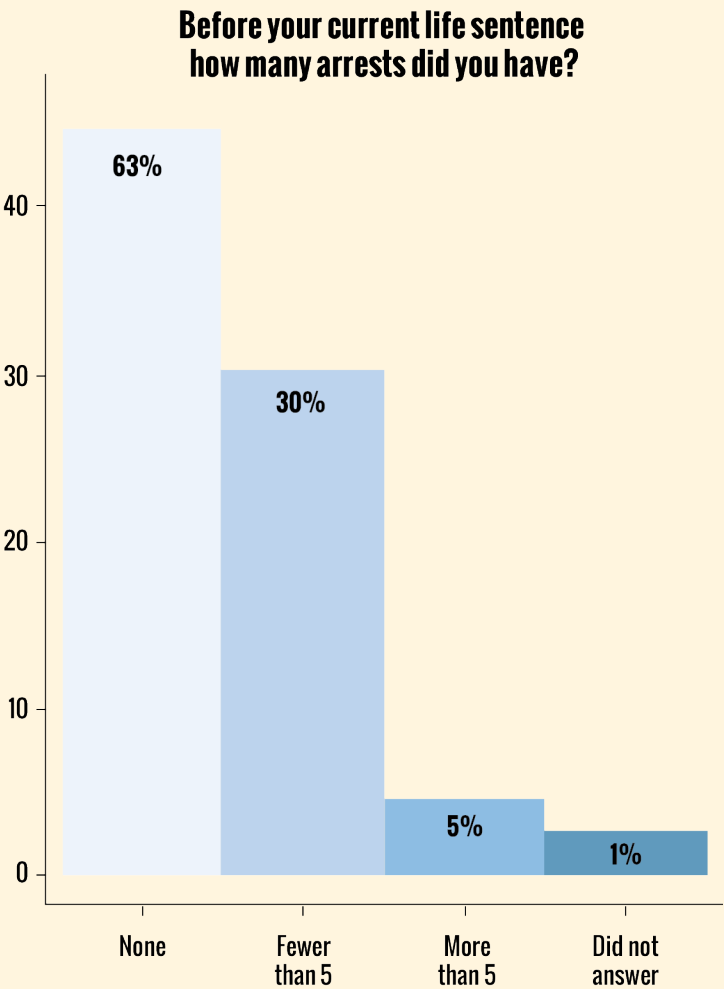
You can write to Ms. Miller here:
Smart Communications/PADOC
Sarita Miller, OJ3158
SCI Muncy
PO Box 33028
St. Petersburg, FL 33733

Theme 3: Lack of a history of violence

“I was never in jail before”

The majority of respondents (59%) were first-time offenders. Survey after survey reported no or minor criminal histories prior to the participants’ current life sentence. Of all the respondents, only 5 listed a previous conviction for a violent offense. And most participants (63%) had never even been arrested prior to the current sentence.

Figure 11. Prior Arrests. The majority of participants had no arrest record prior to their life sentence (63%).



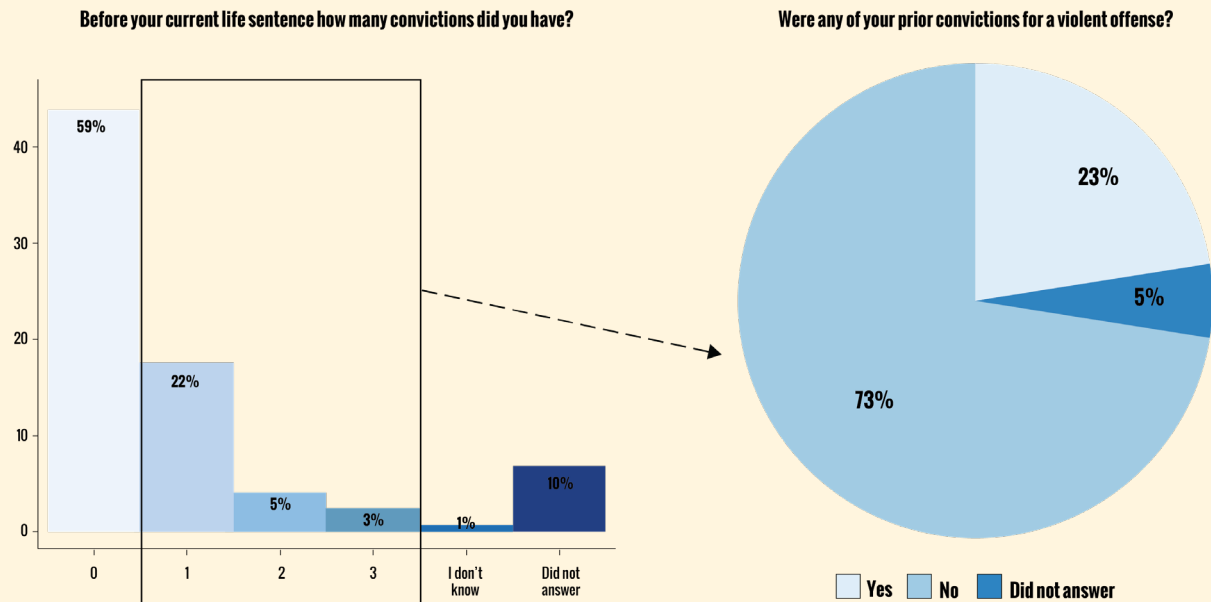


Figure 12. Prior Convictions. The majority of participants had no convictions prior to their life sentence (59%). Of the 22 individuals with prior convictions, 73% reported having no convictions for violent offenses.

A LIFE INSIDE: ELIZABETH COLLAZO

Written by Juliette Rando in collaboration with Elizabeth Collazo



“I have mountain moving faith. I go to God for all decisions in my life...I live a life of fire for God Jesus.” Elizabeth Collazo’s faith and devotion to God has motivated her to accomplish incredible things. She attends Calvary Christian and an international Christian college, as well as 22 correspondent schools for biblical seminary studies. She is working on her Doctorate and will soon be a minister. And she’s done all of this from inside prison.

Elizabeth was incarcerated ten years ago after being charged with first degree murder for the death of her common law husband. The 18 years of abuse she experienced at the hands of her husband were not brought up a single time at her trial. He beat her constantly, even when she was pregnant with their four children. The police never intervened when called. Elizabeth explains, “I chose not to leave...it was easier for me to stay and accept things than to figure out how to support four children on my own. I was weak and selfish.”

When asked to describe the crime for which she was convicted, Elizabeth wrote:

“I was charged with #1 murder for the death of my common law husband with his own gun he had provided to me to commit suicide. Other charges were added so they could seek Death. Basic facts: 18 years of abuse (I allowed) I accepted a gun that was given to me loaded with two bullets by the victim to help me rid the problem myself. I kept that gun and a few days after being convinced he was right, I went to a coworker to load more bullets in case I missed myself. I wrote [a] suicide note to friends and family after & photo copied a letter he had written me. I had my two sons gather stuff out of my apt to lock up. Prior to murder he beat me up (I was covered in bruises)... He murdered almost all of our dogs with four dead on the back porch. And two in a tote. My sons were not being taken care of and my daughters were doing things they pleased to and also caring for themselves. My daughter physically attacked me (& I still have the scar). Police called but gave no help, “Because I had a court order to remain away.” My son and daughter needed medical attention he refused to provide. I was convinced he was correct and was going to kill myself. Well as you see it did not happen that way.”

As Elizabeth explains, she was facing the Death Penalty. She feels the harsh charges she was facing were a result of the political motivations of the District Attorney, John Morganelli, who was eyeing a run for Attorney General. It was election time, and Elizabeth explains that Morganelli was trying to “show his ‘tough’ stance for his next job he was running for.” She would have been the second person sentenced to death that year. She notes that women facing similar charges in other counties were given much shorter sentences: “The women from Philly with the same type of crime received 7y-10y - 7-15y with a high gravity score. Lehigh just 15 min from Northampton 15-20y similar but knife was weapon.”

Elizabeth did not go to trial. She was not given the choice because her public defender team stated they were “not prepared for a trial.” They said she would be found guilty “because vital organs were hit and...[because she] said he was sleep when he was not.” Instead, Elizabeth took a plea deal of life without the possibility of parole.

Elizabeth’s incarceration and the realities of her crime caused a severing of her family. She writes, “My incarceration caused a lot of pain, suffering, torment and separation. Anger, questioning, abandonment, addiction.” She says, “I lost all ‘family’ support upon my crime.” She does not have communication with her children, now in their early-mid 20s, who went to live with her victim’s family when she was incarcerated. She never receives in-person visits. As Elizabeth distills it, “Prison is a lonely life filled with suffering.”

Elizabeth had no record prior to this conviction. And she has received no disciplinary actions since being incarcerated. She was, however, sent to solitary confinement—without justification. Here's how she describes that experience:

“Well they had this machine that tests for drugs. I have gout. So the uric acid that [my body] expels set an odd code. So it was sent for investigation. Urine test on sight: neg. I was forced to be placed into solitary confinement, was told a lot of lies... They said once the urine from the lab returned neg I would be out. Well the urine was back in 48 [hours]. I resided in confinement for 15 days—torture—shower 1 every 3 days. No reading material, freezing cold (I am never cold) was forced to eat all of your meal or you were going to starve. No one checked on you so if I wanted to hang myself there would be plenty of time. Handcuffed to and from showers. In dirty clothes and only 1 roll of toilet paper with 1 bar of soap.”

Inside prison, medical care is as lacking as punishment is plentiful. She explains that the COs determine who receives medical care. “If you are sick to the point of death they would rather death than place a call to medical.” If an incarcerated individual is refused care, their only recourse is to wait for someone from the psychology department to see them, which could be a minimum of three days. In that interim, Elizabeth has witnessed individuals self-harm, commit suicide, harm others, or die from lack of medical care.

Elizabeth has experienced the same battle for mental health care. She was diagnosed with PTSD in her late 40s, but was repeatedly denied mental health treatment when she was at SCI Muncy. It wasn't until she was transferred to SCI Cambridge Springs that Elizabeth finally received care. It was in the course of the aforementioned drug test debacle that Elizabeth met a staff psychologist. She says, “she took interest in me and provided me with information and tools I still use 5 years later to maintain stability.”

Although her time in therapy was helpful, Elizabeth notes that the prison does not provide avenues for self-growth and transformation, writing, “There is nothing here to do to grow. Everything I've done to grow/ change has mainly been on my own.”

That growth and transformation has been significant. She writes, “I speak, think, act completely differently.” She no longer acts on impulse, but takes a minute to pray, reflecting on how her actions and words affect others. She says, “A lot of thought goes into consideration before I do something.” She now understands how deeply her trauma impacted her and those around her. She reflects, “A person in mental anguish acts out of desperation, believes lies, and just wants to

satisfy so the mental anguish leaves. People cope with substance abuse of all kinds and also self mutilation.”

Elizabeth is able to extend this compassion even to her abuser, holding a complex and nuanced understanding of her ex-husband’s violence. She writes, “He was thrown to the wolves to live a life of ‘you are on your own.’ Little to no guidance. But he did the best he could, considering his upbringing.” In the end, she says, “I know my ex husband’s life had value and he was loved and still loved, that God has the final say.”

Elizabeth thinks about her abuse differently now, writing, “I allowed things to happen to me. Now I am not ok with allowing any type of abuse in my life.” Beyond understanding more about her trauma, she has come to recognize her self-worth: “I know now life has value where I did not care if I killed myself.” When asked to describe herself today, Elizabeth says, “I represent Christ Jesus. I am honored to do so. I love people and I love to help them in wellness.” Indeed, Elizabeth has had a deep impact on those around her. She nurtures many women inside, her “jail daughters”, like a mother, teaching them about faith and morality and helping them recognize and heal their mental health issues.

Today, Elizabeth’s faith in God is what keeps her moving forward. She writes, “God brings me all the joy, peace and purpose I need.” Her faith grounds her belief that she will one day be free. She writes, “I know God can move the unmovable...I believe laws will change and God will unlock the prison door and let the prisoner free.”

You can write to Ms. Collazo here:

Smart Communications/PADOC

Elizabeth Collazo, OT6733

SCI Cambridge Springs

PO Box 33028

St. Petersburg, FL 33733

LEGAL FACTORS

Theme 4: Injustice in legal proceedings

“I really believed in justice - but justice only believes in itself”

Discrimination in trial proceedings

Several participants described the blatant discrimination that ensued during their trial. One respondent described how his transness was interrogated and criminalized by the court:

“As a transmale, I felt like I was convicted for ‘wanting’ to be male. Like a, “That’s what you get for trying to be a man.” And a, “Now this is what you get for trying to be a man.” My sexuality was put on display and attacked my entire trial because I am trans when all I was doing was trying to protect myself.” (Anonymous)

Similarly, Michelle Hetzel felt that the jury scrutinized her sexual orientation more than the facts of the case, writing:

“I was portrayed as the villain. My relationship with a girl was the biggest talking point. At trial the rings we exchanged were passed around to the jury. The rainbow sticker on my car was photographed and blown up for the jury.” (Michelle Hetzel)

Sarita Miller also experienced homophobia throughout her trial. She wrote,

“My lesbian affair was brought up in front of the jury and my sexual performance with my ex-partner.”

She also writes about the racism she experienced due to being Black and being charged with a crime involving a white victim:

“My victim was a white woman and my [court-appointed] attorney on a legal visit behind closed doors leaped into my face screaming THIS WAS A WHITE WOMAN THAT WAS KILLED! I reported it to my so-called family; they never took action. I was never in jail before—I didn’t know I could go to the judge about this.” (Sarita Miller)

In fact, over half of respondents were incarcerated for a crime involving a white victim. This statistic is in accordance with research demonstrating racism in the prosecution of cases—sentencing for crimes involving white victims tends to be harsher.¹³

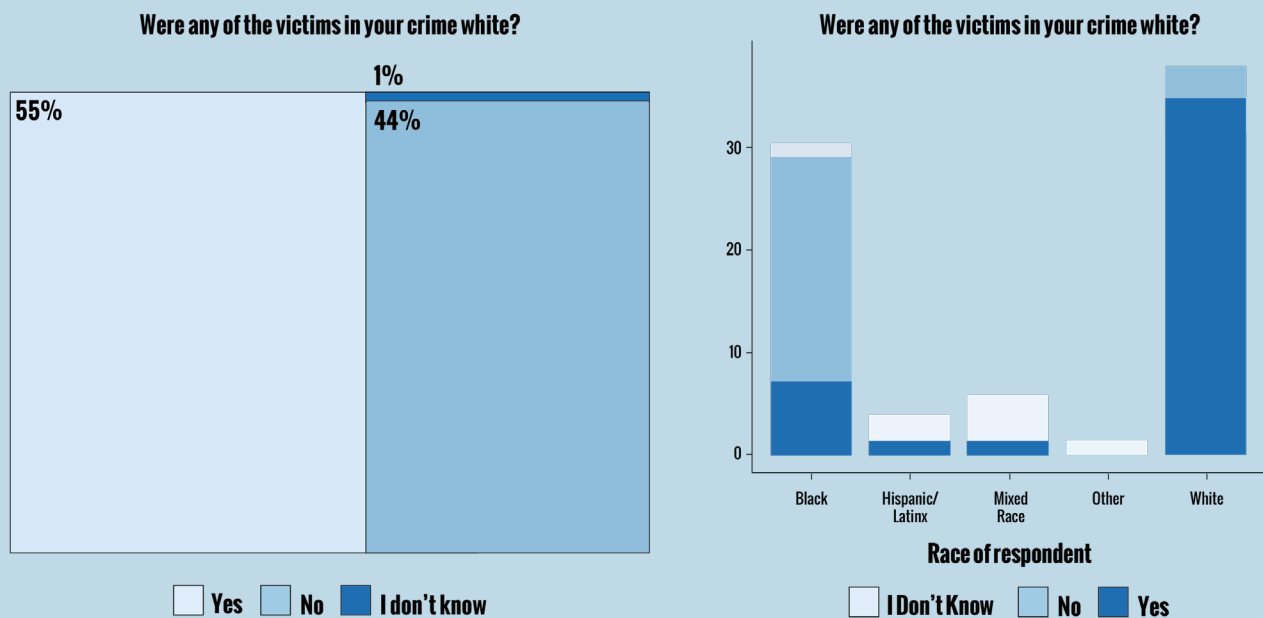


Figure 13. Race of Victim. Over half of cases involved a white victim, though the race of the participant and the victim tended to correspond.

¹³ The race of defendants and victims has a massive impact on criminal punishment and no legal significance. Prosecutors are more likely to charge people of color than white people with crimes that carry harsher sentences (Starr & Rehani, 2013). A report examining over 3,000 exonerations in the U.S. identified a trend of harsher sentencing for murder convictions with white victims than Black victims; innocent individuals in white-victim cases were more likely to be sentenced to life in prison (Gross et al., 2022). Similar patterns have been observed in capital punishment cases. In the infamous 1987 case *McCleskey v. Kemp*, 481 U.S. 279, the Supreme Court confronted evidence that the death penalty in Georgia was imposed in “22% of the cases involving black defendants and white victims; 8% of the cases involving white defendants and white victims; 1% of the cases involving black defendants and black victims; and 3% of the cases involving white defendants and black victims” (*McCleskey V. Kemp*, 481 U.S. 279, 1987). Nevertheless the state of Georgia electrocuted Warren McCleskey on September 26, 1991 (Applebome, 1991).

Cyd Berger was convicted in a case involving a white victim, and she believes the racial optics of the crime were leveraged for political gain.

“My trial was during an election year, and I was informed that the judge hand-picked my case. After all these years, I believe that because it was a black on white crime that to a degree, it was racially motivated.” (Cyd Berger)

Another participant described a similar situation, detailing the collusion she witnessed between the detectives, judge, and District Attorney:

“I was tried by an all-white jury, by a known racist judge and known racist DA [who were] white. Confession was obtained by a detective who taught college courses on ‘how cops trick murderers into confessing.’ Judge investigated by NAACP, DA and judge were buddies, DA was fired and sentenced to mental hospital by buddy judge.” (Anonymous)

Lori Lassiter noted similar political motivations behind her conviction, believing she was targeted for being a sex worker:

“I was a prostitute—living wherever—crackhead—I was part of the problem in society, yet and still I had absolutely no part in this crime I am convicted of. I know exactly where I was and what I was doing. Yet being part of society’s problem caused this incarceration. Election year—clean up the streets and solve cases. Being who I once was made me an easy target and mark... I really believed in justice- but justice only believes in itself. It aims to please itself, not poor, under-privileged, helpless people of innocence.” (Lori Lassiter)

Thus the political landscape of the region where crimes occur can deeply influence which cases are tried and which convictions are pursued. Elizabeth Collazo emphasized this in her follow-up survey, writing,

“Yes, our DA ‘has a record.’ He likes Death Row. I would have been the second that year and a woman at that. He was showing his “tough” stance for his next job he was running for (Morganelli). The women from Philly with the same type of crime received 7-10 years and 7-15 years with a high gravity score. In Lehigh county, just 15 min from Northampton county, someone received 15-20 years for a similar case, but a knife was the weapon.” (Elizabeth Collazo)

These participants’ stories emphasize how courtrooms are not neutral spaces. Their convictions were directly tied to their race, gender, and class and influenced by the politics of the region. No matter what it purports about equal justice, the criminal legal system is always subject to the creep of systemic oppressive forces.

A LIFE INSIDE: KAL-EL CAREY



Written by Kal-El Carey

I was born Sameania Carey.

I have never felt feminine. I wore my brother's underwear, I played in the woods, caught wild animals, and hated my genitals. I was a recluse at a young age. While I passed elementary due to high test scores, I spent the whole second grade under a desk in the back of the classroom. I was afraid to use ANY bathroom outside of my home because I was afraid someone would see me sitting down. This caused a lot of accidents. Needless to say, I had very poor social skills.

During this time, I was also being molested by a close family friend. He used to touch on me when he thought I was asleep. I knew at this early age that I didn't like the feeling of being vulnerable and weak. I started to act out in violence against the boys in my neighborhood. Fighting the boys made me feel like I had the power, not them. Although I wanted what they had, I refused to feel inferior. By the time I was twelve, I took my power back from my molester and told myself I would NEVER be anyone's victim ever again.

I didn't really know about relationships, but I knew I wanted to be in one with a girl. I envied the boys, so I beat them up for that. I also had what a book called "penis envy." Every boy that I was around I made them show me their penis and I used to make them explain in detail how it worked.

I was such a confused kid. I knew I wanted to be with a woman, yet my family beat into my head the standardized way of a man and a woman. So, I treated the boys like girls. This is the best way I can explain this strange part of my life.

My mom took me to a shrink when I was twelve. Years later I asked her why. She said because of all the shit I was doing, my family thought I was crazy.

Twelve was the age that my life took a lot of wrong turns.

I am from St. Clair Village.¹⁴ In the late 80's, gangs crept into the city of Pittsburgh. St. Clair Village was already a secluded and dangerous city project. I couldn't begin to tell you the things I've seen as a kid. To me, violence was a normal thing. People fought every day. People sold drugs, every day. People got high, every day. Cops were the enemy. Those rival neighborhoods were the enemy. Any form of disrespect was met with violence.

So, let me go back a little bit. An older kid, whom I'll call Cowboy, put boxing gloves on me and made me fight all the boys on the block. He trained me so that the older kids could have some entertainment in watching me beat up all the boys. My reputation came with pros and cons: Some kids, I didn't have to fight because they were afraid. The others wanted to fight, but were afraid to lose, so they started to use weapons, or it would be two or more of them against me. The last straw for me was when a guy pulled a gun out on me in front of crowd to humiliate and disrespect me. As I've said before, I was never going to be anyone's victim again. I got my revenge, but that incident created a monster. Once I seen the kind of power that a gun wielded, I craved it. The drug dealers and the most violent got the praise and respect in my neighborhood. I regret it; but I wanted both.

I started selling drugs at 12. I'm banging my block now and I'm in and out of juvenile hall at 13. I had already started drinking at 10 and smoking weed at 11. I guess that's the proper progression in these environments. We never knew anything different.

So, this was my adolescent life in a few paragraphs. As an adult with a mid-level drug business, I had to be a little more brutal. If you didn't put a significant amount of fear into this world, they would do unto you, so-to-speak.

I ended up in a violent altercation in my neighborhood and my mom thought that it would be a good idea for me and my brother to get out of there for a while. Still young and dumb, I got into more trouble in my grandmother's neighborhood. So, my mom sent me to Cleveland to get me out of Pittsburgh and away from the family. I was causing too much trouble.

To this day, I don't know if that was a good or bad idea. I started selling drugs in Cleveland, so my aunt put me out and I ended up in Joliet, Illinois. She shipped me to Job Corps. I got my G.E.D. I got my certification in industrial and commercial painting (which was a joke because we were barely taught anything). I also got my Masters in gangbanging.

¹⁴ The City of Pittsburgh's Housing Authority began construction on St. Clair Village, a low-rent housing project of 1089 townhomes at 930 Cresswell Street in Pittsburgh, in 1951. In 2009, the Board voted to demolish the complex because of "perceptions of violence and crime, a dwindling population, operating losses and about \$16 million needed for major renovations." The City of Pittsburgh had demolished four public high-rises since 2005, and nine since 1995.

Joliet was a city about 40 minutes outside of Chicago. Joliet Job Corps was a melting pot of ALL the area and surrounding states gangs. Gangsta Disciples, Vice Lords, Crips, Bloods, Latin Kings, it goes on. Don't get me wrong—there were a lot of guys there trying to better themselves so they wouldn't stay in a gang. But most of us dummies were just kids doing shit that aided in the situations that we found ourselves in. I learned a lot and seen a lot in Chicago. I'll just leave that at that.

I was back in my old neighborhood by 1994. I was working for the city, painting project housing units. That lasted about a year. My past found me and I started carrying a gun again. By this time, I was working for different contractor's painting houses but I was NEVER getting paid what the guys were. So, I started selling drugs again. I was also into music. Opening up shows for national artists.

My family, at this time, still didn't know I liked women. Long story short, my mom and my "boyfriend" found out at the same time. Once it was finally out in the open, I felt freed. I didn't look back. Even when my mom disowned me. I felt liberated. My mom is cool now but, she was not at all understanding back in 1995.

I was living my life as a man and putting my Masters in crime to use. I went through my share of dysfunctional relationships. I was so reckless, but always a step or two ahead of everybody else in my neighborhood. I became something that a lot of men couldn't accomplish. I thought that the reputation that I built was all that I had. I had to protect it at all costs.

God knows, I've done a lot of things, but nothing that warranted a life sentence. I was attacked for being a trans man at a gay after hour club. My codefendant, the girl I was seeing, said that she testified to what they told her to say. My sexuality was used against me in court. And not once did they ask any of my jurors if they had a bias against LGBTQ in my voir dire. People are only seeing in the last few years how the LGBTQ community has been treated. I was tried 14 years ago.

Sadly, I thought my only way out was the music business or death. I did play women's professional football for a stint, but we all knew that wasn't going anywhere. I say that to say; this is how small the world is for us in these kinds of communities. People outside of our communities might not understand this way of thinking. We see the world through a certain lens.

I'm an artist in any form it calls to me. I like the kind of art that makes people feel better about their day. Even if it's temporary, or short lived, like music. It's that feeling that makes you forget about everything that's been weighing you down in life. In those few minutes, you're happy, and you realize you're not the only one going through something. I can look at a Juan Miro or Salvatore Dali painting and get that feeling. I'm hoping that my art does that for someone, somewhere, someday.

Kal-El Carey is an artist incarcerated in SCI Cambridge Springs. View Kal-El's artwork at z-coded.com

Get in contact - especially any Black artists in Pittsburgh!
Send an email at <https://z-coded.com/contact/f/kal-el>

Attorney misconduct

“The judge, DA and lawyer were all working together to railroad me”

Survey after survey described incompetence or negligence on the part of participants' legal representation. This ineptitude was especially apparent when it came to plea deals—many wrote that their lawyer:

a) Did not communicate the existence of a plea agreement offer.

“20 years into my sentence I was told by a then-public defender in the Philadelphia PD office that the DA in my case was ready to offer a plea deal of third degree which at that time was carrying into 10 - 20 years. However, my attorney never approached him. My attorney on three occasions said the DA's office didn't want to make a deal.” (Anonymous)

“My lawyer said that they wanted to offer a second degree murder plea bargain over the phone. I told him this wasn’t an over the phone talking matter. I asked him to visit me to further discuss this matter. He didn’t and the next thing I know I went to court after picking a jury and was found guilty of second degree murder. I believe the judge, DA and lawyer were all working together to railroad me.” (Denise Crump)

b) Refused the plea deal without informing them.

“The judge told my attorney to plead it out. My attorney said no. Never explained how it all worked.”
(Catherine Dieckman)

“I was offered 20 to 40 years, then 10 to 20, and my attorney refused both pleas without my (verbal or written) consent.” (Nichole Hawkins)

“The plea was never made available to me because my court appointed lawyer intercepted it. My court appointed lawyer turned down the plea agreement without my knowledge of the agreement; I didn’t know about the plea until after appeals” (Kimberly Joynes)

c) Pressured them to take the plea deal.

“My attorney pulled me out of the holding cell. He told me that the jury was coming back with a death penalty verdict and that I needed to take the deal that the prosecution just offered. I asked him what it was, and he said a life sentence. I asked him so you want me to take a deal for a life sentence, and go to jail for the rest of my life for something I didn’t do? He told me it’s a lot of people who’s in prison for life for something they didn’t do. He went and got my mother and told us that if I didn’t take the deal as soon as I got upstate they were going to kill me and I will never see my kids again. I started crying and my mom said to me you heard what he said, take the deal. He told me in order for them to accept the deal I have to admit to committing the crime and that I accepted it on my own. If I didn’t say that, they would not accept the deal. Once I got back into the courtroom, they gave me 3 life sentences, plus 5-10 years, when that’s not what he told me.” (Zakeeyah Harper)

“It was a capital case and I was told if I pled guilty to first degree murder, the judge would decide my fate rather than a jury. The death penalty was never taken off the table. My lawyers told me if I went to trial a jury would convict me because they wouldn’t defend me—that there was no defense for my actions. I feel like my court-appointed attorneys were working with the prosecution to get a conviction and I was naïve about the process.” (Heather Lavelle)

“A jailhouse witness received parole and probation for her lies, it was a madhouse. I was offered to plead guilty and let the judge decide what level of homicide I would be charged with, my defense attorney told me out of his mouth the prosecutor needed my case and at this time I was facing death row—I said NO.” (Sarita Miller)

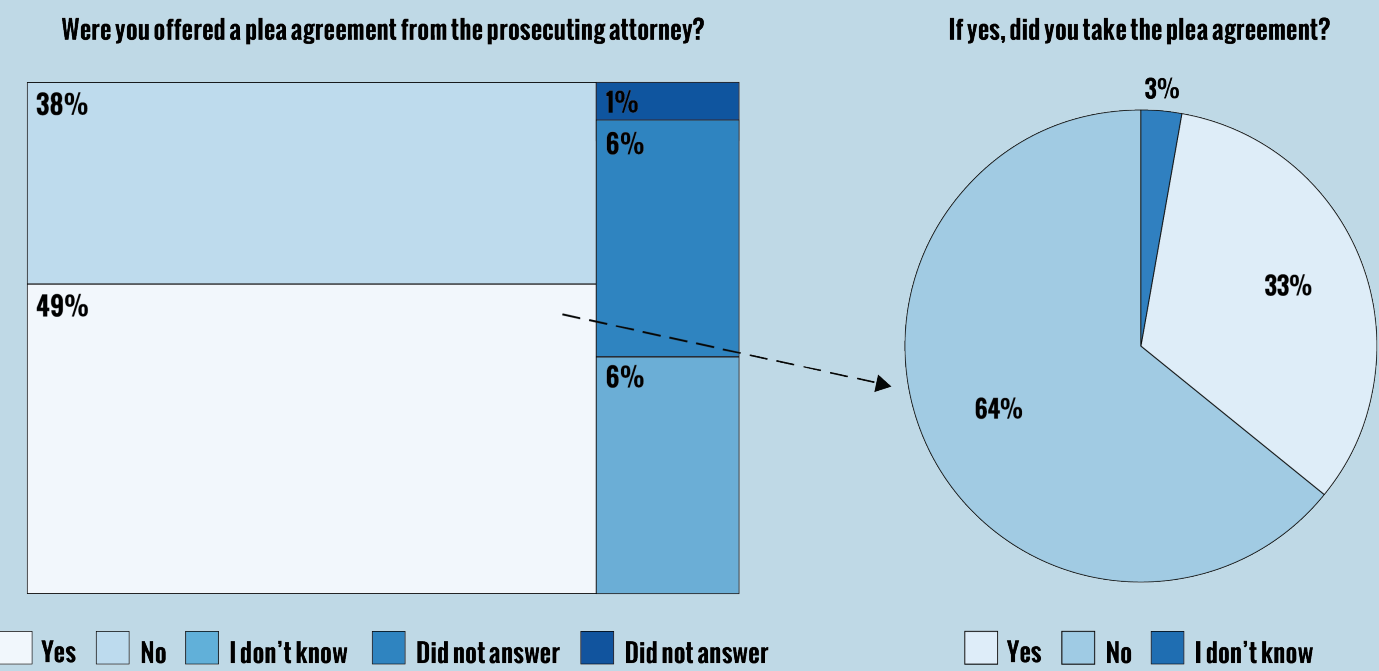
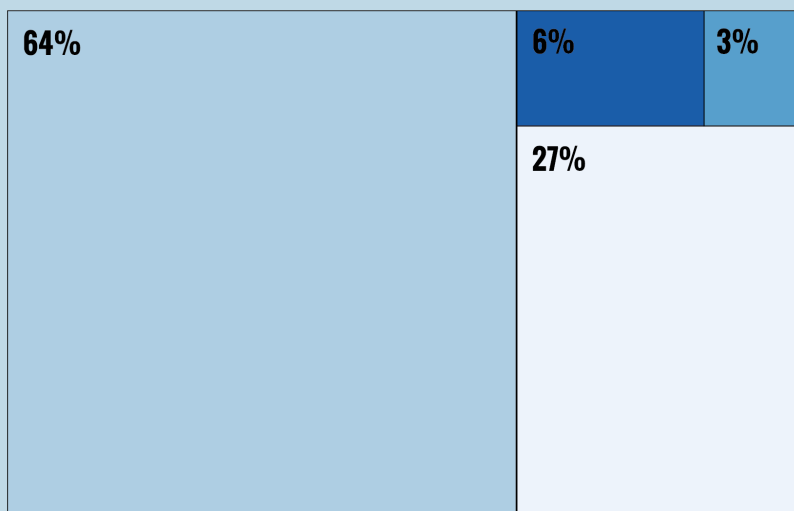


Figure 14. Plea Agreement. Almost half of participants were offered a plea deal and of those, 1/3 accepted

Furthermore, throughout the surveys, there seemed to be trends of confusion over the sentencing details, particularly whether sentences were mandatory, if charges were felony murder, and what the plea conditions were or why they were offered. These trends suggest poor communication on the part of the lawyers, who were overwhelmingly court-appointed (64%).

Was the attorney who represented you privately retained, or did the court assign an attorney to you?



- ☐ Privately retained attorney
- ☐ Court-appointed attorney
- ☐ Privately retained initially then court-appointed
- ☐ Did not answer

Figure 15. Attorney Type. Most participants reported having a court-appointed attorney (64%).

Sentencing Structure

Seventy-five percent of participants were convicted of first-degree murder.¹⁵ Twenty-one percent (15 individuals) are serving a life sentence for felony murder, a charge of committing a felony during which someone died, even if the individual did nothing to directly cause or intend their death.¹⁶

While the initial survey did not ask for details of the crime, it was evident in several of the follow-up surveys completed by a subset of participants that many respondents were caught up in situations in which they never intended to hurt anyone and/or did not perpetrate violence themselves (as expanded upon in theme 1 above).¹⁷

¹⁵ Pennsylvania is an outlier regarding felony murder sentencing. It is one of 9 states that imposes a mandatory minimum sentence of life without parole for felony murder. This means that the courts have no power to impose a lesser sentence, while in other states, courts can apply a range of sentences based on mitigating circumstances. In Pennsylvania, a quarter of people serving DBI sentences were convicted of felony murder (more than 1,000 people) (Ghandnoosh, Stammen, & Budaci, 2022).

¹⁶ In Pennsylvania, there is no required mens rea (criminal intent) regarding the murder itself for an individual to be convicted of felony murder—one can be convicted of felony murder for simply participating in a felony even if they had no involvement in or knowledge of the death that ensued. In some other states, an individual cannot be convicted of felony murder unless it is shown that they possessed a culpable mental state—one of reckless disregard for human life (Ghandnoosh, Stammen, & Budaci, 2022).

¹⁷ California study found that 72% of women serving life for felony murder were not the perpetrators of the homicide, as compared to 55% of men (Ghandnoosh, Stammen, & Budaci, 2022). The California Coalition for Women Prisoners reports that most of their members convicted of felony murder were navigating intimate partner violence, effectively criminalizing them for acts of survival (Ghandnoosh, Stammen, & Budaci, 2022).

Felony murder convictions disproportionately impact young people and people of color. In this sample, those convicted of felony murder entered prison at a younger age (25 years)¹⁸ than those with other convictions, including first-degree murder (30 years)¹⁹. The racial and ethnic distributions in this sample were similar for individuals convicted of felony murder versus other convictions, which differs from the racial disparity in felony murder sentencing observed in Pennsylvania overall.²⁰

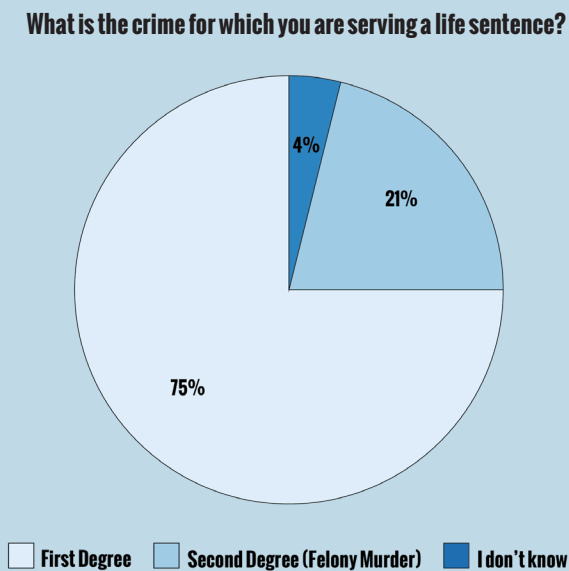
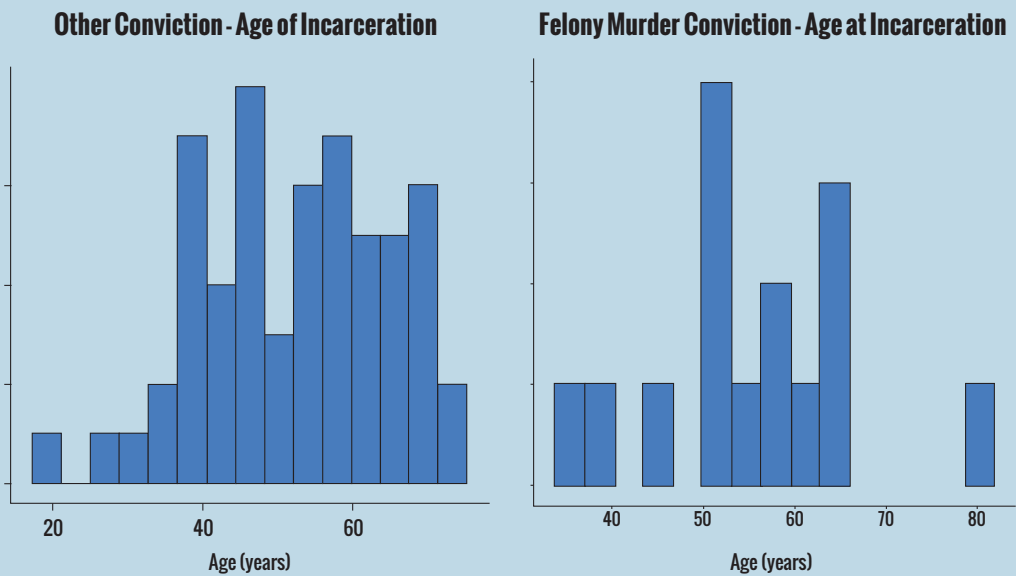


Figure 16. Conviction. Most participants were convicted of first degree murder (75%). One-fifth (21%) were convicted of second degree murder/felony murder.

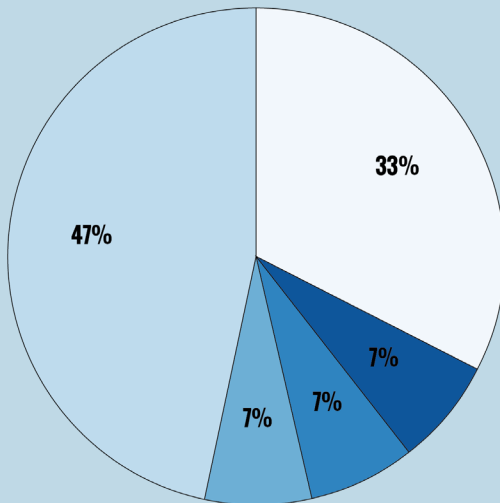


¹⁸ This statistic is consistent with Pennsylvania overall—in 2019, 75% of people serving LWOP for felony murder in PA were 25 or younger at the time of their offense (Ghandnoosh, Stammen, & Budaci, 2022).

¹⁹ Youth may be particularly vulnerable to felony murder convictions. Human Rights Watch estimated that nationwide in 2008, one quarter of individuals serving LWOP sentences for crimes committed under age 18 were convicted of felony murder (The rest of their lives: Life without parole for youth offenders in the United States in 2008, 2008). Research suggests that youth’s immature brain development (evidenced by risk-taking and susceptibility to peer pressure) make them especially vulnerable to felony murder convictions (Burton, 2017). Up to age 25, young people often act impulsively with impaired ability to understand the consequences of their actions, while older adults are better able to anticipate the impact of their choices (Beyer, 2000).

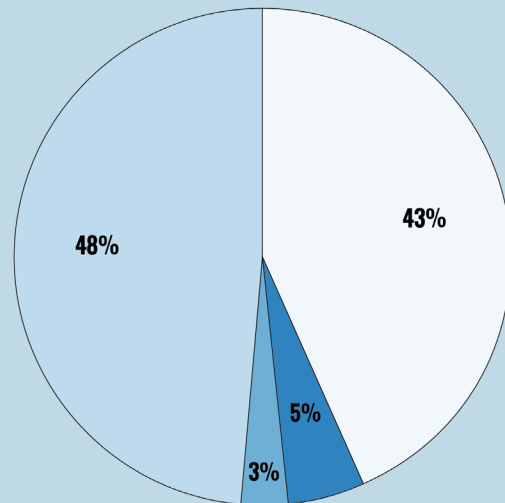
²⁰ In 2020, 80% of individuals serving sentences for felony murder convictions in Pennsylvania were people of color (Ghandnoosh, Stammen, & Budaci, 2022).

Felony Murder Conviction Race and Ethnicity



Black White Hispanic/Latina Mixed Race Other

Other Conviction Race and Ethnicity



Black White Hispanic/Latina Mixed Race Other

Figure 17. Felony Murder. One fifth of the sample was convicted of felony murder (21%). Age at incarceration differed—those convicted of felony murder entered prison at a younger age on average (25 years) than those with other convictions (30 years). Racial and ethnic distributions were similar for individuals convicted of felony murder versus other convictions, though the proportion of Black individuals was lower for felony murder convictions.

A LIFE INSIDE: KRISTIN EDMUNDSON

Written by Kristin Edmundson



In the eyes of the public, all I am is a monster, a vicious villain. For many years I agreed and felt the same way. I mean only a monster could commit such a horrible and heinous act. I am intertwined for a lifetime with people I have hurt deeply, beyond what any words could describe. They only see me as the person who took the precious life of a loved one.

Before the monster, there used to be a human, a young girl... so I would like to share a chapter of my life. I don't want to say I was your typical kid, because I don't think I ever was. I wanted the same things as every other child of course. However, I always knew there was something different about me. I never fit in, I never ran with the "popular" crowd growing up. I felt discarded, an outcast among my peers. My home life was not the worst but it was also far from the best, growing up with a father who was an alcoholic and abusive. (I am proud to say though my father is no longer the same man he once was!)

Like I mentioned before, I knew that there was something different about me, for as long as I can remember I always had an attraction towards girls. Even when I was just little, I had crushes on girls but at the time I didn't realize exactly what it was about me. I tried to be "normal" but I just wasn't. I was always a tomboy, did things the boys did, dressed like one, acted like one. And to be perfectly honest, I envied the boys even though I knew I was a girl. I kept this secret for a long time because I thought there was something wrong with me. Around the age of 13, I finally came out, I confided in my little cousin who was my best friend. When her Dad asked what the big secret was that I told her, she refused to tell so he called me up screaming at me on the phone and I just blurted it out. Not really the way I wanted to tell everyone. When I hung up on my Uncle after saying what I did, I realized my Mom was standing behind me. Her eyes were warm and she said that she had already known. She was waiting for me to tell her.

So after that my whole family knew. Well, let's just say I was accepted by some and cast out by the rest. My father and his side of the family were much more traditional and it wasn't right. The abuse from my father became more intense. But there it was, that secret no longer weighing on my shoulders. However I was going to discover a whole new and different kind of weight, being openly gay in a small town...

When I was in 9th grade I became friends with another girl, our friendship grew and we became inseparable. She was, at the time, the only other person outside my family who knew I was gay, she accepted me. She didn't judge me. It felt great! Now please know that I had a few other close friends— I wasn't a TOTAL loner, but she was different. As the school year went on, we became closer and by that I mean, we actually became a couple. She became my first girlfriend. Of course we kept that our own little secret while we were still in school, but once summer came we let loose. It honestly was one of the best summers in my whole life—I felt free!

Unfortunately, all good things must come to an end. Being free all summer meant that people had seen us and seen the way we acted towards one another. It's not like we were making out in public or anything like that, but remember we're in a small town. So when we went back to school we started High School, and it seemed like everyone knew about us. That's when the bullying began – it became so bad and rather quickly! At first it was just name-calling and people leaving nasty notes. Then it became physical, a shove into the locker here, a trip in the hallway there. The screwed up thing was the teachers were just as bad as my peers, just not the physical part. The bullying became so bad for the two of us that my girlfriend couldn't stand it anymore, and she packed up and moved with her Dad to a different part of the state. I was crushed!

The bullying didn't stop when she left, it still continued on. I did eventually find a group of friends who accepted me—we were all outcasts in our own little ways. Time went on and as I got older, I kept telling myself that things would get better. Things subsided, but never truly got better. I just kept pushing the hurtful words and actions of others deeper and deeper inside me.

Things at home had gotten so bad that at one point, I was placed out of the house by CYS [Children and Youth Services] and I lived with my Grandparents, the ones who accepted my lifestyle. So in the meantime I was still struggling at school and my Guidance Counselor asked me about my religious beliefs ... honestly I never really had given it much thought. My parents believed in God, but we never really went to church. She told me that she belonged to a church that was accepting of all people. It just so happened to be the same church that my cousin (the 1st person who knew my secret) and her family had gone to as well.

So I thought, okay let's give it a try. Maybe this is what my life could be missing. I went and I was accepted—well at first ... After going for almost 6 months, I met new people and started hanging out with some kids my age. It was nice. I still had my friends at school but these kids seemed to have goals and a purpose. That is until I got “too close” to one of the girls there. We were really only just friends. There was never anything inappropriate going on between us. However the adults didn't seem to feel the same way. So one night after Youth Group, the pastor, the girl's parents, and my guidance counselor and her husband sat me down in the banquet room in the church. Now mind you my parents weren't called and I was only around 15 years old, but my guidance counselor was there ...

Anywho, there I was surrounded by people I thought were there to protect me—yeah big fat joke that was. They proceeded to tell me that I could no longer be friends with the girl (Like my gayness is a virus and she was gonna catch it! My words, not theirs). They did say they were afraid I was poisoning her soul, that the only reason they accepted me was to show me the error of my ways, to try to change me and my lifestyle. When they realized that I wasn't conforming to their beliefs, that I wasn't changing and I was leading this girl astray, I was no longer welcome in church. I'll never forget what the Pastor said to me that day. He told me I will never be accepted into heaven and that I was going to go to hell. Nobody stood up for me ... needless to say seeing my guidance counselor at school after that was very awkward. My cousin and her family eventually left that church not too long after that. A true statement, I struggled with God for decades after that ...

So between school, my home life and churches, I really was a lost soul. My story is far from over even at this point, and I could continue writing this. There are still many things that happened between this point that I am leaving off at and how I became that monster in the mirror.

You can write to Ms. Edmunson here:

Smart Communications/PADOC

Kristen Edmunson, OH3055

SCI Cambridge Springs

PO Box 33028

St. Petersburg, FL 33733

REHABILITATION

Theme 5: Strides in rehabilitation

“I am a different person and not a horrible human being”

Participants report minor disciplinary records

Most participants reported disciplinary infractions since being incarcerated, the majority of which were minor. The most common reason for a disciplinary sanction was possession of contraband (8 people). Reported contraband included perfume, fruit salad, earrings, electrical tape and extra cable cord, a lamp, ketchup and a seasoning packet. The second most common infraction was being in an unauthorized area (6 people).

Have you received any disciplinary actions while you have been in prison?

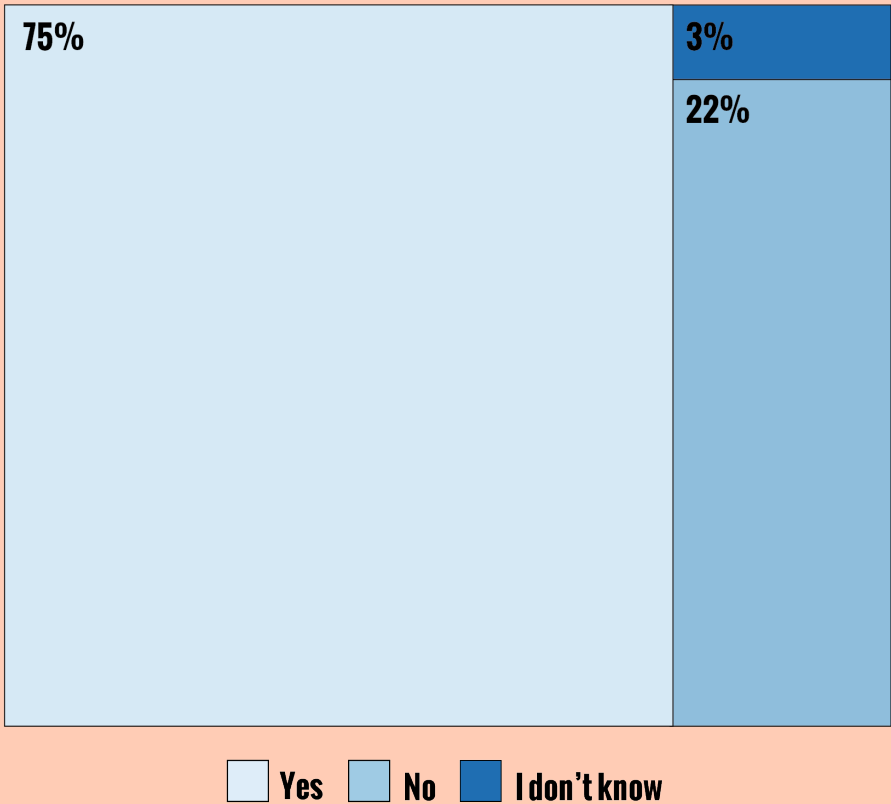


Figure 18. Disciplinary Actions. 75% of respondents reported receiving some type of disciplinary action while incarcerated.

When asked what was the “most serious” disciplinary action they had received, several participants described fighting with other incarcerated people. Many others described trivial circumstances:

“Tossing an empty crocheted yarn bag at an officer searching my cell when asked for it. It was caught in her hand.” (Michelle Hetzel)

“Taking pop from the PLA organization” (Anonymous)

“I had a random search. They found a sheet made into an Islamic dress for my baby and they charged me with disobeying a direct order, contraband, and escape.” (Anonymous)

“Possession of contraband. I had a lamp someone gave me when they left. We can only have what we or our friends and family purchase for us.” (Catherine Dieckman)

Others described being disciplined for instances of self-defense.

“In 2014, I received 30 days RHU status²¹ for threatening to hit another inmate because she was harassing me about my crime over a course of 10 months and staff wouldn’t help me with the situation.” (Jade Olmstead)

“3 inmates stole my arthritis meds. I put 2 locks in a sock and threatened them. Got 30 days in the hole. Did not hit them or draw blood. Scared them badly.” (Joann Helfrich)

“2014 assault; I was being bullied by another inmate because of my crime” (Anonymous)

Participants are dedicated to personal growth and self-improvement

Many participants expressed how much they had changed during their incarceration. They spoke to remorse and self-understanding.

“I have spent the last 32 years of my life doing everything possible that I could to make me a better person. I know that no change will ever overshadow the death of another human being. I wish that I could change the events of that night. I understand my moral obligation, not only to the victim, but to others and with that comes a deep remorse and conviction to contribute to something positive to those around me. I want to reach teens and let them know that they are not alone, that it is okay to speak and there is always someone who will listen.” (Anonymous)

²¹ The Restricted Housing Unit (RHU) segregates people who have received administrative or disciplinary sanctions in solitary confinement. Solitary confinement is discussed further under Theme 6: Barriers to Rehabilitation.

“I am a reasonable, well-rounded woman who overcame and learned a lot about myself and my victim. Unable to have rational or logical thinking before my incarceration I can say I have that. I think of the consequences of my own words, actions before I speak or do. I represent Christ Jesus. I am honored to do so. I love people and I love to help them in wellness.” (Elizabeth Collazo)

“I would like to add that I am an adult now. At times I think differently than I did as a child/ teenager. I never meant for anyone to lose their life. I didn’t want to have to suffer in this way nor did I want the victim’s family to suffer. I just want a second chance at life. I would like to show that I am a different person and not a horrible human being, or just a number. I’ve lost my liberty but for how long?” (Normita Jackson)

“But since I’ve been incarcerated I have discovered who I am. I have accomplished more programming and education inside these walls than I have out there. I am a good person with a lot of good to give. I was only 18 years old when I committed my crime and it’s so devastating to think that I’m condemned to die in prison. I don’t ever seek pity. But understanding and justice. I know that I deserve time for what I’ve done...but life?” (Jade Olmstead)

“Yes, I deserved punishment for taking a life but I have worked tirelessly in those 36 years to change everything about me to become strong, independent, responsible, caring, loving and forgiving. I am ready for work, to have the life I never had, Please let me try to repair the damage I’ve done by giving me a second chance. I will cherish freedom should I ever get to have it again.” (Charmaine Pfender)

In these reflections, we see many participants question the necessity of a life sentence. Many of them describe a shift in their perspectives and behaviors that occurred at some point in their incarceration.²²

Participants described the numerous ways in which they are striving for self-improvement. For many, they are focused on self-improvement through engaging with the programs offered by the DOC. Participants listed long resumes of accomplishments inside, including earning their GED and enrolling in educational, vocational, self-improvement, support groups, and other programs. Countless participants wrote that they had enrolled in every program available to them.

²² Research indicates that people “age out” of crime; the rate of recidivism decreases drastically with age (Chettiar, Bunting, & Schotter, 2012; Prescott, 2020; Rakes, Grace Prost, & Tripodi, 2018). What’s more, former lifers are three times less likely to recidivate than the general released prison population nationwide (Mauer, King, & Young, 2004). A recent study found that of 174 Philadelphia juvenile lifers who were re-sentenced and released (due to the Supreme Court ruling that mandatory life-without-parole sentences for juveniles are unconstitutional), only 3.5% were rearrested and 1% re-convicted within approximately two years. Compare that to a rearrest rate of 30% within two years of release for people convicted of homicide offenses nationally (Daftary-Kapur & Zottoli, 2020).

“Wow, where would you like me to begin? I have completed a high school diploma and participated in an inside/outside program with Temple University while still in the county. Once upstate I took and completed the following: Bethesda Family Science Parenting Program, violence prevention, typing, restaurant trades, buffer training, serv safe, house of hope women with abuse issues, parenting teens, long term offenders phase, NA meetings, seeking safety, victims awareness, money smart, CAD classes, thinking for a change, host of religious studies” (Sarita Miller)

“I have completed lots of stuff over the years. I got approximately 70 certificates since being here, between all the schooling and groups I have done, so yeah, I have done a lot.” (Paula Johnson)

“26 total credits so far (Grief and loss, sleep hygiene (depression and anxiety), coping skills, guilt and shame, violence prevention, thinking for a change, forgiveness, boundaries, 4 domestic violence groups, adults in trauma, resilience, cognitive behavior therapy, safe journey 1 and 2, healing generational trauma and abuse, healthy living, staying on track, relationships, parenting, adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse, bipolar and depression group” (Joann Helfrich)

“31 years of everything (currently a Braille transcriber), certified optician (certificate), business accountant (assoc. degree), abuse anger act 143 domestic and sexual abuse group, drug and alcohol, breaking barriers, peer AOD group, fineline reentry group, conflict resolutions group, AA, NA” (Anonymous)

Many described working as certified peer specialists because they wanted to facilitate the growth of others. Others, like Donna Martorano, explained that they themselves are actually teaching the courses the DOC offers. Several participants also reported pursuing further education with an outside institution (which they facilitated independent of the prison).

“I attend Calvary Christian and international Christian college, I also attend 14 correspondent schools for biblical seminary studies that are not degree oriented, I take self help groups and also run groups being a CPS Other than that, there is nothing here to do to grow. Everything I’ve done to grow/ change has mainly been on my own.” (Elizabeth Collazo)

“I have maxed out of ‘ALL’ DOC and self-help programming in DOC. I now attend Colorado State University for my BA in Sociology and BS in Psychology” (Kimberly Joynes)

Have you completed high school since being in prison?

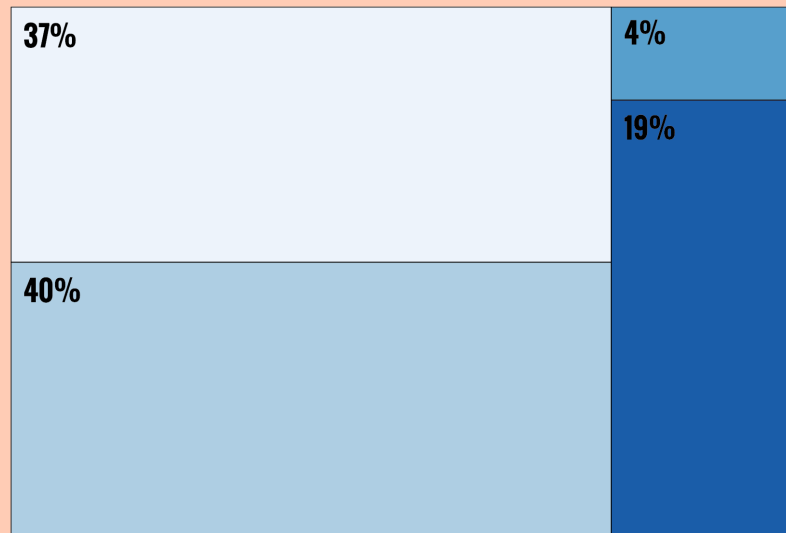


Figure 19. Education. Over 80% of participants reported that they completed their GED/graduated high school or are currently working towards completion. Over 40% did or are currently doing this work while

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No - I completed before my incarceration
- ☐ No - but I am enrolled/ I have plans to complete
- ☐ Did not answer

Beyond programming, several participants described how therapy helped them in their healing process.

“When psychologist Howard Woodring was here, I saw him every week, sometimes twice a week for individual counseling sessions. He did the same for many other women. He helped me process a great deal of my trauma and helped me realize my role in the tragedy I am here for. If not for him, I would not be alive today. Howard is still an active advocate for those of us on the inside. Unfortunately, since he’s left, no one has replaced his level of care.” (Jamie Silvonek)

“Therapy weekly for 16 years. It was with the same psychologist. I needed to work through sexual and physical abuse in my past, also PTSD from my crime” (Michelle Hetzel)

“Yes, I have, I used to go to see the prison (retired) psychiatrist, that was when I began to receive therapy for my abuse issues. I took on the house of hope which I was inpatient for 6 months receiving therapy for my childhood traumas throughout my 18 years my walk with God has grown stronger and through that I realize everyday that I’m loved and I love myself” (Sarita Miller)

“Talking one on one with staff has helped me get out a lot of emotions I have suppressed.” (Brittany Williams)

They describe how therapy has helped them unpack past traumas and gain self-awareness. Many expressed a deep desire to understand their pasts and heal themselves.

A LIFE INSIDE: DENISE CRUMP



**Written by Emma Fenstermaker
in collaboration with Denise Crump**

Self-worth, respect, integrity, and confidence. These are all words that Denise Crump uses to describe the person she is today: someone who has been incarcerated for 35 years for felony murder, but who has developed a profound sense of self and a dizzying series of accomplishments despite every obstacle. She states, “I’ve grown into a woman with integrity who knows her purpose in life. I know that my past doesn’t define who I am and I don’t have to hold onto it.”

That past was rife with violence. Denise is a survivor of sexual abuse by her stepfather and assault by a group of six boys, which forced her out of school and “changed the course of the direction [she] was heading in.” Reflecting on her history, she says, “I see now how my physical abuse and rape caused me to have a mental illness because I didn’t receive counseling for it so it was covered up. This act caused trauma and that’s what led me to use drugs. I thought I was in control but my dysfunctional life was controlling me. Every path I took led to destruction.” She reflects that she grew up “burying the little girl inside [her],” a fact that she didn’t fully face until a few years ago.

Despite the direct path from her trauma to her conviction of second degree felony murder, her court-appointed attorney made no mention of her past abuse during her trial. Denise was convicted for a robbery gone wrong, although she was not the triggerman. At 22 years old, Denise says that she “was made to look like a killer of the worst kind who didn’t deserve to speak for herself, as they already knew what they decided to do for my sentence.” She further comments on the sociopolitical factors at the time of her arrest. When she was convicted in 1987, the war on drugs was in full swing. Denise says, “The drug dealers made a lot of money from the users. The political figures didn’t like this. They wanted to step up in their careers and the best way to do this was to crack down on drugs.

Any person with a drug case during that time was dealt with. I was poor, came from a poor neighborhood, and my family members are all on welfare. My bail was \$350,000.00. They didn’t want me to get out. I was railroaded.” Her lawyer told her that she would serve 12 years and would then have the chance for parole, but instead, at the time of this report, she has been incarcerated for 35 years and 5 months.

Denise's accomplishments since her conviction have been tremendous. She obtained her GED and went on to obtain an Associate's Degree in Business Administration and Accounting/Management. She has completed over twenty educational programs, ranging from domestic violence support groups to public speaking classes to poetry workshops to country line dancing. She is a member of the Pennsylvania Lifers Association and has held numerous committee positions, as she has remained committed to community engagement and enrichment throughout her time in Muncy.

Denise is a deeply spiritual woman, and finds joy in listening to gospel music and attending weekly services. She has participated in weekend retreats and "Leading in Faith and Education," a religious program. She states, "now that I've educated myself since my incarceration, I know how to work a full-time job, pay bills, save money, fill out a job resumé, communicate effectively, exercise, eat healthy, make healthy decisions and count my blessings for now living the life of the person I was born to be." She is a certified peer support specialist and is dedicated to helping her peers help themselves. In the 1990s, she even organized and executed a sit-in to protest harmful changes in housing unit operations that would have resulted in restrictions on inmate rights. For her courage in standing up for her peers, she was sentenced to 30 days in the RHU.

Denise has many thoughts on the ways in which the carceral system urgently needs to change. For one, she would establish a counseling appointment for every person beginning their sentence in order to get them started on a program that would "involve school, groups, therapeutic community, parole/commutation classes, jobs, re-entry classes and more. There will be all kinds of educational things going on in and out of the unit. Each unit will have a time for recreation and aerobics." On a structural level, Denise would like to see changes to sentencing guidelines: "It's unfair that each case that is the same doesn't match the sentence. I would like to see flat sentence guidelines as well as furloughs and pre-lease brought back."

"I'm a firm believer in old out and new in. When you have a bunch of people working in the system, with old mindsets, nothing seems to change. Everything stays the same. People are afraid to come up against them, so they just go along with the system although they don't agree with it. We need people in the system working who will be open-minded to change and who will not back down and stand on what they believe in."

On her resumé, Denise states that once she is released from prison, she plans to live her life as the woman that her grandmother raised her to be. Her grandmother has always been an inspiration to her; she has been there for Denise since she was three years old, including throughout her incarceration. Denise emphasizes that she is “focused, grounded, rooted, and ready to start [her] next chapter in life.” She summarizes the woman she is now with these words: “Today I am a woman with dignity. A woman who knows what she wants out of life and knows how to get it. I am a survivor of physical abuse and rape. I am strong, confident, intelligent and willing to make the best out of my life because my past doesn’t define who I am today. Someone’s always watching and when they see me, I want them to say, ‘Wow! If she can make it, so can I!’ I am forgiven; I am free. I am a woman with dignity.”

You can write to Ms. Crump here:
 Smart Communications/PADOC
 Denise Crump, OO8321
 SCI Cambridge Springs
 PO Box 33028

Theme 6: Barriers to rehabilitation

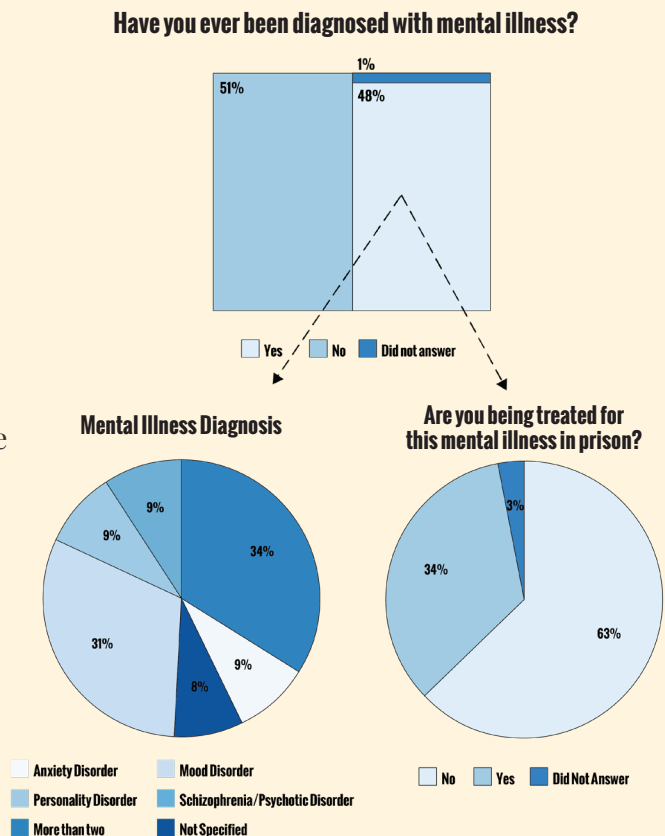
“There is nothing here to do to grow”

Participant after participant described real barriers to pursuing the self-improvement and healing they desired.

Mental Illness

Half of participants reported having a mental illness diagnosis. These included anxiety, personality, mood and psychotic disorders. Of the 35 individuals with diagnosed mental illness, 63% said they are not receiving treatment in prison.²³

Figure 20. Mental Illness. Almost half of respondents have a diagnosed mental illness (48%). For those 35 people, mood disorders were most common (34%), and most are not receiving treatment in prison (63%)



²³ From 2011–2012, 66% of women in state prisons had a history of mental illness (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017). Post-traumatic stress disorder is four to 10 times more prevalent among incarcerated women than women in free communities (Green et al., 2016).

Several participants emphasized the prison's reliance on medication to treat mental illness.

"Prison is no place to house those with physical and mental issues. Mental health issues in my opinion are treated with meds, meds and more meds. The care for physical and mental needs are not well cared for. In both cases the origin of the problem is not investigated, and pills are the remedy." (Michelle Hetzel)

"Medication has become a more relied upon way of dealing with mental health in prison. Although medication is needed, it has been exploited, making problems worse and creating more addictions." (Sarita Miller)

"My mental illness (PTSD, major depressive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and bulimia and anorexia) have not been adequately treated by the prison. For a few years, I was able to receive individual therapy sessions with a compassionate and human psychologist, Mr. Howard Woodring. After he retired, this treatment ceased. SCI Muncy attempts to deal with trauma and mental illness through medication. There is no meaningful help available in this facility" (Jamie Silvonek)

Others spoke to the staff's neglect and abuse when individuals are facing mental health crises.

"The officer is the one who decides wellness for the inmate. If the officer refuses the inmate in need of wellness there is nothing can be done until someone from the psychology dept sees them. This can be a minimum of three days. By this time the person who sought out wellness has self or others harmed up to suicide." (Elizabeth Collazo)

"The mentally ill are locked in their cells 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They get upset and start yelling to get out or to talk to someone and then get misconducts for yelling. It's shameful and cruel. The guards call them names and can be violent to them...Last week I argued with two COs because they called a mentally ill patient dirty names and mocked them." (Maria Spencer)

Several others reported that when individuals demonstrate mental health issues, they are not sent to treatment, but rather to solitary confinement (referred to as the "Restricted Housing Unit" (RHU)). Kristin Edmundson explains,

"If the officers know that the women have issues, why is it always straight to the RHU when they act out? I wish they never took the funding here for the Daily Program in one of the mental health units. They were taught daily living skills such as cooking, cleaning, etc. It used to be a really good program" (Kristin Edmundson)

Even in instances of attempted suicide, the DOC's solution is to place individuals in crisis in solitary.

"I attempted suicide multiple times throughout this period; each time, I was placed under an even more restrictive solitary confinement protocol, in which I was stripped of clothing, reading materials, and access to my family." (Jamie Silvonek)

"...a lady slit her throat with her razor. The officer without a beat placed his hands over her neck applying pressure. He saved her life. But then she was placed in the RHU upon her release from the hospital." (Elizabeth Collazo)

Solitary Confinement

In fact, 62% of respondents reported being placed in solitary confinement, despite the disciplinary infractions they listed being primarily minor.²⁴

Maria Spencer wrote that she was "placed in solitary confinement for years at a time and [faced] other acts of retaliation by guards" for advocating for "the medications and treatment [she] needed" as a diabetic kidney transplant patient. One participant wrote that she spent "2 days in the RHU for having a ketchup and seasoning packet in my pocket" (Anonymous). Joyce Schofield went for "having a pair of earrings."

Unlike trends observed for Pennsylvania overall, in this sample, the racial and ethnic distributions of individuals who have been placed in solitary predominantly mirror the same racial and ethnic breakdowns for those who did not serve time in the hole. The foremost difference, however, is that all Latinx/Hispanic participants have faced the torture of solitary.²⁵

²⁴ Research indicates that incarcerated women are often punished disproportionately more harshly for minor infractions in comparison to incarcerated men. Women are subjected to harsher punishments for offenses such as "being disorderly," whereas men are more often punished for violence (Women in prison: Seeking justice behind bars, 2020)

²⁵ A recent study of the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections found profound racial disparities in the imposition of solitary confinement for prison misconduct. Women of color are punished with solitary confinement for "verbal threats" at three to four times the rate of white women (The study tracked the first offense resulting in solitary so as to avoid double-counting individuals with more extensive misconduct histories). 7.7% of white women were punished for "verbal threats," as opposed to 21.4% of Black women, 25.6% of Latina women, and 25% of women of other races (Pullen-Blasnik, Simes, & Western, 2021).

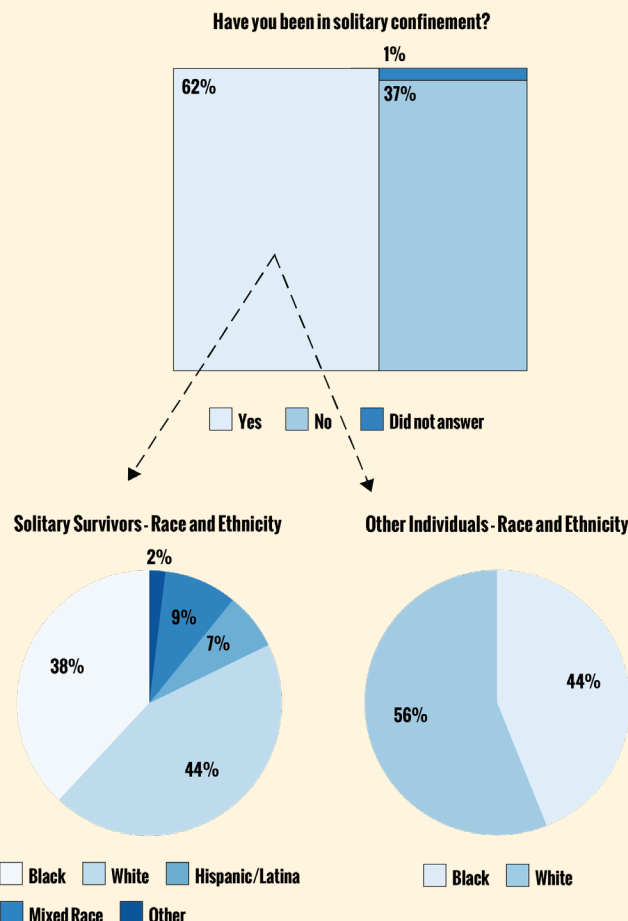


Figure 21. Solitary Confinement. A majority of respondents are solitary survivors (62%). The racial and ethnic distributions of individuals who have been placed in solitary versus not are similar, except that all mixed race and Latinx/Hispanic-identifying participants are solitary survivors.

In follow up surveys, a subset of participants were asked about their experiences in solitary. The conditions they describe are torturous:

“There was feces smeared over the walls and not cleaned properly. They made us share razors to shave. They never answered the buttons for help. The inmates had to bang and kick the doors if someone was having a medical emergency. Sleep deprivation = torture.” (Anonymous)

“I resided in confinement for 15 days—torture—shower 1 every 3 days. No reading material, freezing cold (I am never cold) was forced to eat all of your meal or you were going to starve. No one checked on you so if I wanted to hang myself there would be plenty of time. Handcuffed to and from showers. In dirty clothes and only 1 roll of toilet paper with 1 bar of soap.” (Elizabeth Collazo)

“In RHU it was cold, and loud. You were left hungry because while you get your 3 meals a day, the portions some days wouldn’t even leave a toddler full. You only showered 3 times a week and being female, well not showering everyday is not always fun. What got me the most was the fact that I couldn’t call home or get visits and I hated every minute of that.” (Kristin Edmundson)

“After 30 days, I felt suicidal and like I was going insane.” (Sheená King)

Jamie Silvonek described being placed in solitary for years on end because she was a minor incarcerated in an adult facility.

“I lived about four years of my life in solitary confinement from the age of fourteen until my 18th birthday. I spent about a year in solitary confinement in the county jail. I was transferred to SCI Muncy five days after my 15th birthday, where the isolation continued. The Prison Rape Elimination Act mandates adult prisons to segregate the children they cage from their adult population by “sight and sound.” At SCI Muncy specifically, children are confined to the Youthful Offender Unit (YOU) of the Young Adult Offender Program (YAOP), which is a program “serving” young adults between the ages of 18 and 21.” (Jamie Silvonek)

The severe psychological impacts of solitary confinement are well described.²⁶ Thus this overuse of solitary confinement to discipline minor misconduct and “protect” minors housed in adult facilities is both counterproductive and inhumane.

Lack of access to programming

Numerous participants described barriers to accessing DOC programming, not only due to COVID-19, but also because individuals with life sentences are given last priority for programming.

“Not much is offered to Lifers here. We are at the bottom of the list because the thought is why waste resources on someone who is not leaving. I have registered for the restaurant trade. There is only one lifer allowed per class.” (Anonymous)

“I am not involved because there are long waiting lists that I am bumped to the bottom of the list because of my sentence and then COVID-19 hit and now it’s moving even slower” (Rita Pultro)

“As a life sentence inmate, we are at the bottom of the list for programming/ seat fillers if needed. I’ve completed plenty before this “minimum” rule came down” (Lori Lassiter)

“I have completed all programming that was available to me. With my sentence I can’t enroll in schooling because they enroll you based on your minimum which I do not have” (Anonymous)

²⁶Over the past 40 years, researchers in the fields of public health and psychology have consistently concluded that solitary confinement has damaging, long-term consequences for individuals who experience it. Some of the identified symptoms include hallucinations, anxiety, depression, paranoia, confusion and memory loss, sleep disturbances and nightmares, aggression and rage, loss of emotional control, and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Grassian, 2006; Haney, 2018; Kaba et al., 2014; Lovell, Johnson, & Cain, 2007; Smith, 2006). These psychological effects can appear within only a few days and worsen as isolation is prolonged (Haney, 2016; Haney, 2018). Some symptoms can even persist long after the individual has been released from solitary confinement (Grassian, 2006; Kupers, 2008; Shalev, 2014). These findings on the severity and duration of the psychological effects of solitary led the United Nations to declare in 2015 that more than two weeks of solitary confinement at a time constitutes “torture” and should never be used in any correctional setting (United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules), 2015).

Participants explained how lifers are treated differently than people incarcerated for other sentences – they are disciplined more harshly by staff and are given less access to resources. As Shavone Armstrong explained,

“Inmates serving life are treated horrible due to our sentence. Discipline is harsher than average inmate that may do the same thing—automatically are thought the worst of and hard to get the counselor or unit manager to see you”
(Shavone Armstrong)



Uprising by Lataya Johnson

Maria Spencer also pointed out the sexist disparity between which programs are offered to people incarcerated in women's versus men's prisons:

"Unlike the male inmates, the female inmates are not offered certification in any programs but cosmetology. They are given the opportunity to work on maintenance crews, plumbing, electricity, but they are not given a degree or certification in the field. They just get (labor) experience. There is no heating, air conditioning or building certification." (Maria Spencer)

Other participants described not being given access to therapy or counseling. Given the frequency with which participants described early life abuse and partner abuse, this fact is troubling. When asked if they receive therapy, participants wrote:

"I went through extensive therapy in the past. Today, unless you are on the psychiatric list, you don't see a psychologist or in any groups due to COVID" (Marie Scott)

"No, none is offered unless you have mental health issues. You can't really talk with the psychologist assigned to the unit. They tell you to talk to the counselor. Counselors are bust and don't typically talk about therapeutic issues. Thank God I don't have mental health issues." (Charmaine Pfender)

"None available for a shut-in senior at almost 71 years old." (Janet Martin)

"Before the COVID quarantine, I seen Mrs. Fallon (Psych) once a month but now I don't see anyone, I NEED to" (Anonymous)

"I do not. I was not court ordered nor has the DOC determined I need counseling. Therefore, I can request a group for women who have been abused. However, everything is reported to the facility." (Maria Spencer)

"Before COVID-19, yes. The transgender therapy group. Since March of 2020 we've had nothing." (Anonymous)

With such limited access to rehabilitation through programming and therapy, and with the looming threat of isolation and deprivation through solitary confinement, it's difficult to comprehend how prisons could ever be purported as rehabilitative environments. As Elizabeth Collazo summarized it so precisely, "There is nothing here to do to grow."

A LIFE INSIDE: MICHELLE HETZEL



**Written by Juliette Rando in
collaboration with Michelle Hetzel**

Michelle Hetzel's parents were her role models growing up. Despite both working two jobs, they always made time for Michelle and her siblings, ensuring one parent was home at all times. Her dad was "the fun one but disciplinarian," while her mom was more of a "homebody". They took Michelle on trips to the beach, Hershey Park, and even Disney on occasion." No matter what they were always there and gave us unconditional love," she says. Even now, in her 40's, Michelle is very close with her mother who is, "holding on for [her] to come home."

Despite the loving homelife fostered by her parents, Michelle still experienced trauma and abuse in her childhood. Unbeknownst to her parents, Michelle was sexually abused by her father's uncle starting at age 4. She reflects that this early-life abuse impacted her behavior: "It explained why I started acting out as a child and peed myself so often. I would throw fits about being touched."

As a teenager, Michelle ran away from home both because her father did not accept her same-sex relationship with her best friend, Devon Guzman, and because her parents disapproved of Michelle spending time around Devon's parents, who used drugs and alcohol openly and supplied it to Michelle and Devon. A judge ordered that Michelle be placed in foster care for 3 months for diagnostic testing and family counseling. So, at age 16, Michelle went to live with a foster mother who later lost her right to be a foster parent. It's in that household that Michelle met her future husband and co-defendant: her foster mother's son who was 7 years older than her. The relationship she had with him was physically, sexually, and psychologically abusive, and she stayed out of fear for her safety.

This relationship ended up being the catalyst for the crime for which Michelle is now incarcerated, Devon's death. Michelle had no part in the actual murder—that was committed by her husband and abuser. But Michelle says, "I was there, I lied and helped cover it up." Michelle was 18 at the time.

During her trial, the abuse she endured at the hands of her husband was never brought up. Nor was the fact that he was her foster brother, that he was 7 years older than her, or that the relationship started when she was a minor. Michelle requested to have a trial separate from him, but was denied. Instead, they were tried as co-defendants. What the prosecution did bring up at trial was the gay relationship Michelle had with Devon. Michelle writes, “I was portrayed as the villain. My relationship with a girl was the biggest talking point. At trial the rings we exchanged were passed around to the jury. The rainbow sticker on my car was photographed and blown up for the jury.”

In addition to the homophobia of the trial proceedings, Michelle identified other ways in which her trial was unfairly influenced. She was represented by a court-appointed attorney, but the grandmother of the victim, Devon, worked for that same attorney. She also points to the fact that the District Attorney who prosecuted her, John Morganelli, had ambitions of becoming Attorney General. She believes his political ambitions may have played a part in her conviction.

Michelle had no prior convictions and very few arrests before this crime. In the over two decades she’s been incarcerated, she has had very few disciplinary actions, the most “serious” of which was for throwing an empty bag at an officer. As Michelle describes it: “An officer who was searching my room left my room and came back minutes later. She wanted my small crocheted shower bag made of yarn. She was at my cell door and I emptied my soap and shampoo onto my bed and tossed the yarn bag to her. She caught it in her hand and said I assaulted her because I did not hand her the bag.” Michelle was sent to solitary confinement for 15 days.

Despite traumatizing situations like this, Michelle has been able to heal herself since being incarcerated. For 16 years, she had weekly voluntary therapy sessions with the same psychologist, and she completed a series of mental health programs. She writes, “I needed to work through sexual and physical abuse in my past, also PTSD from my crime.” She says that because of this process, “I have made many needed changes in my life.” She has learned not to be codependent and to identify unhealthy relationships.

Michelle writes, “Myself and many women I have met have had some sort of trauma that led to them being incarcerated. The naive teenager I was, the unhealthy relationships I had and physical and verbal abuse I endured all led to my incarceration.” But Michelle points to ways in which the prison itself and the system at large prevent change. She writes, “There are staff that really do care and treat us as people. There are also those that have control issues and do not treat us as people. These officers do more damage to those mentally who have come from trauma.”

She also talks about the lack of support for the mentally ill and physically disabled, and how the prison is not the right environment for care. She writes, “Prison is no place to house those with physical and mental issues... In both cases the origin of the problem is not investigated, pills are the remedy.” She thinks that if prisons are meant to be rehabilitative, they need more educational and vocational opportunities that do not have barriers based on sentence minimums. She recommends more trauma counselors so all incarcerated people can have access to therapy.

Beyond improving the prison conditions themselves, Michelle wants to see real policy change. She explains that as it currently operates, the prison system “has become a warehouse and less of a means of rehabilitation.” She writes, “For me it feels like our system does not believe in change.” She advocates for parole opportunities for lifers, explaining, “Parole, as in all cases, is not guaranteed on a minimum. This is why we have a Parole Board to review each individual.”

Today, Michelle is a transformed person, and she says she is proud of who she has become. But she doesn’t want to portray herself as the victim or “take away what happened to Devon.” She reflects, “What brought me here has never left my thoughts and driven me to do all I can to better myself and help others. I have volunteered for self help groups, counseling, education and the domestic violence program.” Since being incarcerated, she’s earned her cosmetology license and completed numerous programs and college courses at various universities. Now she feels a new sense of purpose: “My family and my faith in God bring the most joy to my life. I enjoy volunteering in any way that I can and helping others.”

You can write to Ms. Hetzel here:
Smart Communications/PADOC
Michelle Hetzel, OG3803
SCI Muncy
PO Box 33028
St. Petersburg, FL 33733

IMPACTS OF INCARCERATION

Theme 7: Disability and aging in prison

“LWOP means you will die in a dirty diaper, begging for someone to come help you”

The age of survey participants ranged from 20–80 with an average age of 55.²⁷ Though not specifically asked about in the survey, several participants described prison life as one hostile to the aging and disabled. Two participants in their late 50s/ early 60s detailed numerous overlapping health conditions.

“I had covid in January. My health is not good. I have high blood pressure and cholesterol, spinal stenosis, walk with cane scoliosis, asthma. I had bowel surgery last year, emergency—cut my whole stomach open.” (Sylvia Boykin)

“After all these years here, my health is not great, including Parkinsons, which I was diagnosed with about three years ago. Also, diabetes that I’ve had for 45 years. I am having mobility issues in one leg. But I want to lay in a comfortable bed, eat a home cooked meal and see the outside of the walls and razor wires, if only for ONE day of my life.” (Loni Krick)

Maria Spencer, also in her late 50s, described the extreme lengths she had to go to in order to advocate for adequate treatment for her health conditions. She faced severe retaliation, including solitary confinement, from correctional staff as a result.

“Abuse of the disabled is common. I have a kidney transplant, I am diabetic and I have bilateral (illegible) (difficulty digesting food). I require a lot of medications and physical therapy. The prison refused to provide me the same medications or treatment plan when I arrived. Within the 1st year, I became extremely ill. The doctors apologized for not being able to help me, but would try to feed me better as they watched me die. I was forced to take actions to save myself. I made a lot of the administration and guards angry. I however got the medications and treatment I needed. The cost has been to be placed in solitary confinement for years at a time and other acts of retaliation by guards. I have been given 12 misconducts but only found guilty one time. To get out of the infirmary I was forced to waive my medically restricted diet. The kitchen refused to follow the diet plan. They give me the same meal 2 times a day for 186 days.” (Maria Spencer)

²⁷ Elders are the fastest growing demographic in the U.S. prison system (Skarupski, Gross, Schrack, Deal, & Eber, 2018). In Pennsylvania, over 7,000 incarcerated individuals are age 55 and older, and over one third of them are serving a life sentence (Doc all population spreadsheet 6–10–20, 2020). The poor quality of care in prisons leads to disproportionately high rates of diabetes, cardiovascular conditions, liver disease, and mental health crises. Many incarcerated elders get no or too little assistance with mobility issues, leading as many as 31% to experience difficulty getting to dining halls for meals. Up to one fifth of incarcerated people over 50 struggle with activities of daily living (Skarupski, Gross, Schrack, Deal, & Eber, 2018). Nationwide estimates indicate that the cost of healthcare for older incarcerated people is 2–3 times higher per year than for younger incarcerated people (Dulisse, Fitch, & Logan, 2020).

She then expanded beyond her own experience, describing the general attitude the prison shows toward the disabled and mentally ill:

“The disabled and mentally ill have a lot of difficulty in prison. The activities building and gym is not handicap accessible. The kitchen refuses to meet dietary restrictions. Those that are having mental health issues as they are ignored until it’s an emergency. But my heart goes out to the inmates with dementia or mental illness. One inmate named [name redacted] is 90 years old. She has been here 40 years. She NEVER gets out of her cell. She can’t walk and she has dementia. She often cried out for someone to come and talk to her. Another lifer named [name redacted] had a stroke. She has beginning stage dementia. She rarely gets out of her cell. The officers tell me they don’t have the time to watch her. There are so many others. The real tragedy is these women will get lonely and frustrated and start screaming. The COs will give them a misconduct, the women will be taken to the RHU for 30-90 days and then brought back.” (Maria Spencer)

In brief, she says, “LWOP means you will die in a dirty diaper, begging for someone to come help you and be abused for losing your memory” (Maria Spencer)

In follow-up surveys, we asked a subset of participants if they felt they would be supported as they aged in prison. Almost all participants said no. They described witnessing neglectful conditions for elderly individuals, and many feared how they would be treated in their old age.

“The staff look at the elderly as a burden. The elderly are treated horrifically. One thing about Muncy is that they never deliver the meals to the elderly here. There was a woman partly paralyzed who went without meals for 30 days. I am scared to be a senior here! I would rather be in heaven than live here as a senior.” (Elizabeth Collazo)

“I feel those of us with disabilities are totally ignored. There are only three available handicap cells at any given moment. There are at least 25 inmates with wheelchairs, nowhere to live but on regular units with toilets too high, no guard railings, and inmates assigned as wheelchair pushers, to push us around like zombies” (Jennifer Rhodes)

“It is shameful and there will be little support as any of us age. Surgeries take many years before they are approved and the medical care provider denies basic needs which, if preventive measures were taken, medical costs could be significantly reduced. Medical, like every department in this facility, is reactionary.” (Sheená King)

Sarita Miller wrote that most of the elderly women in prison are serving death by incarceration sentences and have spent well over 20 years in prison. She asks,

“Why must they die like this? Who are they going to hurt?”

A LIFE INSIDE: JENNIFER RHODES

Written by Lolo Serrano in
collaboration with Jennifer Rhodes

(The following direct quotes are from
interviews, mail, or ConnectNetwork
communication)



At the time of interviews in September and October 2022, Miss Jennifer Rhodes was awaiting word from the Library of Congress (LOC) about official certification as a Braille Transcriber. She had passed the LOC's reading test and submitted two full, English-to-Braille translated manuscripts: *The House: The History of the House of Representatives*, the LOC's choice of text, and *The Child Called 'It': One Child's Courage to Survive*, her own.

Miss Jenn was born in Pittsburgh on April 22, 1958. Her father, a wealthy and proud man, distanced himself from birth; her mother, while present in her life, was very strict and emotionally distant. She was never a social butterfly and hated school ("with a capital H") but took vocational courses in dental technology in the 9th through 12th grades and had hopes of becoming a dental technician. Instead, when she became pregnant at 18, she married the father of her child—an abused boy who became an abusive man. Over the next thirteen years, she left one abusive man only to find another while raising three children—Dorian, Antwon, and Quiana.

In the summer of 1989, Miss Jenn fled a violently abusive partner in Atlanta, Georgia with twenty-two stitches over her skull. She returned to Pittsburgh with her three children. Though "sick of life, sick of living, sick of drugs, sick of getting high," she found a job in a retirement center in March of 1990. She was the only Black person to have worked there since the early 1970s and was regularly subjected to racial slurs and harassment by some of the residents. After finishing an 11pm–7am shift on Friday, April 13, 1990, she heard a cry for help and found a woman, Bertha Boyle, on the floor.

“I tried to help her up to her bed. She seemed disoriented. Once she looked up to me, she began that nigger stuff. I told her I worked there; she insisted I did not. I tried to get my supervisor on the phone to clear things up, but no one answered. Things began to verbally escalate. She accused me of taking money from her wallet, which set me off even more. I snapped, took her life and her rings. I did not even realize all that I did to her until I heard the coroner’s report.”

“After my crime, I was not here. My mind went somewhere, and I didn’t know where to go. I was not here. I had snapped. I slept for two straight days.

Three days after my crime, I was led to the Bible—not Jesus, or God, but the word of God. I opened the Bible, not really knowing where to go. Reading the Bible, I found peace and stability. I was drawn to the presence that I felt when I read the word of God. My soul cried out as I read Psalms 51.”

Miss Jenn was incarcerated at SCI Muncy, over 200 miles from Pittsburgh, in February of 1991. In June of 1991, she enrolled in the Associate Degree program in business management and financial accounting. She graduated on the President’s List and the Dean’s List.

For the next 11 years, she worked the best jobs available to her. As a seamstress at SCI Muncy, she designed and sewed the uniforms for kitchen workers. She also tutored other incarcerated students. At SCI Cambridge Springs, chosen by Superintendent Brooks, she worked eight hours a day sewing “happy hats” for kids with cancer at the Ronald McDonald House, earning 51 cents an hour (“you never see that kind of money anymore.”) She was cleared for lifers’ honor detail. She was trusted to interact with community members, taking pictures of other women with their families and loved ones.

When she transferred to SCI Cambridge Springs, she enrolled in the optical program. Jennifer Rhodes is now the only certified optician in Pennsylvania with a life sentence. Due to her sentence, Miss Jenn is not eligible to work in the Optical Lab making glasses for DOC facilities. So she enrolled right away in the Braille program to learn transcription.

“I like creating. I am a person who loves working with my hands: writing; doing hair; sewing; crochet; drawing; painting; poetry; optical, making glasses; Braille; really serving with my creations. With Braille, I can become the eyes for the blind. That’s amazing.”

“My life’s goal every day is to give back, love and give some more.

I am persnickety—I’m into details, I care about everything I do, I’m detailed and not sloppy about my work.”

Miss Jenn currently works at SCI Cambridge Springs transcribing magazines, books, menus, greeting cards, and posters into Braille—and still waiting for word from the LOC.

Miss Jenn is a product of self-transformation. She grieves for the woman whose life she took in 1990, and for her children; at the same time, she has taken the opportunities presented to her and committed to growth, healing, love, and restoration.

“I didn’t take just one life, I took four. The other three were my children. All that they could have been, all they were meant to be. If only...

I’ve found that love will cause a meltdown in the kingdom of darkness. I tried walking in love before but had too much junk, too much hurt, too many triggers, too many flashbacks, too low self-esteem, covered by a mask called drugs. I didn’t know what love was, but I know what it is now, and I love myself now, and my life.

I chose to change.

Most people are locked up and they aren’t even behind bars, and that was me. Now I’m free for real. I’m not the battered, bruised, low self-esteem, drug-using person I was before I got here, and that makes me proud.”

Wheelchair-bound by chronic myelocytic leukemia, chemotherapy, and one knee replacement, with a recently stitched-up tooth, another knee replacement scheduled, and a legal sentence of Death by Incarceration, Miss Jenn has plans for the world.

She wants to start a latchkey program for girls with incarcerated mothers. The program already has a name: Girls Just Like Us. With enough funds—the plan now is to sell homemade cookies—the program could organize educational field trips and collect funds for the children’s futures. So by providing a safe place to go, an adult to look up to, feel accepted and loved, it would tackle something more fundamental:

These kids go through hell. They might get visits or phone calls, but that’s not a hug from a mother. A mother’s presence is her assurance.

It will be a place to feel sheltered from peer pressure, shame, and abandonment issues from having a mom in prison. A place to demolish their shame, build self-esteem and hopefully keep them from becoming one of the statistics: 85% of children with mothers in prisons become incarcerated themselves.

In closing, Miss Jenn writes:

“I’d like to express how psychologically deafening it is to be rehabilitated, take full responsibility for your crimes, have meaningful goals and assets to offer to society, be called a role model, yet denied a second chance to become a taxpayer, instead of a costly tax burden within society.

Society deserves to see the enormous amount of taxpayer dollars spent on incarcerating a human being for decades upon decades, especially when the penal system has nothing else to offer one incarcerated for such a long time. There comes a time when words are not enough.

I pray for the day I’m afforded at least a chance to see the parole board. Even Charles Manson was afforded this gift.

It is said that the greatest gift that we can give each other is attention to one another’s existence.

Thank you for caring and listening.”

You can write to Ms. Rhodes here:

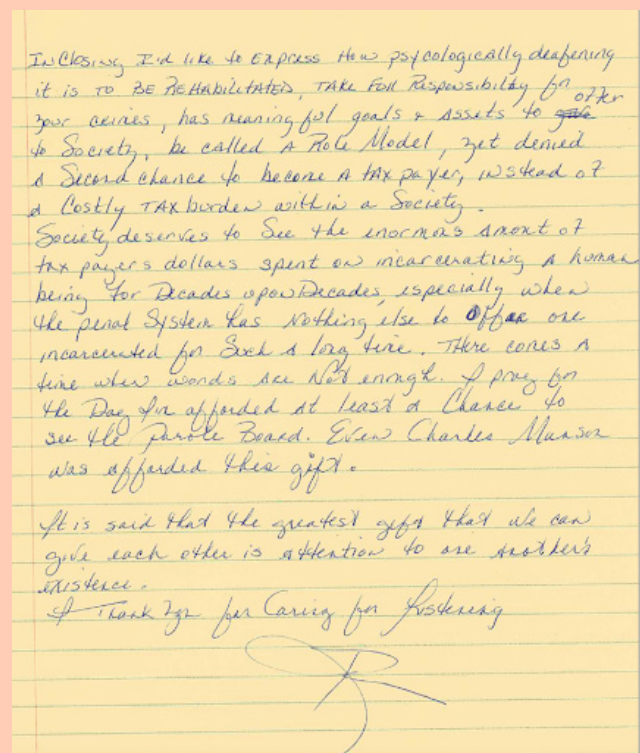
Smart Communications/PADOC

Jennifer Rhodes, OA8479

SCI Cambridge Springs

PO Box 33028

St. Petersburg, FL 33733

A photograph of a handwritten letter on yellow lined paper. The handwriting is in blue ink and matches the typed text on the left. The letter is signed 'Jenn' at the bottom right with a stylized flourish.

In closing, I'd like to express how psychologically deafening it is to be rehabilitated, take full responsibility for your crimes, have meaningful goals & assets to offer to society, be called a Role Model, yet denied a second chance to become a taxpayer, instead of a costly tax burden within a society. Society deserves to see the enormous amount of taxpayer dollars spent on incarcerating a human being for decades upon decades, especially when the penal system has nothing else to offer one incarcerated for such a long time. There comes a time when words are not enough. I pray for the day I'm afforded at least a chance to see the parole board. Even Charles Manson was afforded this gift. It is said that the greatest gift that we can give each other is attention to one another's existence. Thank you for caring for listening.

Jenn

Theme 8: Family disruption

“I haven’t seen them since I’ve been locked up”

A major impact of DBI sentences revealed in the surveys was the disruption of families. Respondents reported strong social bonds with those on the outside, maintained via virtual, phone and mail communication. Yet many reported receiving few or no in-person visits (25%).

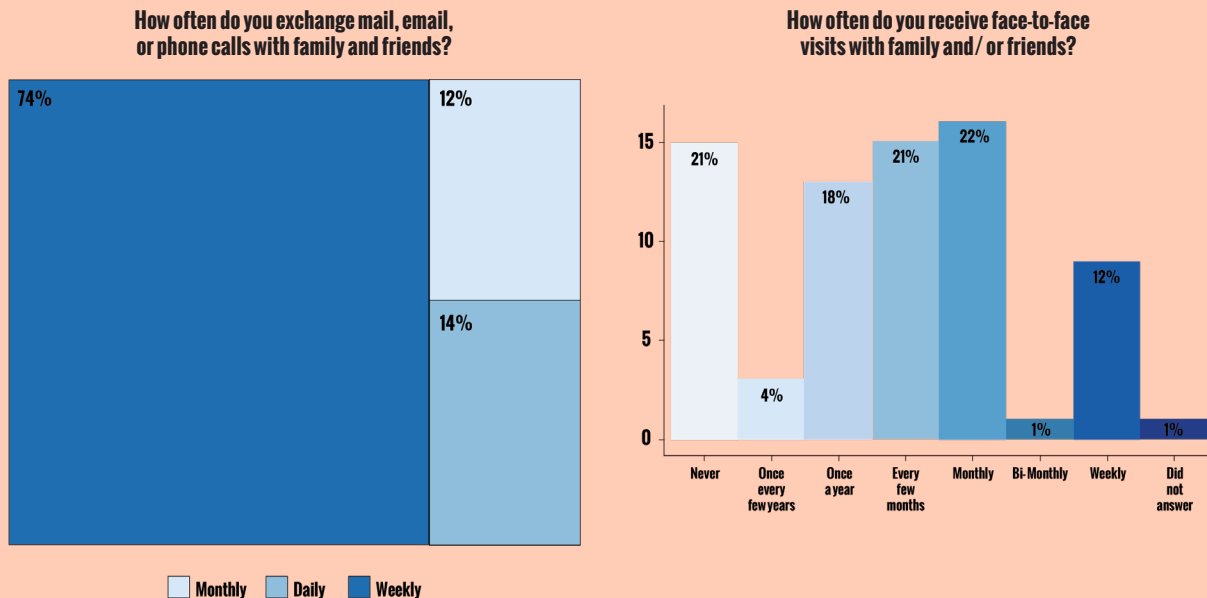


Figure 22. Communication with Outside. All participants reported communicating via email/phone calls/mail, with nearly 90% reporting daily or weekly communication. Yet 43% of participants reported having one or fewer in-person visits per year.

This lack of face-to-face contact is likely driven by the fact that the families of most individuals are farther than three hours from the facility.

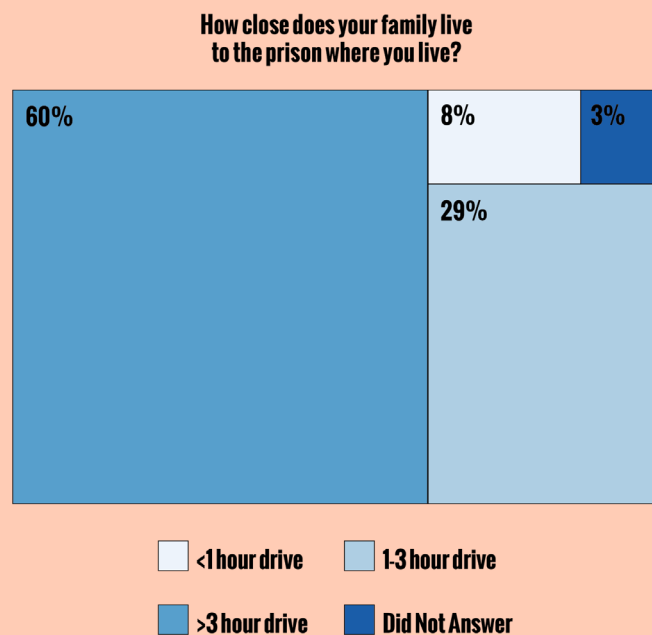


Figure 23. Family Distance. The families of most participants (60%) are more than three hours driving from the prison.

Sixty-seven percent of participants have children. Over half of respondents were separated from their children when they were under five years old.²⁸ Several participants described losing contact with their children or not knowing much about their children’s lives.²⁹

“I haven’t seen them since I’ve been locked up” (Mirinda Boob)

“I don’t know where [my daughter] is. I do know she is married and as far as I know has two children.” (Paula Johnson)

“Do not know, do not have communication with [my children].” (Elizabeth Collazo)

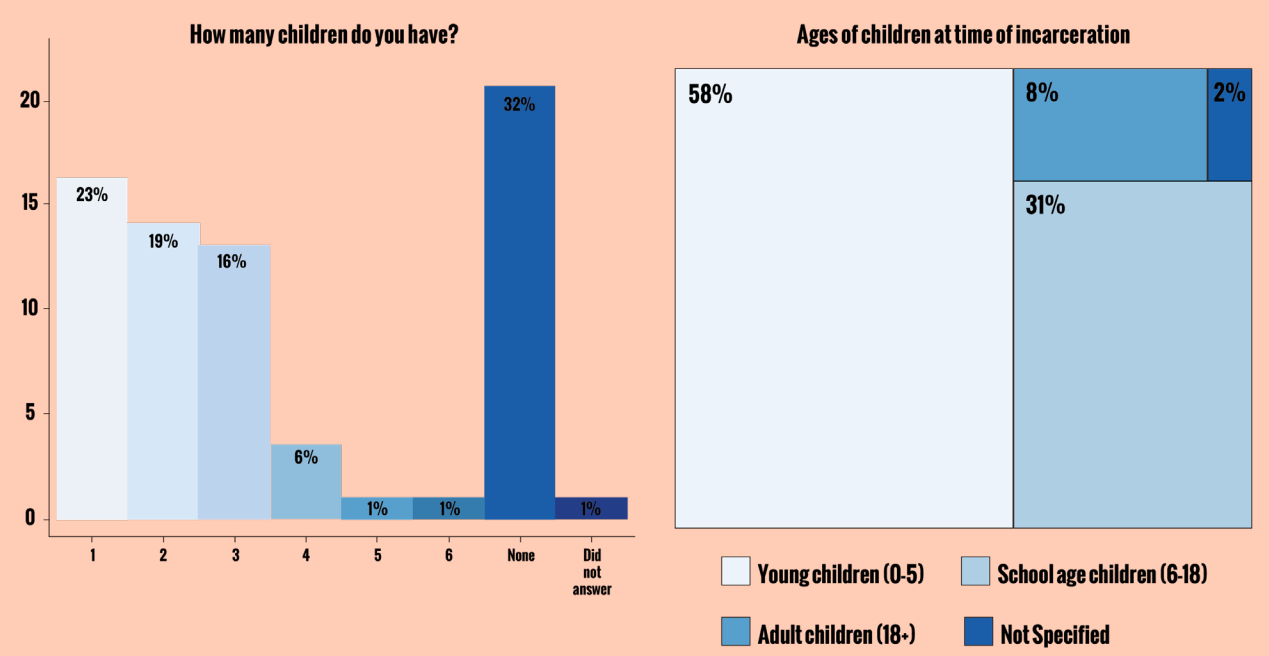


Figure 24. Number and Age of Children. Participants had on average 2 children. For those with children, 58% were separated from them when the children were between the ages of 0-5.

Many participants who had young children at the time of their incarceration reported that their children lived with family members. One participant said her child was placed in foster care.

Some participants reported that their children were incarcerated.³⁰

“All three of my children who were the ages of 6, 13, 15 years old at the time of arrest have all been incarcerated off and on throughout my incarceration.” (Jennifer Rhodes)

“He’s grown up in Cincinnati with my mom’s brothers. He now lives in Pittsburgh after being incarcerated in PA” (Dierdre Owens)

²⁸ Nationwide, 5% of women in state prisons are pregnant upon entry (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008), and 18% of women incarcerated in state prisons have children less than 4 years of age (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999).

²⁹ The separation of mothers and infants during incarceration is rare in the global landscape; only Suriname, Liberia and the Bahamas also condone this practice, whereas most countries permit co-residence of mothers and infants in prison. In 1987, a United Nations working group recommended the use of community based programs for mothers and expecting mothers instead of carceral practices (Byrne, Goshin, & Joestl, 2010; Carlson, 2009; Villaneuva, From, & Lerner, 2009).

³⁰ Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to struggle in school, have poor mental health, be antisocial, and develop substance abuse issues. As adults, they are significantly more likely to become engaged with the criminal justice system than their peers (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007; Murray, Farrington, Sekol, & Olsen, 2009; Pochlmann, 2005; Pochlmann, 2010).

“My son is in SCI Albion and my daughter has her own home” (Sheená King)

What’s more, over 30% of participants listed family members who were currently or formerly incarcerated, suggesting entire family lines disrupted by incarceration.

Do you have any close relatives who have been in prison?

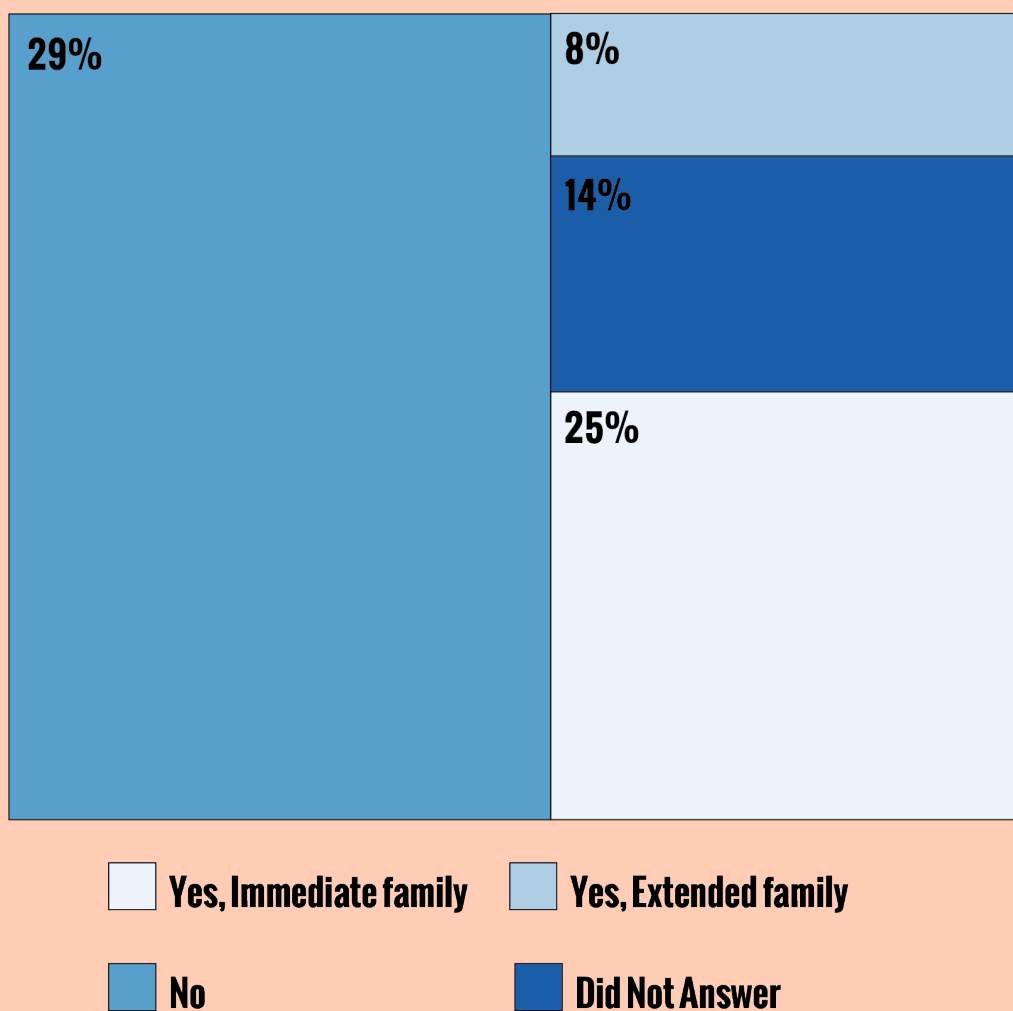


Figure 25. Incarcerated Family Members. A quarter of participants have immediate family members who are currently or were formerly incarcerated.

A LIFE INSIDE: SHEENÁ KING

Written by Juliette Rando in
collaboration with Sheená King



Sheená King's book, *SUBMERGED*, has a five-star rating on Amazon. Reviewers deem it "excellent" and a "remarkable memoir." The work of nonfiction follows Sheená's story of childhood sexual abuse and its impact on her life, interwoven with poems written by her and other sexual abuse survivors. In the introduction, Sheená tells the reader, "You may have suffered at the hands of an adult in the past or you may be living through that nightmare right now. You're not alone." Sheená says becoming an author is the thing she's second-most proud of in life. The first is her growth and transformation as a person.

Sheená was incarcerated in 1992, when she was 19 years old. At the time, her daughter Keeva was 3 years old, and her son, Keiff, was only 4 months. After she was incarcerated, Sheená's children went to live with her mother and two younger sisters. She writes, "My incarceration devastated my family...at ages 30 and 33, [my children] still have enduring effects of my incarceration." Keiff is currently serving the same sentence as his mom—a life sentence without the possibility of parole for first-degree murder.

At the time of her arrest, Sheená had never been arrested before, let alone convicted of anything. When asked about the circumstances of the crime, Sheená explained, "I was involved with a man who threatened to kill me and my family if I did not commit a murder for him and in the exact manner that he directed." Sheená believed this threat because the man alleged to have ties to the Junior Black Mafia, "a notorious and dangerous gang of drug dealers and murderers." Sheená reflects, "At the time, I felt that I had no other choice and although I never wanted to hurt anyone, I didn't know what else to do". She felt paralyzed—forced to do what he said or risk losing her family.

But the threats to her family didn't end there—when she was arrested and then interrogated by police, they also used her love for her children against her. Sheená explains, “The detective ‘told’ me what I had done and told me that I would never be with my children again. He yelled but he did not hit me. He broke me down in a way that I was acquainted with (screams and threats). The other detective who was not present for interrogation, typed a statement and showed me where to initial. I was too shaken to read it.”

During her trial, Sheená was represented by a court-appointed attorney, who didn't do enough. Not once during the trial did he bring up the history of extensive physical and sexual abuse that Sheená endured during her childhood—even though it was detailed in her psychological evaluation. Sheená was physically abused by her mother and stepfather with “tree switches, extension cords, leather belts.” When she was five, she was “thrown to the floor and stomped on by [her] mother.” She also endured sexual abuse by her biological father and mother's boyfriend: “When I was 9 until 12 my mother's boyfriend used me to perform every sex act except anal penetration. He used the threat of violence and the possibility of raping my younger sisters to control me and keep me quiet about what he was doing.”

None of this abuse was mentioned during her trial, and, in fact, Sheená says her attorney presented no real defense. Her extensive abuse history was only brought up after the trial, during the penalty phase, as a mitigating factor. At age 19, Sheená was sentenced to life imprisonment without the possibility of parole.

While incarcerated, Sheená was subjected to solitary confinement for “possession of contraband”—that “contraband” being a fruit salad. Sheená says the administration knew this was not an alcoholic beverage, but a deputy at the time told her, “Too many people are making fruit salads. So since we don't know if others are attempting to make hooch—who's a better example than a lifer?” Her stay in solitary lasted 2 months, a period that is defined as cruel and unusual torture under the Nelson Mandela Rules set by the United Nations. Sheená says that after the first 30 days, she felt suicidal, like she was “going insane.” And even after that point, she was kept in solitary for another 30 days.

In addition to prisons subjecting trauma upon incarcerated people, prison staff and programming rarely provide fruitful avenues for healing or self-improvement. Sheená remarks that the abuse and substance abuse programs are more focused on “punishment” rather than “treatment.” She also describes situations of psychiatric staff not listening to patients; Sheená was misdiagnosed by a psychiatrist who didn't recognize that she had recently undergone a hysterectomy and prescribed psychotropic medications that worsened her symptoms.

But despite the compounded trauma experienced before and during her incarceration, Sheená keeps moving forward, motivated by her faith in God. She says, “It is my faith in the goodness, mercy and forgiveness of Christ that has kept me alive and keeps me moving forward.” And the sheer number of accomplishments Sheená has achieved while incarcerated is astounding. She completed every program offered at SCI Muncy and graduated with an Associates in Religious Education and a Bachelor’s degree in Christian Counseling. Now, at almost age 50, she aims to pursue a Master’s in Pastoral Ministry.

Beyond her education, Sheená has dedicated herself to finding clarity and healing. She says one of the best decisions she ever made was joining a therapy group, which she participated in until the psychologist, Howard Woodring, retired. When asked to describe herself at the time of her incarceration, Sheená says, “I was fearful, naive, easily intimidated, manipulated, and controlled.” She describes having no self-esteem or sense of self-worth; “I hated myself, I had no purpose, no direction, or a love for God.” But that all changed after participating in the therapy group. Sheená learned she wasn’t “alone, strange, dirty, and different.” The feeling of inclusivity helped to “eliminate the shame and self-loathing [she] had carried since [she] was a child,” stemming from the belief that the molestation and abuse she endured was her fault. She gained clarity on why her mother acted the way she did (because she was also molested), and she was able to move past her anger and “understand how my life ended here and why I had made the choices I did.” Sheená thinks deeply about the ripple effects of her actions, remarking that her crime must have had an enduring impact on the victim’s children and family.

In Sheená’s story, we see the woven thread of patriarchal violence – men who used her love for her family to control her and make her do their bidding. First, with her sexual abuser who threatened to hurt her younger sister if she did not cooperate, then with the man who forced her to choose between committing murder and losing her children, and finally with the police who used her children to coerce a confession.

Perhaps this is why, today, Sheená feels deeply for other women in pain. She writes, “I feel a strong connection to people who are hurting, especially women and when I am in a position to help to ease their pain or to put it in proper perspective, I feel immense joy and that I am serving my purpose.” Throughout her incarceration, she has been a counselor to her peers to help them “to learn, to grow, to change, to become better.” Just like the message of her book, *SUBMERGED*, Sheená speaks the truth “You’re not alone” to the women she counsels.

When asked to describe herself now, Sheená says, “Today, I am not afraid, I love the compassion and empathy I have for others and my unquenchable drive to improve myself everyday and to help the people around me. I am a person of value and worth.”

CONCLUSION

“The system doesn’t need to be changed, it needs to be abolished. Until it is, though, everyone should be eligible for release when they’ve taken accountability for the harms they’ve caused and made strides to repair those harms. LWOP for adults needs to be immediately dismantled, as data indicates excessive sentences are ineffective. Likewise for the draconian sentencing of children, which literally flies in the face of science.” – Jamie Silvonek

These survey responses peel back only a few layers of the complex human experiences of women and trans people serving Death by Incarceration sentences. The responses paint a devastating picture of inescapable, targeted violence against women and LGBTQIA+ people, that often starts at a young age and persists through adulthood. The abuse that women and trans folks face permeates everything from their households and relationships, to the streets, courtroom, and prisons—for some, it’s engulfed their entire lives.

This oppression of women and LGBTQIA+ people stems from a patriarchal and white supremacist culture that reveres domination over others. It is not until this culture of domination—that saturates nearly every aspect of our society—is dissolved that the violence against women and LGBTQIA+ people will subside. An uprooting of the patriarchal culture in conjunction with an overhaul of the structures that allow, encourage, and enforce this culture is necessary for women and LGBTQIA+ people, and ultimately every person, to truly be free. This dismantling and building process is step by step, brick by brick.

Alongside the omnipresent pain and oppression bleeding through the pages of this report radiates the love, resistance, and power of the women and trans people willing to open up some of their most vulnerable wounds to the world. In addition to their experiences, the participants shared their perspectives on how to approach change and what to prioritize moving forward. Using these responses as guidance, we offer a rough and inevitably limited blueprint for systemic and policy changes that can build upon the centuries-long movement for the liberation of women, transgender, and all people.

Abolish Death by Incarceration

“We need laws to change. I love Pennsylvania and never knew how extreme their punishment is and how punishment is not equal across the board. There should be no life or death sentence, It is God who should have the final say, not man.”
– Elizabeth Collazo

A principal pillar upholding the system of dominance within our justice system is the practice of Death by Incarceration, sentencing an individual to life without the possibility of parole. Through this practice, the state enacts ultimate control over another human's life, killing them slowly through the systematized neglect and violence of incarceration, a tit-for-tat for the life that was taken. In this sense, the state takes on the role of the ultimate abuser, enacting a finality of violence and stripping humans of their freedom for the rest of their time on this earth. Death by Incarceration must be abolished.

In September 2022, human rights groups across the nation came together to call on the United Nations to ban Death by Incarceration in the US, as the practice violates the international prohibitions on racial discrimination, arbitrary detention, torture, and cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment (DBI complaint to UN, 2022). Death by Incarceration also violates individuals' right to life and deprives them of their right to hope, rehabilitation, and liberty.

Pennsylvania has the second highest number of people serving DBI sentences of any state in the U.S., a country that far surpasses any other country in the world in its exorbitant rate of sentencing people to die in prison (Cozzens & Grote, 2018; Nellis, 2021). The movement to abolish DBI in PA has made headway over the last decade in both launching supporters into the political arena as well as persuading and pressuring the legislature to acknowledge the humanity of incarcerated people.

In 2021, PA Senator Sharif Street (D-District 3) introduced Senate Bill 135, which would begin the process of dismantling the structures that uphold Death by Incarceration sentencing in the state. The bill would provide parole eligibility for every individual serving a Life Without Parole sentence, including first and second degree murder convictions. People serving first degree convictions would become parole eligible after 35 years in prison. People serving second degree convictions would become eligible after 25 years in prison. The bill currently holds an exception for convictions involving a law enforcement officer³¹. While this bill would effectively eliminate Death by Incarceration, the year designations of 35 and 25 for first degree and second degree are not based on data. A recent report from the Sentencing Project provided mountains of data and reasons for capping any maximum sentence at 20 years (Komar et al., 2023). Many people, whether facing first or second degree convictions, have reported outgrowing the mentality that led them into prison within 10 years or less of incarceration.

³¹This exclusion is antithetical to abolishing Death by Incarceration, as it values the lives of some humans—law enforcement—over others.

Restructure Felony Murder Sentencing

“Parole for lifers needs to be implemented. Prison has become a warehouse and less of a means of rehabilitation. Parole as in all cases is not guaranteed on a minimum. This is why we have a Parole Board to review each individual. I was 18 when the crime I am incarcerated for happened. I am now soon to be 41. I did not physically take a life. I was there, I did help cover it up. I do not take my part in it lightly. After voluntary counseling every week for 16 years straight I have made many needed changes in my life”. – Michelle Hetzel

Currently, in Pennsylvania, the felony murder statute mandates that the judge dole out a Life Without Parole, or Death by Incarceration, sentence to any individual accused of involvement in a felony in which a life was lost, even if they did not kill or intend to kill anyone. It is one of only 9 states that imposes a mandatory minimum sentence of life without parole for felony murder. This means that the courts have no power to impose a lesser sentence, while in other states, courts can apply a range of sentences based on mitigating circumstances (Ghandnoosh, Stammen, & Budaci, 2022). While sentencing anyone to die in prison is a cruel, torturous, and inhumane practice, it is an especially egregious violation of human rights to sentence individuals to die in prison who have not killed anyone or intended to kill anyone. Mandatory DBI sentences for felony murder must be abolished.

Pennsylvania does not currently have any bills introduced that would specifically restructure the felony murder statute or provide parole eligibility for individuals serving DBI sentences for felony murder. However, in California, where a felony murder conviction also carries a mandatory DBI sentence, Senate Bill 300 would provide parole eligibility to individuals serving felony murder convictions after they have served 25 years in prison.

Establish Geriatric and Medical Parole

Elders are the fastest growing demographic in the U.S. prison system (Skarupski, Gross, Schrack, Deal, & Eber, 2018). In Pennsylvania, over 7,000 incarcerated individuals are age 55 and older, and over one third of them are serving a life sentence (DOC all population spreadsheet 6-10-20, 2020). As our prison population grows older, Death by Incarceration abuses our elders through medical neglect and forces them to die in cages and shackles. Prisons are not equipped to adequately provide health care for an aging population and especially lack the infrastructure, resources, and desire to provide the health care that women and trans people need. In their final stages of life, people serving DBI are stripped of essential treatment, compassion, and time with their families. After decades behind bars, our elders pose little to no threat to their communities. According to federal data, the age that people in the US commit a violent crime spikes before a person reaches 24 years old and then declines (Minors aging out of crime, 2022). Yet, the average age of people in Pennsylvania serving Death by Incarceration is 48.6 years old (Kubla, 2019). The average age of the respondents for this survey was 53 years old.

Studies show that the rate of recidivism decreases dramatically with age (Chettiar, Bunting, & Schotter, 2012; Prescott, 2020; Rakes, Grace Prost, & Tripodi, 2018). What's more, former lifers are three times less likely to recidivate than the general released prison population nationwide (Mauer, King, & Young, 2004). Geriatric and medical parole would provide women, trans people, and all people an opportunity to live freely in society after they have, in most cases, already served decades in prison. Senate Bill 136, introduced by Senator Sharif Street, would ensure that all incarcerated people are able to see the parole board once they turn 55 years old, have served 25 years of their sentence, or have been diagnosed with a chronic, terminal, or debilitating illness (Senate Bill 136, 2023). Releasing our elders from prison is the only way to ensure that they can access the necessary medical care they need. As Sylvia Boykin writes, pleading for the most basic humanity: "Let us die at home with family." The PA legislature must pass geriatric and medical parole.

Expand Clemency and Grant Mass Commutations, Especially for Survivors

Currently, the only mechanism besides compassionate release that exists for people sentenced to Death by Incarceration to have a chance at coming home from prison is clemency. The two avenues for clemency are pardons—a dissolving of the convictions completely—and commutation—a lessening of the sentence. For decades, clemency in Pennsylvania has been nearly inaccessible to most everyone serving Death by Incarceration. Prior to 1994, an individual only needed to obtain a 3-2 majority vote from the Board of Pardons and Parole in order to attain commutation. Since then, following the politicization of one incident of a violent reoffense, applicants of commutation need to obtain unanimous approval from the Board, which is composed of the Lieutenant Governor, Attorney General, a corrections expert, a psychiatrist, and a "victim representative" (Notterman, 2020). Between 1995 and August 2, 2021, only 44 people serving DBI have received commutation (Austin et al., 2022). As of 2020, over 8,242 people are serving DBI in Pennsylvania (Nellis, 2021b).

Access to commutation must be vastly expanded. The purpose of the mechanism is to provide a chance to come home for people who demonstrate their readiness to do so, based on the person that they have become since their original arrest. However, enormous barriers prevent this process from being accessible. In addition to bureaucratic barriers, the process has become a political battleground for the members of the Board, who often arbitrarily deny applicants in an attempt to skirt backlash for utilizing the mechanism as intended. The Board does not need to consider any specific criteria in their decision to approve or deny someone's application, nor do they need to provide any reason for their denial.

The Fix Clemency Act can be used as a starting point for Pennsylvania to reconstruct its commutation process. In collaboration with the National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls,³² Representative Ayanna Pressley introduced the Fix Clemency Act as HR6234 in December 2021 (Davis, 2021). This federal bill would create a Board of Pardons made up of nine members, including one formerly incarcerated person, one person who has been directly impacted by a crime, one current or former Federal defender, a representative of the Department of Justice (DOJ), and additional members who must not have had an affiliation with the DOJ for the prior 16 years.

Mass commutations are another route for survivors to be granted urgent relief. In 2019, for example, Kentucky Governor Matt Bevin granted clemency to over 600 incarcerated people directly before leaving office. And in 2015, Kentucky Governor Steve Beshear granted clemency to 10 women, all of whom had been convicted for violent crimes after enduring years of abuse (Law, 2015). The women had all been recommended for pardons by the Department for Public Advocacy and the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association. While this can serve as a template for the type of actions governors all over the country can and should take, as previously mentioned, we call for a complete overhaul of clemency, pardons, and commutations in Pennsylvania. The Governor must commute sentences for survivors, grant mass commutations, and overhaul the clemency process.

Weigh Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Trauma Heavily as Mitigating Factors in Sentencing and Resentencing

I would like to see more practices in place, where a person's background has a tremendous impact on the sentencing and rehabilitation process. Yes, I know mitigating factors are brought up in the judicial process, but how much effect does it really have in sentencing? I think a person's traumatic background should play a huge part in sentencing.

- Sarita Miller

The survey responses demonstrate in intricate detail the need for the court to heavily weigh circumstances of abuse, violence, and trauma in deciding whether to incarcerate a person and for how long. Various states, including Pennsylvania, New York, Illinois, and California, have introduced legislation in this vein.

³²The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls was founded in 2010 by a group of women incarcerated in federal prison in Danbury, CT and works to abolish the incarceration of women and girls.

On February 21, 2023, PA Senator Amanda Cappelletti introduced SB385 Alternative Sentences for Domestic Violence Survivors, which is a companion bill to PA Representative Bridget M. Kosierowski HB181 introduced in 2021. The bills would demand the court “take into account the domestic survivor’s history of domestic violence victimization at the time of the offense and how much the domestic violence victimization affected the participation in the offense.” If the court considers the domestic violence to be a mitigating factor, the court may impose a sentence below the state sentencing guidelines or choose not to incarcerate the person at all. People currently incarcerated would also receive consideration for resentencing, a sentence more lenient than the state sentencing guidelines, or release if “the domestic violence endured by the person substantially affected the person’s participation in the crime.” In New York, the Domestic Violence Survivors Justice Act, Criminal Procedure Law § 440.47(1) similarly “allows the court to resentence a domestic violence survivor who suffered sexual, psychological or physical abuse that contributed to his or her conviction.”

However, while SB385 does not prohibit eligibility based on one’s conviction, the other two bills do. The New York bill excludes people who have been convicted of second degree murder, first degree murder, aggravated murder, acts of terrorism, conspiracy, or a sex offense, while PA HB181 excludes people convicted of murder or sexual assault. California Bill 124, which went into effect January 1, 2023, similarly overhauls the state penal code to establish the use of affirmative defense for survivors but excludes those accused of violent felonies, thereby shutting out many of the people who would need this defense the most and pose no threat to society. We encourage all similar bills to follow the lead of SB385 in its acknowledgement of the trauma and humanity of all survivors.

In her most recent memorandum introducing HB181, PA Rep Kosierowski urges her colleagues to pass the bill, saying, “There is no reason to lock up domestic violence survivors who have already suffered so much at the hands of their abusers. Incarcerating individuals who have committed crimes without taking their victimization into account is unethical, inhumane, and perpetuates victim-blaming.” (Memorandum: Domestic Violence – Survivors’ Alternative Sentences, 2023). Survivors’ histories of abuse must be taken into consideration in sentencing, currently incarcerated survivors must be resentenced, and all survivors must be provided resources to heal.

Create humane living conditions and meaningful opportunities for incarcerated people to grow and thrive

As much as abolition is needed for the system as a whole, we must not lose sight of the fact that millions of people are scraping by in unlivable prison conditions everyday. They are subjected to further trauma instead of being given access to resources that could help them grow, heal, and thrive.

a) Abolish Solitary Confinement

Urgent changes are needed to create humane conditions in the face of a cruel and inhumane system. One of the most pressing issues of living conditions revealed through the surveys is that of solitary confinement. The survey responses were rife with anecdotes of extreme periods of solitary confinement for infractions as small as tossing a crochet bag at a guard. The use of solitary beyond 15 days is considered a torturous practice in violation of international standards as outlined in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, more commonly known as the Mandela Rules (United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Mandela Rules), 2015). The reliance on solitary confinement as a means of punishment and control must be abolished.

HB1037 and SB685, which both seek to curb the use of solitary confinement, need to be passed immediately. The bills would prohibit the use of solitary confinement for more than 15 days at a time, for more than 20 days in a 60-day period, and for individuals from vulnerable populations such as the elderly, pregnant people, juveniles, people living with mental illness or intellectual disability, and LGBTQIA+ individuals. They also propose disciplinary alternatives to solitary confinement for all but the most serious infractions, introduce a meaningful step-down program to transition individuals back into the general population, and prohibit the direct release of individuals from solitary into the community. Solitary confinement must be abolished and all basic human rights must be met for incarcerated people.

b) Overhaul Prison Oversight

The survey responses also highlight the vital need for prison oversight. Sexual, verbal, psychological, and physical abuse run rampant inside as, time and again, prisons fail to hold prison staff accountable for their own crimes against the incarcerated people over whom they wield unfettered power. Several of the survey respondents had ideas for ways prison oversight could be overhauled. Sarita Miller advocates for increased discretion in the hiring of correctional staff, asking how incarcerated people can be expected to be rehabilitated if “they are being abused in the very place where they should be getting the help they need?”

Kal'el Carey proposes the creation of a DOC misconduct committee assembled from outside groups to hold both officers and the DOC accountable for abuse and misuses of power. He emphasizes the need for a file on all CO misconduct reports, including number of grievances and a documentation of all internal requests for investigations and findings. He calls for “a complete cleansing and do-over.”

c) Release All Survivors of Sexual Assault by Correctional Guards

We call for the release of all people who have been sexually assaulted by guards. At the Federal Correctional Institution Dublin, a women's prison located 21 miles east of Oakland, California, the former warden, as well as multiple other employees at multiple levels, were exposed for sexual abuse of incarcerated individuals (Former warden of Dublin women's prison sentenced in sex abuse scandal, 2023). This investigation has fueled prisoner's rights groups' complaints that the BOP rarely grants compassionate discharges even in cases of abuse at the hands of prison employees. While the Justice Department is starting to consider revising the policies that govern compassionate release, we echo the prisoners' rights groups that have been pushing for incarcerated people to have the right to directly request compassionate release from trial judges rather than going through the BOP, as the BOP stymies these requests almost without fail. To be trapped inescapably with your abuser is beyond unacceptable.

d) Provide Opportunities for Meaningful Prison Programming

Not only do prisons constrict the physical existence of incarcerated individuals, but they also limit their ability to learn and grow. Participant after participant described barriers in accessing the self-improvement they desired because people serving life sentences are systematically blocked from accessing the already meager opportunities for further education and personal development.

Sheená King calls for “more free educational opportunities for post-secondary or employable trade programs without a 10% cap for lifers.” Jennifer Rhodes echoes this sentiment, calling on the DOC to “stop forbidding long termers the same opportunity to obtain much needed access to the same education you afford the parole violators who are often placed in openings immediately.”

The restrictions on lifers glosses over the fact that, as Kristin Edmundson says, “A lot of lifers/ long-termers are the backbone of the Institution. We are relied on for many things, including being mentors for others. We are the ones called upon to get things done. However, when it comes to policies or programming, we are pushed aside or to the back.” Similarly, Jennifer Rhodes writes, “I feel that it is ok to train inmates to be peer assistants, or CPS workers, but stop using them to do jobs you were hired and paid to do. I think this practice does an injustice to the inmates these DOC employees sometimes have the blind leading the blind; they are the ones with all the degrees, diplomas, experience.”

People with life sentences are expected to provide unacknowledged mental, physical, and emotional labor on behalf of the institution that is imprisoning them while being blocked from every structural avenue for self-improvement. Ms. Edmundson sums this up perfectly and succinctly: “most everyone, if they wanted to change, then they did it on their own through other avenues.”

e) Expand Access to and Quality of Healthcare

The DOC fails woefully in providing even baseline physical and mental healthcare. Survey respondents describe the tendency for the prisons to overmedicate rather than provide individualized care for mental health issues. “I feel that the prison population here at SCI Muncy is overly medicated,” says Sarita Miller. She outlines her vision of how addiction treatment should be conducted: “If medication is needed it would only be provided to get through the initial process and the rest of the person’s rehabilitation would be a deeply personal process between the person seeking recovery and a life coach.” The need for more therapeutic support was echoed by many of the respondents. Elizabeth Collazo says, “People need a private place to speak to a person they trust. And they should not be judged by staff—who know nothing about mental health.” When discussing mental healthcare, Mr. Carey states, “there would actually be some.” He goes on to emphasize that “the womens’ facilities have NO budget. At least, that’s what they tell us. We have no staff to run any groups. Psychology is over worked. So are the counselors.” Sheená King envisions an institution where “counselors would actually meet 1-on-1 with their caseload and genuinely care about counseling instead of only handling paperwork.”

Participants also pointed out the prisons’ disregard for the elderly. Jennifer Rhodes calls for the DOC to “implement programming for the elderly, activities for the elderly, housing appropriate for the elderly, groups for long termers, housing for long termers. LWOP inmates have special needs too, especially the real young, old, and newcomers.” Everyone deserves dignity and care in their final years, and we call for adequate healthcare for our incarcerated elders.

While the above recommendations present viable next steps for the Pennsylvania Governor, Legislature and Department of Corrections, these changes still leave considerable leeway for the whims and discretion of individual state agents who are often influenced by the same biases, racism, and rigidity that shaped the carceral system in the first place. This is why, above all, we call for abolition. We envision a complete reshaping of the social systems that allow for the patriarchal violence and trauma that enmesh so many people in the suffocating web of the prison industrial complex.

In tandem with dismantling the current patriarchal systems, resources need to be redistributed to build up our communities through basic, life-affirming necessities such as mental health treatment, healing, public education, housing, food security, transformative justice, and social welfare programs.³³ The current lack of investment in our communities leads to layers of trauma, violence against women and trans individuals, and entanglement in the vise grip of the prison industrial complex. To return to the words of Jamie Silvonek:

“Prisons are not designed to make the people they cage whole. Any reforms made to prisons only legitimize their inherently racist, classist, sexist, and ableist existence as a weapon of oppression and social control. I would not change the programming and counseling offered by Muncy, though it is woefully inadequate; I would imagine and build community-based systems of accountability and mutual aid that could truly serve those caged by the punishment industry.” – Jamie Silvonek

³³The National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls calls for an initial investment of \$41 million into a Community Fund to be distributed through a Black-led Participatory Budgeting Process, which is one way to begin redistributing resources to the most critical places and people.

METHODS

Study Overview

Surveys were sent to 197 people serving DBI sentences at SCI Muncy and SCI Cambridge Springs, the two women's prisons in Pennsylvania. Surveys asked participants to answer short and long answer questions regarding their demographics, abuse history, childhood, home environment, mental illness and drug use, offense, case processing, and experience in prison. Survey results were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The process of developing this report aimed to center the leadership of women and trans people serving Death by Incarceration. The relationships built between the outside members of the team and the inside participants were an integral part of the process. Many of these relationships will continue to flourish beyond the release of the report.

The report was limited in its scope of the transgender experience of Death by Incarceration, since the survey only reached trans people who were housed in the women's prisons. Countless transgender people serve their time in men's prisons, but the PADOH fails to properly collect information on people's gender when it does not conform to the biological binary.

Research Team

The qualitative research team (Rose Dinkins, Cynthia Alvarado, Juliette Rando, Emma Fenstermaker, Valerie Kiebala, Jonas Caballero) included individuals both with and without lived experience in prison. All qualitative team members have experience advocating for the rights of incarcerated people. RD has served 50 years of a life sentence and is currently incarcerated at SCI Muncy. She wrote a testimony for the 2022 nationwide submission to the United Nations, calling for the abolition of Death by Incarceration. CA was incarcerated at SCI Muncy for 11 years, serving a felony murder sentence for a murder she did not commit. She is a powerful advocate for incarcerated people and draws attention to the specific issues impacting incarcerated women. JR pursued a Master's in Public Health and has a background in qualitative and quantitative research methodology. She also works closely with the Abolitionist Law Center and Human Rights Coalition on their campaign to abolish solitary confinement. EF is a Research Assistant with expertise in qualitative methods and holds a B.A. in Sociology. She volunteers for the Abolitionist Law Center as a court-watcher. VK holds a B.A. in Philosophy and has advocated for incarcerated people for over a decade, focusing her energies primarily on abolishing solitary confinement and ending DBI sentences. She has worked with a number of abolitionist organizations, including the Abolitionist Law Center, Straight Ahead, and the Human Rights Coalition. JC was incarcerated in New York for 25 months. He holds a B.Phil in Professional Communications and International & Area Studies and an M.Phil in Middle Eastern Studies. He worked as a paralegal/legal advocate for the ALC before returning to New York to begin law school in the Fall of 2022.

Data Collection

Participants were identified based on data from the PADOc of individuals serving life without parole sentences in Pennsylvania women's prisons. Surveys were designed by The Abolitionist Law Center, with feedback from the Sentencing Project. Survey questions spanned several topics: demographics, abuse history, childhood, home environment, mental illness and drug use, offense, case processing, and experience in prison. One hundred ninety-seven people incarcerated at Pennsylvania state women's prisons Muncy and Cambridge Springs were sent surveys and letters inviting them to participate in the project in May of 2021. Participants were given consent forms where they could specify whether they wanted to remain anonymous in published reports. Individuals who returned the completed survey and consent form were included in the report. A subset of 15 participants were chosen for follow-up surveys following the initial qualitative analysis. The ten participants who completed the follow-up survey were compensated with \$50 in their commissary account. Participants were not informed of the monetary compensation before they were sent the follow-up survey so as not to inadvertently coerce individuals to participate, but the team felt that it was critical to compensate participants for their inherently valuable and unique subject-matter expertise. Each participant was assigned an identification number to protect their privacy, but names were included in the results for individuals who requested that their name be published with their answers.

Quantitative Data Analysis

JC completed all data entry. For survey questions that could be analyzed with quantitative methods, JR prepared visualizations using R (version 4.0.2).

Qualitative Data Analysis

Surveys were qualitatively analyzed using Rapid Qualitative Assessment methods (Hamilton, 2013). In brief, two researchers (JR and EF) chose 10 neutral domains: home life, neighborhood, interpersonal violence, mental illness and drug use, prior record, crime/conviction, trial and sentencing, disciplinary record, rehabilitation, and social relationships. These domains were the framework for summary descriptions of each survey, which were used to encapsulate the relevant information in each survey relating to each domain. EF and JR tested the summary template by independently summarizing 5 surveys chosen at random and comparing their results. Based on this discussion, they decided to add "self-reflection" as the 11th domain. Given the high agreement between their summaries, EF and JR independently summarized the remaining surveys. Completed survey summaries were compiled in a final matrix organized by domain. RD, CA, EF, and JR then independently reviewed the matrix and noted major themes across the domains. The research team met to compare and discuss the themes they identified, and a final list of themes was compiled collaboratively. Also in this meeting, RD, CA, EF, JR and VK discussed which individuals spoke to the identified themes in their surveys. They chose 15 individuals to whom follow-up surveys were sent to garner further information. The follow-up surveys aimed to elicit more details regarding aspects the participants mentioned in their initial surveys, as well as questions that arose during the qualitative analysis process that were not covered in the initial survey. In total, 10 participants returned the follow-up surveys. Follow-up surveys were not assessed using RQA. Instead, surveys were scanned for answers that spoke to the themes identified through RQA and by the qualitative research team.

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